

Archive of past posts

May 2024

We did the usual day-to-day stuff a lot in the first part of the month. Getting the washing machine repaired, for example, and emptying the loft for extra insulation to be added. The latter turned out to be a huge job, but we hope it will be worthwhile in the end. We had a survey to see whether our house would be suitable to have an Air Source Heat Pump system put in, Octopus Energy did that for us – they have deals! It turns out to be a “No” from them because of the size of the house – it’s just too big for what they can do for us. Maybe we should just leave it for now until things develop a little further – new adopters of developing technology are sometimes disappointed.

We had an absolutely fantastic week in a cottage at Achateny on the Ardnamurchan Peninsula. This was just up the road from where Hamza Yassin lives (the wildlife photographer who won Strictly a couple of years ago) but we didn’t see him. We had a super time, the weather being changeable but when it was fine it was very fine indeed! Ian got lots of new contacts by radio since, apparently, proximity from the sea makes a difference! He raved about the lack of noise, both in the radio sense and in the actual sound sense – it was very peaceful indeed and we both enjoyed the break from our hectic retirement lives.

It was, of course, also our anniversary – 40 wonderful years of marriage and we dined on venison sausages (those being the only venison around pre-stalking season).

April 2024

Is April the first month of Spring? The weather was awful – cold and raining. But the hour changed and it was, between the rain, bright and beautiful. Nature is restarting and we can understand why all beliefs celebrate this time of year.

We had a short break in a fantastic lodge near a canal marine between Nantwich and Audlem, in Cheshire early in the month. It rained more or less solidly and the roads round about were flooded quite badly, but that didn’t stop us having a great time. The proposed visit to Lois’ sister was postponed because she wasn’t well, but we did go and see Ian’s mate, Mike. Ian and Mike were close friends when they were at school and if his name is familiar from this website, it’s because he supplied the photos of Ian and friends while they were at school (see Our Vehicles from the menu on the left and navigate to Series 1). It was terrific to rebuild the connection.

Ian (as Deputy Lieutenant) attended the Joint Cadet Forces presentation at North Durham Academy in Stanley. This was a wonderful event, drawing together representatives of many of the cadet organisations in the region, including the RAF Cadets, Army Cadets, Police Cadets and Fire Service Cadets with the intention of raising the employability skills, self-confidence and self esteem of students through the activities they offer. As a bonus, there has been shown to be a marked decrease in Antisocial Behaviour by young people engaged with effective groups like this. The Cadet groups, some of whom included students of the Academy themselves, gave demonstrations and presentations to the whole of North Durham Academy’s Year 8 students (all 250 of them!) Most of

the presentations got students involved directly with practical activities and dignitaries enjoyed some virtual flying of aircraft, seeing how the Police deal with civil disruption and helped roll up fire hoses. Ian even examined rations carried by soldiers on manoeuvres (but, perhaps thankfully, didn't have to sample them). Despite continuous drizzle, the students were in very good spirits indeed, engaging fully with the activities on offer.

We spent a good deal of our time this month watching the app that monitors our electricity use now that we've had the batteries fitted and transferred to Octopus Energy's Flux Tariff. Seeing zero draw from the grid because we're using solar power from our roof and batteries as we cook dinner is a great experience. (To get £50 off if you transfer use <https://share.octopus.energy/soft-raven-379> We get £50 too!)

March 2024

Lots happened in March – mostly to do with the UTC! OFSTED came – so much stress amongst the staff. Despite assurances from OFSTED following Ruth Perry's suicide, things are no less stressful for staff and inspectors are no less "assertive" in their questioning. But that's acceptable if the outcome is OK and while at the time of writing nothing's been formalised so we can't report it here, at the end of the two days, we were "pleased" with our outcome.

You'll recall that Ian mentioned that he was British Science Week for the RSGB and, lo and behold, BSW came around. It was cold, raining and miserable so the planned outdoor activity of working with satellites was called off and instead Ian set up a radio station at the school. A (Large) group of students took part, as did some staff, and we had a good time. The students (and staff) all found it sufficiently fascinating to want to go on to take a course with Ian to take their exam for their amateur radio licences. Great stuff!

We enhanced our existing roof-mounted solar panels with a battery system which means that, if the sun shines, we can run the house into the evening free of electricity charges. Unfortunately the sun hasn't shined very much, in fact it has rained solidly for most of the month! Fortunately we can charge the batteries up when the electricity is cheap – overnight – and then use it when it's expensive (peak hours). All good and the app has kept us entertained for much of the month! Great big shout-out for Sustainable Energy Systems of Washington who were great and for Octopus Energy who provided some excellent advice and made the transfer to export very easy. (To get £50 off if you transfer use <https://share.octopus.energy/soft-raven-379> We get £50 too!)

February 2024

February was the wettest one on record! It seems that it never stopped – there were some days that were less rainy than others but they tended to have drizzle instead. We got little flooding, though – we're hilly here – but the south of England got it very much worse than we did. The farmers are not happy since their crops are rotting in the ground and we are expecting increased food prices as a result ... but what doesn't cause increased prices one way or another?

February brought lots of visitors to our AirBnB (<https://airbnb.co.uk/h/durham-brandon-flat>), which is always nice to see. Some come and go without us seeing them, others interact with us and we have met some very nice people. At one point we were turning the place round every couple of days.

We had lots of sittings this month, each having two new magistrates as mentees, and we had some interesting cases between us. Lois went to Doncaster to see the dance performance that Anjie (Lois' niece and god-daughter) had put on with the dance workshop she owns and runs. While there, Lois was able to see her sister who is suffering from dementia. Ian was busy this month working with the RSGB as British Science Week co-ordinator but also organising his own day at the UTC next month where he will introduce students to amateur radio.

January 2024

Happy 2024 to you all!

January was a month for "hunkering down" in. It rained pretty well non-stop, although we had it better here than some parts of the country. Not very much happened, really – January is often that sort of month which given the weather was probably for the good. It never really got cold, though – we had a bit of snow, but not very much dangerous icy conditions.

Lois slipped and got a bit of a concussion which required a trip to A&E for a checkup. It was very scary at the time because she didn't make a great deal of sense while it was happening. She's fine now, though – which is a huge relief.

Ian got asked by the RSGB to take on the role of British Science Week Coordinator. BSW is a national 10-day celebration of science, technology, engineering and maths, marked by schools, libraries, museums, businesses and more. Ian had already decided to do something at the UTC where he's governor, so this fitted in well. Check out rsgb.org/bsw to see what he's been doing.

Otherwise it was business as usual for us. Something of a boring report really ... we'll try harder next month.

December 2023

First of all, may we wish you a very Happy New Year and all our best wishes for 2024!

This year we switched largely to ecards. If you didn't get one and would have expected one from us, please let us know. This worked really well and meant that we could send some cash to charities instead of to Royal Mail. All good.

December was quite a busy month, one way or another. Lots of sittings for both of us, a trip to the theatre and some time away. Let's concentrate on the interesting ones – we went to see "A Jazzy Christmas" with Paul Edis at the Glasshouse International Centre for Music. This used to be the

Sage, Gateshead, but changed its name when Sage (the software people) decided to sponsor another place nearby – one can't have two Sages in Gateshead. We now have an excellent and reliable dog-sitting person whom Tara loves, so we can get out more. We stopped going to Paul's show when we got Tara and it's nice to return. Hall 2 (the round one) is a fantastic place – one sits up above the performers and always get a super view. The sound is, as one would expect, fantastic.

We spent Christmas at Romaldkirk, near Barnard Castle (no jokes, please – they've all been done). We decided not to go too far this year and when we saw the Arran Ferry updates, we were pleased we didn't. It was very windy indeed – Storm Gerrit was around – so it was wet and VERY windy. Have we mentioned that it was windy? But surprisingly warm. We AirBnB-ed a lovely cottage right in the middle of the village and next to the church. Great thick walls, so lovely and warm. We all loved it because it was very quiet and peaceful. A lovely Christmas.

Well, that's another year gone! As we write this, it is 1st January 2024. We always love looking back on the old year, but prefer looking forward to the new one. What next?

November 2023

You'll remember that we were on the Isle of Arran at the end of October, to avoid the fireworks. We came back at the beginning of November, travelling quite late on bonfire night itself. This was a great way to enjoy fireworks – in a warm car and thus insulated from the cold and more importantly the noise. But perhaps best was the fact that we could see some of the lovely displays from way back so could see them in their entirety. Beautiful colour, no crick in the neck and no noise – perfect!

We went to see Hannah and Ben's wedding venue for October, Shotton Grange on the other side of Newcastle. It's a lovely choice that they've made and we were really impressed by the thought that the venue have put into making their day go well. Can you believe there is even a "dog chaperone" whom we have booked to look after Tara for the whole of the day and into the evening. What a wonderful idea! It means that Tara, being something of a princess, can get all the attention she deserves! And Hannah, who is also something of a princess, can get our full attention! (Tara is cheaper, though.) We also went for a meal just round the corner at the Snowy Owl to discuss detail, which was lovely.

Ian did his bit on Remembrance Sunday. As always, it was a lovely event on Gainford's Green and thankfully the rain held off.

Ian did one of the country's very first Single Justice Service sessions, where a magistrate sits on their own in front of a PC and makes judgements on things like TV licence evasion, DVLA notices, that sort of thing, and then decides on the appropriate penalty (normally a fine). This is a new way forward and the first session was a bit of a shakedown – Ian was able to point out some shortcoming before the whole system went fully operational.

So, all in all, a busy month with lots going on! In December we might re-engage with Strictly – we've avoided it up to now but it does offer a great countdown to Christmas!

October 2023

There seemed to be a lot happening in October! We got our Covid and 'flu jabs (Ian at the same time, Lois about a week apart). It's always reassuring to get those done, with very few side effects this time.

Ian attended the Radio Society of Great Britain (RSGB) annual convention which took place in Milton Keynes. He met lots of interesting people and attended some super presentations ... and came back with some ideas for future work, especially at the UTC.

We were almost fully booked in the AirBnB for this month so met some really nice people doing interesting things. We even had a lovely couple from Brazil.

As the month went on, the yobs of the area bought up fireworks and threw them around – as yobs do. Three things struck us (none of them actual fireworks, thankfully): first, why are fireworks so much noisier now than they used to be – when we were young, fireworks were colourful and fun, not simply noisy; second, why are people spending significant amounts of money on things that are gone on, literally, a flash and a bang when we are supposed to be in a cost-of-living crisis; and third, we do we have a government who are happy to allow anyone to buy explosives on a whim? Whatever, fireworks, especially loud ones, freak Tara out which was kind of OK when they bangs happen on bonfire night because we could deal with it, but now they start in mid-October and go on well into November. This year, we went to Arran and missed the worst of it because Arran do things quietly! They don't do anything less enjoyably, just in an organised and quiet way! We had a wonderful time and Tara was able to enjoy her walks again.

And so we begin the countdown to Christmas...

September 2023

The bulk of September was taken up by a fortnight in the West Country, visiting first Cornwall (near Truro) and the up to Devon (Beer for the fourth year). The run down to Cornwall to start the holiday was a long one, but very easy and we stayed for a week at a fantastic cabin within 3 miles of Truro, which is lovely in itself. Ian erected his radio antenna (much to the surprise of the hosts – it's over 9m tall) and got a whole load of new contacts with his mobile rig. We'll write up the trip properly in our travel blog, but the big news was that this trip allowed us to complete the "six-points tour", which we've been planning for about 20 years! Land's End and Lizard Point (the latter being the southerly-most in the British mainland). See the [six-points tour blog](#) in "Our Adventures". The weather was perfect for the whole of our visit and while some found it too hot, our position at the top of a hill meant we got a lovely breeze. Later we thoroughly enjoyed our week in Beer, Devon and went on the tram again. We stayed in the same house as we have for the last couple of years so know our way around – the steep hills don't get any easier, though!

The rest of September was taken up with the usual round of sittings and so on, the weather having turned rapidly to autumn – we seem to have gone through the seasons very quickly indeed!

August 2023

With it being the school holidays, and with us being retired, we stayed at home this month. As it happened, summer didn't really start and we went from a bit of nice weather in July to autumn in August; certainly the weather thought it was autumn, with lots and lots of rain. Mind you, it stayed quite warm so the garden went berserk and it was possible on a quiet day to hear things growing. Luxuriant is probably the right word!

In Court, we both picked up new mentees and Ian met them all at the Magistrates' Swearing-In ceremony where he appeared as King – well, kind of ... as Deputy Lieutenant he took the place of the Lord-Lieutenant. See what I mean?

We spent a lovely long-weekend in Oxford looking up Lois' cousins who we hadn't met before. Lots of traffic in Oxford! We made use of the buses quite a lot, which Tara kind of enjoyed. We also visited Diddly Squat Farm Shop, made famous by Jeremy Clarkson's Amazon programme "Clarkson's Farm". We thought we'd go early to miss the crowds that we were sure would turn up around lunchtime and early afternoon; but we didn't expect the crowds of people that we came across! It was absolutely rammed full, with all the car parks full and hoards of people walking from where they'd abandoned their cars by the roadside into the farm. The queue to get into the shop looked like something out of a Disney theme park. We elected to miss this particular attraction! We also (we think) saw Harry's Farm (from YouTube), but that was more of a locked gate across a road – no crowds there. During our stay we made use of Travelodge, which was excellent and which Tara really did enjoy!

A-level results came and went, as did GCSE results a week later. I was great to go into the UTC as governor to see the students get their results and to have confirmed where they would be going next ... or in some cases making new decisions because they did worse or better than they'd thought. Always lovely mornings.

June/July 2023

These months were very much a "catch up with all the things we haven't done and should have" time of year! Nothing much that could be termed exciting. The car got a service, Lois got her final appraisal as Presiding Justice (she has now passed all three required and has been approved to Preside over Courts); Ian did a lot of similar appraisals on other people in court. So all pretty boring really.

Two things stood out for us ... Lois painted the deck – no mean feat given its size and it looks fabulous now. Also, Ian achieved his "DXCC award". DXCC means 100 – C in roman numerals and DX or long distance contacts. To achieve this, 100 different countries have to be contacted and they have to confirm the contact. A confirmation (or QSL as it is called) is that a two-way contact has been made and both ends agree that it took place at a certain time and date and at a certain frequency. The DXCC tends to be the first milestone of awards people get and he is very chuffed! He's also half-way towards his WAS (Worked All States - of the US) certificate which is surprisingly difficult because while the Eastern side of the US is fairly close, the Western side certainly is not! Although he has successfully contacted Alaska!

May 2023

The big event at the beginning of the month was, of course, the Coronation of Charles and Camilla. That was quite a busy time for Ian with a couple of services and even a tree planting ceremony! We also took part in "The big lunch" on Gainford Green which was lovely, and we contributed coronation chicken sandwiches, which appeared fitting! We watch the Coronation itself, of course – a chance in a lifetime maybe – and wondered what the full version for the Late Queen must have been like given that this was a stripped down version. Anyway, it was a terrific weekend!

Ian did some sittings up at South Shields Magistrates' Court (that's away from his home area) which he found really interesting and will return for more if possible.

Our anniversary was at its usual time but we went away this year, travelling all the way up to Altnaharra. If you think you've heard of it, you probably have since it regularly hold the record for the coldest place in the UK ... not for our trip, though, which was lovely weather.

April 2023

Well, we didn't do very much for Easter except a bit of garden tidying which was much needed after the winter. It's been such a cold April that going outside hasn't been that pleasant, really, so we haven't. The only advantage is that the temperature means that nothing very much is growing and although the grass has been cut a couple of times, it hasn't really needed it.

The high point was our visit to East Anglia as part of our six-points tour project. We stayed in Caister and visited Great Yarmouth, reliving a bit of Ian's childhood. Lois visited a couple of places from her ancestry searches, including the church in Ormesby St Margaret which would have been the parish church in their day. We also visited Potter Heigham and couple of other notable places. This being Norfolk, nothing much has changed since Ian remembers it! Ness Point, near Lowestoft, is the most Easterly point in mainland Great Britain and is the fourth of our Six Points Tour. More about that in the Travels with a Greyhound Blog which you can find in Adventures or by clicking [here](#).

Ian has contacted 99 countries by radio (see graphic above) ... so close to the 100 which is a bit of a landmark – he's still working on it!

March 2023

March was dominated by our voluntary activities with nearly every day having something in it that saw us working for others. That's not a moan, it just identifies that we have largely replaced full-time jobs with voluntary jobs for the good of others – thus putting a good deal back into society. That makes us feel good, so it's selfish really! We did find the opportunity to have lunch out a couple of times, which was great, and we had a wonderful takeaway from a new (to us) place just round the corner that Tara led us to during a walk – following her nose, so to speak.

In preparation for Ian's plans to take his radio to high, out of the way places, we got a tow bar fitted to the car so that we can use the caravan again ... and bought a little trailer on eBay to replace the big, heavy older one that we've had for many years.

The hour change caused us significant disruption as ever – we really don't like it and like it less now that we can choose rising and bedtimes ourselves. We remind government at this time of year that we're not working in mills any more!

Lois took two days away to visit her sister and other more distant relatives over in Shropshire and Hampshire, which she enjoyed hugely. While she was away, Ian restrung his cobweb antenna. And we gave the flat its spring clear ready for the new AirBnB season, for which we have two bookings already.

February 2023

This time of year doesn't usually see much action; indeed previous years have seen a combined entry for Jan and Feb. Perhaps it's the good weather (often surprisingly warm and no snow at all!!) that's kept things ticking along.

Lois and Hannah spent a lovely day with relatives in Doncaster – a long drive but very worthwhile. It's always good to catch up and Hannah hadn't seen them for ages (Ben, by the way, is off skiing with a party of students from the UTC). We went to Greatham to take part in the annual "Snowdrop Walk" which is always a delight.

Ian continues to have great fun with his radio, now that he's fully licensed. More details are on the MOKEO page accessed through the menu. In short, though, his latest QSOs (contacts) go as far afield as Japan (12,349 km), Indonesia (12,003 km), Brazil (9,614 km) and South Africa (9,405 km); they include the USA, the Azores and Ceuta & Melilla which he'd never heard of but is a Spanish possession in North Africa.

Towards the end of the month, we all went on a bus into Durham, Ian & Lois using their bus passes! Tara went too – the first time on a bus for her! She was great on the bus and really enjoyed the view as we travelled.

January 2023

After the excitement of December with all that went on then, it's been nice to slow down a bit and relax into the New Year. Highlights in January were, of course, our birthdays and we went out for a lovely meal at the Kingslodge Inn in Durham – one of the few places where we can take Tara to enjoy the celebrations with us (although, in fairness, she slept through most of it!) It's been a long time since we went out for a birthday meal, with everything that's been going on, and we thoroughly enjoyed it!

Along with the birthday came the pension AND THE BUS PASS for Ian! We always feel that the bus pass is something of a milestone to achieve ... and now we have both achieved it.

Ian had a haircut (he has one annually whether he needs it or not) and the rest of the month was taken up mostly with sittings, HoG & UTC meetings and so on. Ian attended (virtually) the UHI Research Conference, which was excellent and as Deputy Lieutenant, the Holocaust Memorial Celebration in Darlington (see photo above). He also set up his new radio equipment and erected his aerials (see MOKEO from the menu on the left for details and pictures).

December & review of 2022

December was dominated by two things – Christmas (of course) and Ian’s radio exam! The latter first ... regular readers will remember that Ian has been studying for his Amateur Radio Licence since the first Covid lockdown. He took his Foundations exam in June 2020, his Intermediate exam in December 2020 and then took a while to get to his Full exam. He took that this month and passed (with Merit) and is therefore now a Full licence holder with callsign M0KEO. The step from Intermediate to Full was a big one, involving some significant electronic and mathematical work, hence the long period ... we were also out of lockdown by then, so life got in the way a bit! Ian wants to do a big “shoutout” to the team at Bath-Based Distance Learning (BBDL) and especially Steve Hartley and Martyn Vann with whom he worked to get the necessary knowledge. They were absolutely first class tutors with a brilliantly organised and delivered on-line course.

We went away for Christmas- not far, just to Boulmer in Northumberland. We booked a wonderful cottage right on the beach (about 10 metres away to the beach and the sea at low tide). It was very peaceful and quiet, both of which we needed. We had the best time, eating from Tesco’s Festive Food range and thoroughly enjoying every moment.

We thought about doing a review of the year, but thought better of it and instead have chosen one or two significant happenings each month – here they are:

January:	Birthdays, continued recovery from lockdown, and Storms Malik and Corrie
February:	Storms Dudley and Eustace - lost tiles!
March:	Visit to Scotch Corner and a lovely day in Richmond.
April:	Lois begins her terms as Chair of Trustees of Hospital of God, Greatham and as Deputy Bench Chair. Insulation and render completed.
May:	New garage door and trip to Altnaharra for our wedding anniversary. Visited John O'Groats and Dunnet Head as part of the 6-points tour.
June:	Successful Summer Solstice observation at the stone circle build by Mike Green in Beer, Devon. HM The Queen's Platinum Jubilee.
July:	G3 flat reunion (G3 was Ian's flat at University).
August:	Hannah & Ben got engaged. Great (sometimes too hot) weather!
September:	HM The Queen died. Several Lieutenancy representations. We went to Ardnamurchan point as part of the 6-points tour.
October:	Hannah and Ben moved into their new house. Tara had 11 teeth removed.
November:	Tried (and failed) to avoid interminable fireworks.
December:	Ian passed his Amateur Radio Full Licence examination.

November 2022

November was characterised by the odd weather (very warm indeed and wet). But the down side was the fireworks, which now seem to run from the last week in October to the second week in November! It’s annoying for everyone, but causes real distress for Tara and many other pets. It never ceases to amaze us just how selfish and thoughtless our fellow citizens are – there were very loud bangs going off late into the evening on several days which brought youngsters sleeplessness

too. In our youth, fireworks were all about colour but now they're all about bangs. What a shame! We tried all sorts of things for Tara, from copious amounts of valerian and skullcap tablets (we refer to it as "Tara's Valium") and long road trips down the A1! Getting away from bangs is becoming particularly frustrating for us and very stressful for her. It was all made worse because there was a marked decline in organised displays causing an increase in home garden events. The amount of money being, literally, blown away is staggering.

On to better things. The Remembrance Sunday service at Gainford was absolutely lovely. The rain held off and we all went along. Ian laid the wreath on behalf of His Majesty as usual and Tara enjoyed herself, especially being invited into church for coffee afterwards. We have a long term tenant with us at the moment, a post-doctoral from Eswatini (formerly Swaziland) working at Durham who will be here until April and he came with us too, experiencing for the first time some of the culture of rural England. It was a lovely day.

Tara had a grooming and had a mound of undercoat (the insulating fur that grows under the top, glossy layer, that keeps her warm in winter and cool in summer) removed. Although greyhounds are not noted for shedding, they tend to shed a bit with the seasons. She's a lot sleeker now!

We have resisted the urge to begin Christmas decorating in November!

October 2022

We thought that this was a boring run-of-the-mill month after September; but actually it's been quite busy. There was a fast turnaround of Prime Ministers which gave the BBC trouble because it meant that they just had to devote the entirety of their news output to who would be the next one ... but they love politics so they coped!

More importantly, Tara had eleven teeth removed – poor thing. No-one with experience of older dogs shows any surprise at that number, but it surprised us ... and her! They have 42 normally – 10 more than us, and given that we've had a few out in our time, she's still ahead in the number of teeth! The poor thing was very miserable for a few days afterwards, and the carpets took some cleaning with the amount of blood that came from her mouth, but she soon rallied. Yobs with fireworks next – oh bliss!

Hannah and Ben have finally moved in to their new house, in Birtley (just up the road), after many delays caused, it seems, by solicitors at both ends of the purchase. We were all worried that the deal might be stalled by the sudden hike in mortgage rates caused by the current hassles in the world, but the Halifax stuck by them and held it; they have done well. It's a lovely house and they are busy turning it into a home. The excitement is palpable! They appear to be moving much of our loft in to their house, supplemented by a pantechicon load from IKEA! But it's great to see them so happy in their new place.

We both had our Covid boosters and our flu jabs, both were as uneventful as ever! As well as feeling more protected, we believe that it's a societal duty to take opportunities to be properly vaccinated. We know that some people don't agree, but that's up to them.

Finally this month, we were delighted to see that the Darlington Retired Greyhound Trust had resumed their monthly walks in Hardwick Park. We went along and it was great (for all of us) to catch up with some old friends from the last time which was pre-Covid!

September 2022

Well, what a month that was. At the start of the month we had a Queen and now we have a King! We all received the news of the end of Her Majesty's reign with shock and sadness – while we knew it was coming, it all happened a bit fast. Our thoughts have been with the Royal Family as we watched them grieve their loss very publically.

Death is inevitable for us all. How we are judged is not predetermined but rather we are judged on our impact on others. We all play our part, whether royal or commoner, in making the world a brighter, warmer, more tolerant and compassionate place and the Queen united a nation by her work ethic, dedication and service. Her Majesty was an anchor of permanence and stability for us during some of the darker times we have experienced and she did so with warmth and affection for and service to the people she ruled. We think she will be judged very well indeed for her impact on us and our society and community.

May she rest in peace. What is most important for us to remember is that her legacy will live on. The light has now passed to the next generation and it is for them to build on that legacy. And so we move forward, out of the Second Elizabethan era into one ruled by a new King – King Charles III – and enter the third Carolean era.

We know we have readers of this blog from all over the world, so it's maybe important to mention what we saw this month - things we experienced for the first time in living memory for most of us here. It's over 70 years since it happened last time in 1952. It's easy to be drawn along in the maelstrom of events without pausing to understand the importance of it all. Unlike many countries, we don't have a WRITTEN constitution, but what we saw in September was our constitution in action – it's there alright!

As His Majesty gets himself into his new role, we shall all be able to see how he does. So, as we herald our new era, our new King, we think we can do so with confidence that he knows what to do and how to do it; that he is not afraid to work hard for us all and to do the right thing. We consider myself to be one of his loyal subjects and as such we have confidence that he will continue the work of our Queen, having learned from her - but he will do it in his own way.

We all have new things to learn ... remembering to say "God save the King" is fairly straightforward, but remembering to sing "Send HIM victorious" in the national anthem might take us a little longer.

During the month, as one the Deputies to His Majesty's Lord-Lieutenant, Ian had a lot to do – he attended and spoke at a number of events including speaking to 400 teenagers and at church services in tribute. Each, as one might expect, needed a different speech. Busy! And we also spent a lovely week (nearly) away visiting Ardnamurchan Point (furthest West in the British Isles and much more detail in the Travel Blog in Adventures) and Fort William.

August 2022

August was a much more straightforward month (for a change!) Instead of going away along with the flood of other people taking advantage of school holidays and no Covid restrictions, we stayed at home and enjoyed our house and garden, got on with some maintenance jobs and, along with others, sweltered in the heat. No hosepipe bans here, of course – we'd have to empty Keilder Water first and since that was built to supply the incoming Teesside industry that never came, that'll take a while! That meant we could keep everything green and growing when those in the south of England couldn't. It was also cooler here than down south, which we appreciated.

It was great to see one of Ian's PhD students who visited from Oman. They spent some time discussing his work face to face rather than over MS Teams, which was great, and also took the opportunity to do some sightseeing round Durham.

Otherwise it was pretty much business as usual, except for one stand-out event was that Ian represented the Lieutenancy at the Durham Youth Council Young People's Awards celebrating the professional, personal, physical or academic achievements of young people here in County Durham. Every now and again an event stands out not only as heart warming but also as reinforcement of our faith in our young people to build a safe, secure and effective society. The event was wholly organised by the young people of the Youth Council themselves, and it went faultlessly – itself a tribute to them. The intention of the organisation is to encourage young people to be more involved in making decisions about issues and services that affect us all, giving children and young people a 'collective voice' that can be listened to and acted upon by the important decision makers. Ian was there to speak a little but also to announce prizes to those who had shown outstanding achievement – the photograph shows all the prize winners – by doing something positive for their local area and the people who live here.

Tara was going to have some teeth out, but that was postponed because the vet's equipment broke down!

June and July 2022

We had a complicated June, starting with lots of sittings and Hospital of God stuff leading up to a (now almost traditional) visit to Beer in Devon for the Solstice. It was a terrific journey down – it's quite a long way – and we got to our cottage in excellent time. This time we'd upgraded a bit and had a really lovely cottage in Beer through Original Cottages (www.originalcottages.co.uk). It was beautiful, very comfy and with beautiful décor and excellent equipment. Furthermore it had its own parking spot and those are like hens' teeth in Beer! Last year we had to spend a fortune in a public car park and carry our luggage and Tara clobber a very long way! Having our own spot right next to the cottage was wonderful! This year we DID get to see the solstice from Mike's very own stone circle (check out last year's entry in the archive if you don't know what we're talking about). It was a beautiful evening with a cloudless sky. Amazing to see the stone circle "working properly". Lois had a Teams meeting on one of the days, so Ian took Tara on the tram from Seaton to Colyton – her vast trip on a tram, and actually the first time on any public transport. After the first five minutes of not being sure, she found it great. It was a lovely holiday catching up with Mike and Carol again and just

doing tourist stuff! While we will be going to Beer again next year, we can leave it later in the year next time because we've seen the solstice properly!

At a checkup with the vet, Tara was found to be losing weight and we got some very clear and unambiguous dietary advice: "Take her off raw meat NOW". We thought that raw food is a good thing, but apparently not ... not for greyhounds anyway! So she went onto Pedigree Petfoods dry food and after a couple of weeks is now back to her "proper" weight with a very sleek coat to go with it. Note to selves ... don't be taken in by advertising rhetoric! You'd think we'd have learned by now!

The Lord-Lieutenant succumbed to Covid so Ian got to go to some really interesting official events, such as the Fire Brigade Long Service Awards which was great fun.

July started with Sunderland's graduations, which were back to normal after a couple of years of zoom events. It was absolutely super to see students crossing the stage again and the atmosphere is undiminished. On one of the days, Prof Peter Smith got his honorary Doctor of Technology which was richly deserved and great to be part of.

When Ian was at university, he became good friends with three people (as well as Lois of course) and they shared a flat together – Barnes G3 for those who know Keele. Back in 2018 Helen – one of the four flatmates – set about trying to get a reunion of the four of us, plus Lois who was around at the time, plus the partners of the others. That was before Covid struck of course. In July we finally got together for a wonderful evening of alcohol and reminiscences. It only took four years to get together! As Helen put it, "It took a global pandemic to keep us apart". The evening was magical, actually, with super food, plenty of drink, and very, very good company. We suspect that those memories will stay with us for a long time!

We also caught up with some family who design and manufacture farm machinery in Essex! Well, you do don't you!

Then we got to enjoy our house and garden as the children broke up for their school holidays and we stayed at home! Lots and lots of little things to do, but that's always enjoyable stuff.

May 2022

May began as April ended – with the clearing up after the renderers had departed. What a mess they left! However, with the help of the great local tradesmen we know, things have got sorted out more or less. The grass is still a bit of a mess, with lumps of dried render all over the place, but apart from that we're happy. It's late May as we're writing this, and we're still in Altnaharra as we reach the end of our anniversary celebration break. Last evening we had our traditional dinner at the Altnaharra Hotel – we've been doing this since 1990! And it didn't disappoint. In 1994, we had Hannah with us in her carrycot and this year we had Tara with us on her rug. A lovely meal with lovely people in a lovely place. We got into conversation with Walter, the ghillie, who regaled us with fabulous stories from his 62 year in the job. A ghillie is a person who is employed to advise and support visitors' fishing (in this case) and hunting. Fascinating. We also got talking to a guy working on the Creag Riabhach wind farm site, which was very interesting indeed – hearing how they

transport the 22 huge generator units from Inverness here, by road, was amazing. He thought it would be working later this year and as we drove passed the site we could see that they were well on the way.

Earlier in the month, we had a new garage door fitted – the old one was about 30 years old and was, frankly, knackered! The new one is very swish and quiet! We went for dinner with Hannah and Ben (and Tara) to the Kings Lodge Inn in Durham (used to be Finnbar's) which was brilliant. Ian went to a conference in Edinburgh with UHI, involving his first train journey since before the lockdowns started.

So, we have decided to complete the Six Points Tour at long last! Regular visits to this website (and we know you're out there) might remember that some years ago we planned a road trip visiting the four furthest compass points on the UK mainland, plus the two points furthest apart (hence Six Points). For many reasons we never did it, but we are now determined to complete it. As a start, and while we were up at the top end of the country, we did John O'Groats and Dunnet Head (furthest North) so that's a third of it completed. We intend to do Ness Point (furthest East) or Ardnamurchan Point (furthest West) later this year and then the last three next year. Our progress on that plan will be shown on our travel blog that can be found via the Adventures link in the menu on the left.

April 2022

April was dominated by mess! More of that in a minute...

Ian's journey to his Full Radio Amateur Licence continued; and we realise that we haven't mentioned that much. An update is called for! Now, those of you who are avid readers of this blog (and we know you're out there and we appreciate your comments) will remember that back in December 2020, Ian passed his Intermediate licence radio exam. There are three stages to full licence, Foundation, Intermediate and Full with each having its own privileges. He did this, mostly, through self study and the next step should have been Full. But when he looked at the licence syllabus and manual, he got a bit scared by the electronics and maths required. He realised that he needed a proper course of study with support from tutors so looked around for a course to join. Locally, things haven't really got back to speed after Covid, so he looked around for distance learning and the main one is "Bath Based Distance Learning" which seems to be accepted as the best amongst those who know. They only run one Full course a year from August to December – the next one being 2022 and it was September 2021 now, so Ian applied for and signed up for that. He was then given the option of doing the Intermediate course from January to May as a revision ... which he took up! That's got him into a lecture session every Wednesday evening, homework, weekly tests and a local tutor to work with. He's found it great to be learning again and in a structured way. The course is terrific, really good. More next month when it'll have finished.

Easter was very quiet for us. Retirement means that we tend not to go anywhere when other people are on holiday ... so we hid!

After Easter the mess started! The upstairs of our house is "wrapped" in insulation – it has a 2" layer of glassfibre insulation attached to the outside, covered by a thin layer of render. That was done nearly 30 years ago shortly after we moved in and extended the house significantly. Over the years, we've repainted the topcoat of the render but over the last two or three years it has started to

separate and crack. Untouched it would soon have got water behind it and the situation would have got far worse very quickly. So the time had come to strip off the loose render and have it redone. We got quotes (which were quite scary) and selected a contractor. The scaffolding went up just after Easter (closing off the garage) and the work started shortly afterwards. We were warned that it would be messy ... and they were not wrong! It was also very disruptive in that we had to clear the drive each morning and it's surprising how dark it feels inside when there's scaffolding all round the house! This blog entry is being written in very early May and it's now finished. And it looks terrific ... but we still have a lot of mess to clear up. It'll be tidy and clean again soon!

March 2022

March was a fairly easy month. We enjoyed some lovely, warm days (later changing to very cold and snow, which was not so nice) and had a few great days out.

We got a little more work done in the garden – a larger back door step (fits a hound and a person at the same time, while before it was big enough for neither!) and a great little bin store area which Graham Hardy built for us. Tidies things up very nicely. We got a quote for a new garage door and for renovations to the upstairs insulation/rendering system which after 27 years of weather is now showing its age. More details of both of these next month when they should be done.

We had a couple of nights away, too. Really setting up as a test to see whether Tara really needed a cage to sleep in when we are all in the same room (we don't) and to remind ourselves what going away was like! We didn't go far, and don't laugh, just to the Scotch Corner Travelodge. It was actually great fun and since it's on an A1(M) Service Area had plenty of shops and catering round about. There was also a very nice dog walk area (with plenty of rabbits to keep Tara happy) and a lovely walk down into a little village called Middleton Tyas. Very nice indeed to look at and enjoy, although disappointing in that a pub which looked inviting and would have been a nice stroll away was never open even though its website claimed it was! We had a really lovely day in Richmond; enjoying their free two hours of town-centre parking (we wish more places would adopt this practice rather than rooking visitors as much as they can get away with). We had a lovely lunch sitting out in the sun as well as very good tea from The Little Drummer Boy tearoom which we recommend wholeheartedly.

Lois went down to London for her Deputy Bench Chairs' course – a good course by all accounts and the first time she had undertaken train travel BCE (Before Covid Era)!

A slow, but good, month!

February 2022

Wow, another month flits past! Or should I say blew past, because the middle of the month was dominated by two more storms – Dudley and Eunice. Franklin also hit the UK, but that was the south and didn't affect us much. Dudley and Eunice took a tile off the roof and into the back garden and with all the roofers of the area booked until June, we thought we might have a problem. Luckily a message to Steve at SB Roofing Solutions got an immediate response and a repair within 24 hours, even over a weekend! That was fantastic service! The repair that we thought was one tile ended up with five being replaced because although only one had blown off, there was more damage up top.

We went out for a Valentine's Day lunch on 14th, which would have been lovely except the place we went to was closed – serves us right for not checking. We returned on Wednesday and thoroughly enjoyed our special lunch. We have found a super place on a farm near Sacriston who allow dogs into the café (and also have a great picnic area and dog walk, and a farm butcher with wonderful

meat). We can recommend it – look up Broom House Farm (<https://www.broomhousedurham.co.uk/>).

Another job was to sort out the piece of ground behind the AirBnB apartment. This was a dump-cum-compost heap and looked a real mess behind a horrible little fence. It wasn't nice for our guests to look out onto so we got it sorted out and it's now a nice little raised area with some pots on it. Much brighter and more attractive outside the window.

On the last Sunday of the month, we went on the Greatham Snowdrop walk, which was absolutely lovely. The groundsmen of the Hospital of God at Greatham had laid the path out using fallen branches after the storms and marked it with a carpet of fresh straw so that it wasn't muddy. Just wonderful.

January 2022

Well, a year gone and another begun! And COVID is still with us (and like an unwanted guest, shows all the signs of settling in for a long stay!) We sometimes do a review of the year, but we're not going to do that – you can read it in the archive (see below) in detail!

So what of January? Like many Januarys, it wasn't very eventful. We had our birthdays, of course, but didn't go out as we usually do, preferring to stay in and eat very well indeed! We had to put off a visit to an old friend because of omicron, but it should be OK for next month. Precautions were steadily lifted, in England anyway, which we think is giving people something of a false sense of security – we even heard someone say “Well, the Covid problem is now over!” ... tell that to the (mostly unvaccinated) people who are populating the ICUs! But it is nice to see people conversing again. HMCTS, of course, are ignoring Government advice and have kept precautions in place – that's up to them!

We had some lovely people in the AirBnB, including someone from Italy early in the month who had to isolate until she got her 48 hour PCR test back. That was interesting because it meant she couldn't buy food! We fixed her up with a food parcel to keep her going and all was well!

Our porch is now finished with the step being built! Terrific.

At the end of the month, Storm Malik (29th) and then Storm Corrie (overnight 30th-31st) hit us. These did more damage to us than Arwen (which was actually more severe overall) and the whole of the fence between us and next-door went over ... about 45 feet in one complete piece! It was quite spectacular and we were tempted just to stand it up but took the more sensible action of having it replaced in record time by James Manion who is a wonder!

December 2021

The first half of December for us wasn't very exciting really. We had our usual round of sittings and so on for Court; and some meeting – many of which began happening in person. It was very nice to begin to reengage with real people (rather than screen versions) again and it made us realise that human contact really is important.

As the month moved on, things started happening. Lois got elected as Deputy Bench Chairman (sic) for County Durham and Darlington Justices' Bench – very much an honour. She also got elected as Chair designate of Trustees for the Hospital of God at Greatham which is her charity. The two are not connected. 2022 is going to be busy for her, we think! Ian got selected to join the Bench JTAAAC (look it up!) and had a tooth out; the two are also not connected. We went to Doncaster to

visit family and heard a rather excellent pun about those who refuse vaccinations ... “Vaccine refusal goes up with the density of the population.” Think about it! The visit was really nice and, again, it was great to talk to real people in person – albeit masked-up ... mostly. Ian spent most of his time outside the pub we met in, while the others lunched, because they didn’t take dogs, but that was OK.

We attended a lovely carol service at Gainford (the place where Ian laid a Remembrance Wreath last month), again on the village green. It’s been a while since we’ve been able to attend one, and it was absolutely delightful. Being outside meant that we were all Covid-safe and could sing our hearts out; which we did. Tara wasn’t sure what was going on and was certainly very unsure about the church bells ringing out – she hasn’t heard the like before! But once she opened herself up to the “vibe and energy” of the event she had a great time. We have been invited to a Blessing of the Animals in the summer, so Tara must have impressed them with her behaviour.

Ian from ISWORX came round to do the flooring for our new enclosed porch – just the step to be built and then that’s finished. Ian also made and fitted our “memories board” for the porch, of which more later when it starts to fill.

Towards the end of the month we set off for Arran for Christmas. See the travel blog about that ... when we write it. It was a really terrific stay and a much needed rest from our hard retirement work (seriously!) We have at last sussed out the ferry and how to get Tara on and off without trauma. She’s fine getting on and up the stairs to the “pet lounge” ... she is NOT ok getting back down the very steep, narrow, busy and slippery stairs back to the car deck. So this time Lo walked her off and Ian drove off, meeting up (as it happens) in Ardrossan Asda which is only a short walk away. Tara genuinely loved this approach and it made the whole experience MUCH better.

As I write this, we await the midnight fireworks but have a plan to help Tara cope with those.

So, 2021 ... for Hannah, a shockingly poor performance by Edinburgh Napier staff, fantastic support from Sunderland staff for her PhD and PGCE, a successful course, a new permanent job and moving into a new flat. For Ian & Lois, four separate holidays to the extremes of the country, back to work part-time for Lo (temporarily), four significant official appointments and a new successful business. Not bad.

Happy New Year to everyone and here’s to 2022!!

November 2021

November’s weather was pretty good ... until the last week when Storm Arwen hit us! 100 MPH winds, snow ... the lot. Thankfully, we only had a small “outage” and very little damage – others were not so lucky. Much of County Durham and Northumberland were without power overnight and as I write (on 4th December) many are still without power and some are without water because it’s pumped by electricity. Awful for them and has knocked everyone’s faith in moving towards electric ground-source heat pumps to replace gas heating and electric cars for example. We have a generator, but it wouldn’t power a GSHP!

We had our longest AirBnB guest – Toni was here for the whole month working on his archaeology research with Durham University. It was very successful for him and us. We also had the next part of the porch adaptation done – the outside door was fitted so we now have a weather barrier, a noise barrier (next-doors have a very loud dog) and a place for Amazon parcels to be left. Result ... and it looks great!

Ian laid a Remembrance Day wreath on behalf of Her Majesty which was a lovely event at Gainford. It was held on the village green which was a perfect venue – plenty of people turned up and the service was very moving indeed. We're intending to go back for their carol service – also on the Green.

Also towards the end of the month, Covid reinvented itself again and morphed into the Omicron variant. We'd just had our booster jabs, thankfully, because the centres had to step up their rate shortly afterwards. We don't really know whether it's more or less dangerous, nor whether the vaccine will be as effective; but by having the booster we've done all we can to help those around us, our loved ones and, maybe, ourselves. We just wish everyone felt the same! Hey ho – there's no accounting for folks, as they say, especially those who are vaccine refusers. Ian made a reminder to himself not to have the Covid booster on the day after his flu jab ... he felt awful for a day!

October 2021

We concentrated on the AirBnB this month, mostly. Interestingly, the majority of our guests stayed with us for 2 or 3 nights and were supporting their "children" as they became students of the university here. Been there, done that ... it brought back some memories for us!

<https://airbnb.com/h/durham-brandon-flat>

Ian attended (via YouTube) the RSGB convention again this year and enjoyed himself hugely. He also moved forward with the recommendation from the RSGB guys at the National Radio Centre (part of Bletchley Park) to start listening to the airwaves to make a decision about whether to go for HF or VHF in his rig. He got a super receiver setup from eBay (a Yaesu FRG 7700 HF Receiver with Antenna Tuner and VHF Converter) and the garden now has a 20m long-wire antenna stretched from one side of the garden to the other! All good fun.

We both attended the Lieutenancy Dinner too, meeting some interesting, entertaining and very nice people there (and sometimes all three) and enjoying the guard of honour of cadets from all three services.

Sunderland University suffered a massive cyber attack which blacked them out completely, even email was off for a couple of weeks. Grim. It meant that Ian's PhD supervision of distance learning PhDs went across to Zoom and WebEx from Teams ... not all bad then!

The end of the month, of course, saw Halloween and, of course, the idiots who start their indiscriminate, antisocial, irresponsible and thoughtless use of fireworks early. Annoying for us but really upsetting for Tara! This year, and in anticipation, we started her on Skullcap and Valerian tablets early. This concoction sounds very much like something out of Game of Thrones ... but is a bit like valium for dogs. We'll tell you more about our other "adjustments" to help her through this gruesome period next month.

September 2021

Well, September whisked by quickly! But we managed to squeeze a lot in. We have four things to report this month ...

- we now have a solar array on the roof. We learned that it's very wise to shop around in this market, though – for the same system we had quotes from nearly £12,000 to under £5,000 (emphasising – for the same system). It's great to see (via an app, of course) the electricity coming down and into our home. Of course, we have had to change a few things, like washing clothes and dishes during the day when the sun is out to make the best use of the

available energy, rather than in the evening when it's dark and we have nothing being generated. We will be feeding-in soon, too, but that requires paperwork like you wouldn't believe! We'll let you know in due course how our electricity bill fares;

- the AirBnB took off in a way that we really hadn't expected. No sooner had we launched the letting site, we got bookings! September was pretty much fully booked and as we write, October is filling fast and November is full! We really hadn't expected that, but it's great. We have hosted some really nice people who leave the place as they found it, and one who wasn't and didn't! Playing the percentages, though, we're happy with that. It was never about the income and is more about the use of available resource – when Hannah left there was a flat there, empty, begging for use ... so we have used it. Interestingly, we've had all sorts of people from those dropping their children off to become students at Durham, to people on holiday and ones attending family events. All great;
- we went to Shetland again, for a week at a place near Bardister at the top end of the mainland of Shetland. We had a wonderful time and that will be detailed in the "Travels with a Greyhound" blog in due course. There's a bit that's worth reporting about "smokers vs dog wee" and the mutual affront ... but we'll let you read that on the blog;
- Hannah stated work, teaching, and is having a terrific time ... even after the honeymoon period ended. She has also restarted her PhD studies with Sunderland after the Edinburgh Napier debacle and is REALLY enjoying proper supervision from committed supervisors – and good administration too. What a contrast!

August 2021

Right, so August ... As with July, we have spent a good deal of our time on the refurb of the flat so that we could launch it on AirBnB. We succeeded and the listing can be found [here](#) - so please have a look at our hard work! This month we've had two lots of two guests, we're booked for most of September and a bit of October and we've even had a booking for the whole of November! We're really pleased, not just because of the work we put in but also because people want to come and stay with us. We're really impressed with the platform too – we're very new to all this and the system guided us through everything. They helped with setting the prices which change automatically according to the time of year, the day of the week, what's going on in the area and how popular we are; we can even set discounts for week and month-long stays right through to how to do a proper Covid-safe clean. We even attended a live seminar with follow-up advice – really helpful.

In addition to that, we got a few days away, got a survey for getting a solar-power system installed (of which more next month). Tara enjoyed some new places to sniff out, Ian took a trip to Bletchley Park to see the code-breaking place and he visited the National Radio Centre. A smashing couple of days away which he thoroughly enjoyed. See his Tripadvisor reviews for both.

Hannah has finally closed down with Edinburgh Napier University and is very pleased to break all ties with the shit-show of a place. If you're thinking of studying for a PhD there then our advice, based on our experience, is DON'T – you'll get very poor supervision and even worse examination arrangements. Contact us if you'd like more details of the horror show that is their Postgraduate setup. She continues her PhD studies with Sunderland next month.

All in all a very good month, although the weather was very poor.

July 2021

Well, we don't have very much to say about July – sorry! It has been all about returning the guest suite that Hannah had been using into something fit for AirBnB or similar. It's a resource too good to leave empty. So that's meant a full redecoration, reflooring, a rejig of the kitchenette, sorting the

bathroom out and so on. That seems simple to write, but it's taken us all the month to actually do it. We have been able to recall tradesmen we trust, so Ian from Isworx did the floor for us, Peter from JP Ceramics did the tiles and Nick will be doing the glosswork (we did the walls, ceilings and radiators). We also did the plumbing for the kitchenette. There's been a huge amount to do, so we haven't really done much else except some sittings! We spent a lovely day at Beamish Museum, though, including a very nice picnic and Ian attended a Baker-Dearing Trust conference via Zoom, which was great. That's about it, really ... except that we bought a new car – another X3 to replace the old one which was only a couple of years old but had got dirty so we needed a new one!

June 2021

We concluded our Arran trip this month (see the travel blog for details) and also went to Devon for another postponed holiday. This one was booked in June 2019, postponed in June 2020 because of the restrictions on travel and then finally we took it this June! That meant that we had two week away in three ... we never expected to be pressured by too many holidays too close together ... and other unanticipated result of Covid. It was a lovely week investigating Mike's stone circle and how it would indicate the solstice which in the event was not seen because of rain and low cloud. (We have booked again for 2022.) More AirBnB – this time in a wonderful little cottage in the middle of Beer right next to the church and two minutes from the mainstreet ... (pause for effect) ... down a very, very steep hill. Going down to the village was easy – getting back up was much more of a challenge and we found a different route. More in the travel blog. Hannah moved out and into her new flat which isn't very far away from here and we set about converting her old flat here into a guest suite ... we might dip our toes into the AirBnB hosting lark ourselves. Tara had a wonderful time on Arran and then again in Beer. She found the sea "interesting" in both places. She very nearly managed to catch a seagull in mid flight when one came too close for our comfort and, in the event, its safety. We don't think she'd have known what to do about it if she'd caught it, but it was a close run thing for the seagull and I suspect Tara would have won.

May 2021

The main thing that happened during the month was that we visited the caravan, perhaps for the last time, to empty it. We have decided, after nearly 7 lovely years, to vacate it and hand it over to the people who have taken over the croft to use as a holiday rental. It's a long trek up there and although it's still lovely, the place has changed a lot since we first moved there. The North Coast 500 route passes close, so the number of tourists has gone up markedly. The roads just aren't up to coping with huge motor caravans, many of which are rented by people who normally drive small saloon cars ... it can get chaotic. It's also a great deal noisier than it used to be, with the people in the two crofts opposite now farming them big time, often working late into the evening (it gets dark very late up there). So, all things considered, we are moving on and finding somewhere rather closer to home. More of that later.

Lo went up to visit her cousin in East Kilbride, spending a lovely day there discussing some records of one of their ancestors she's found.

We spent a gorgeous week on Arran, postponed from Christmas and then again from Easter because of the pandemic. We were hosted by two absolutely lovely people, both significant artists. He's a sculptor – stone mostly – and she's a painter. Their work was all around. We had the run of the grounds which were extensive with three big fields and whole woodland to explore – Tara was in heaven with the smells available to her and had a wonderful time, as did we. We found the place where, 37 years ago, we camped on our honeymoon. The field is still there looking much the same although holiday homes are now built opposite. Getting to Arran was a bit tricky because Calmac (the ferry operator up there) had moved one of their ferries to replace a service from Ullapool to

Lewis so only one was left doing the Ardrossan-Brodick route ... one is not enough and we were cancelled. So we had to travel the route up past Loch Lomond round the tip of Loch Fyne then down the western side of the Firth of Clyde to Claonaig where there's a little "turn up and go" ferry to Lochranza on the other side of Arran. It should have been a couple of hours extra, but we chose to travel on the first Saturday of half term, and it was a nice day, so the whole of Scotland appeared to be on the road to Loch Lomond. Scotland's roads are not built for tourist traffic (even though a significant proportion of the country's income is from tourism) so we got stuck in an hour and a half of traffic jam. The ferry was great, though – once we got there. Coming back was a lot easier since our Brodick-Ardrossan booking was honoured. The experience was terrific and there's even good facilities for dogs in a special area of the inside saloon. Tara really didn't like the stairs - too steep and slippery metal – or the water rushing passed, but loved the smells coming from the carpet in the saloon ... we didn't enquire!

April 2021

Well, what a month that was! Many significant things happened, alongside the tedium of the continued lockdown. We had some work done around the house, including having the tourer's floor replaced with new wooden laminate. We were invited to lunch in a marquee – the only way we would be allowed to be included in such gatherings would be outdoors. The weather has been bright but cold (the coldest April on record, we were told) so thank goodness for the diesel heater! It was a terrific lunch and it was great to share company with other people. Sittings returned (mostly) to three Magistrates, by dint of perspex screens being erected throughout. Very odd, quite sweaty and tests one's voice to be heard in Court!

Scotland lifted its travel ban from England and around the country towards the end of the month ... we didn't join the cavalcade of camper vans going north ... but will soon.

But those things pale into insignificance alongside the huge news that Hannah gained a teaching post for September. She's having a fantastic time on her PGCE course, now at the UTC, and now has a job to look forward to. She also had a major win against Napier University, whose support for her PhD has been a travesty. She'll be moving to Sunderland to continue her studies! Ian got made a Deputy Lieutenant for County Durham (a deputy lieutenant is a deputy of a lord-lieutenant of a county, in the case of County Durham, Her Majesty's Lord-Lieutenant is Mrs Sue Snowdon. The appointment is subject to the sovereign's approval) which is a huge honour. A little about the position is [here](#).

As we move forward into May we hear better and better news from this country anyway about the success of the lockdown and the vaccination programme, so hopefully we will have more trips to tell you about next time.

March 2021

March continued much as February had been – wild swings of weather (sometimes within a day) from beautiful sunshine to perishing cold. But spring is always a nice time of year, with the evenings getting longer. Then we have the horrible time when government decides that we should all have jetlag while it forces an hour change for no obvious reason. We found that the EU had decided not to have "daylight saving" this year but that action was postponed because of the coronavirus pandemic. We've never been sure how tinkering with the time is supposed to cause an astronomical change big enough to save daylight and now we're not sure why the coronavirus pandemic means that a change to the law that's been passed doesn't go ahead ... maybe that's why we're not politicians!

Anyway, Ian's now had his first Oxford-Astrazenica jab and has undergone a full-day battery of hands-on tests including EEG while doing tasks, ECG, gait (including a week-long recording), MRI while doing tasks (which was horrible) and so on; all as part of the Newcastle Parkinson's study we told you about last month. He finished his stint chairing the Lord Chancellor's Advisory Committee for Justices of the Peace at the end of the month, and there'll be news following that later. Lois spends most of her time on-line (it seems) with all her voluntary work taking place via Zoom or Teams. Tara had to go to the vet because she got sick and was given an opioid injection that sent her, frankly, doolally! Bless her! It would have been funny had it not been worrying. She's fine now, though. Hannah continues on her PGCE, ending her placement at Park View School and moving after Easter to the UTC ... she cannot wait. She's on the interview treadmill at the moment.

So, in summary, it's been an uplifting month ... the step towards spring always is, isn't it. We are moving slowly towards a lifting of lockdown which is nice and we've even had an invitation to a lunch in a marquee early next month which will be our first outing and to which we are really looking forward! Could this be the start of the end of this period of our lives that we'll certainly look back on into the future? Or are we being optimistic? Tell you what, let's all be optimistic, shall we – it's good for us!

February 2021

After January's "hibernation" as we called it, February bloomed ... well, it didn't exactly bloom, but it was bright. The "annoying snow" that was noted at the end of January turned into dangerous and long-lived snow ... which then turned into sheet ice as the council failed to do anything about clearing it except for bus routes, making even walking about difficult and driving was almost impossible. That went on for a couple of weeks with the temperature never getting above freezing and regularly dipping to -5°C. On one or two occasions it got to -9.5°C, with a cheery council man on the radio saying that the salt they use on the main roads stops working at -10°C. Helpful. But then everything changed weather-wise. Within 48 hours it warmed up to +10°C ... almost 20 degrees up from a couple of days previously! Spring sprung, as it were! It was lovely - we could do our exercise walks without coats and the whole world took on a better outlook.

We struggled on with lockdown as best we could with our court sittings. Hannah got into school by means of 4x4 during the snow - it was the only way out of the minor roads! Zoom, Teams and a bit of WebEx as ever came to the fore with remote governors' meetings, remote courts, remote committee meetings, remote briefings and, on one occasion, a remote lecture about Poolewe being live streamed from Gairloch. That last one was an absolute joy and is the one brilliant thing about lockdown ... we could never get to a lecture in Gairloch (which is on the far North West coast of Scotland) but we could get there virtually. The museum is worth a look (www.gairlochmuseum.org) and we think you can find the lecture series from there. A great initiative worth supporting! Hannah found that there was more work to do on her PhD and Ian started the ball rolling with a piece of medical research he's volunteered for with Newcastle University (he's one of the healthy control group for a Parkinson's project) and was subjected to a full morning battery of tests to make sure he was free of Parkinson's.

The huge news is that Lois has now had her first Covid vaccination, and Ian has booked his for early next month (Lois is in group 5 and Ian is in Group 7). We've had the news that schools are back on 8th March and there's an outline plan (called the Roadmap) of getting out of lockdown. Politicians are being much more cautious this time since a fourth lockdown would lose votes!

A much more positive month, notwithstanding the snow!

January 2021

We mentioned at the end of last month that COVID was raging ... and that continued into January. There was a quick, but not completely unexpected, full lockdown including school closure right across the country. It was probably too late and as the month went on, so the situation became worse. The figures went well above the previous highs. But the upside was that the vaccinations started in earnest and by the end of the month pretty much all of the care home people were covered. For us, life went on pretty much as before.

These lockdowns don't really affect us much, if we're honest. Interestingly, road traffic continued much as before (unlike the March 2020 lockdown) so we're not really sure whether people are really responding to it! The courts stayed open so we continued to sit and our birthdays were celebrated with a fantastic dial-up Lebanese meal ... the same food as it would have been, but at a bijou restaurant (i.e. our dining room) and the huge upside was that we were all together. This was the first birthday celebration with all three of us present for years. A glimmer of a silver lining, perhaps.

That's pretty much it for January! We had some annoying snow that just got in everyone's way, but there's little else to report. Hibernation, I think one calls it. Roll on the excitement of February!

December 2020

December was great! Odd but great. It was like being in a state of flux for the whole month because one never knew from day to day what would happen next. Brexit vied with Covid for the headlines in the news which was refreshing (-ish) and we didn't know until the week before what we'd be allowed to do for Christmas. The government pulled a blinder by warning that London would go into lockdown a few days before it did (because of a new, more contagious, strain) so everyone left and spread it round this country and beyond. Towards the end of the month, the inevitable deal was whisked from the bag at the very last minute (as EU-related decisions always are) and the French closed their borders. Oh, and Bill Bailey won Strictly.

In the end, we were allowed to mix on Christmas Day only - so we did - and the rest of the time we stayed in Tier 3. All fairly predictable really but it concentrated the mind and we had a fabulous time! Two culinary highlights were a wonderful goose dinner on Christmas Eve prepared (mostly) by Hannah and a fantastic piece of beef from Campbell's for Christmas Dinner itself. We also had, magically, the conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter which we could see on clear mornings and is said to be what was prophesied in the Book of Numbers ("A Star shall come out of Jacob") and is reported in Matthew's gospel ("For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.") See photo above. Perhaps best of all was that we had a white Christmas - it was officially declared so by the Met Office and was confirmed by looking out of the window.

Just before New Year we were put into Tier 4: the one above the highest tier. This was LockDown by another name, really, as was meant to stop people congregating for New Year celebrations. So we stayed in (as we usually do, really) but we had the bonus of all being together to see 2021 in. There has to be a silver lining or two in all this, and that was certainly one! Tara didn't like the fireworks during the evening, but they didn't go on too long and we enjoyed Jools' Hootenanny as usual. It all goes to show that while making forward plans in nigh-on impossible at the moment, much doesn't really change. At 11:00 (midnight European time) Big Ben sounded for the first time in years. The hands showed 10:59, but they made the bell toll at 11:00. Not the chimes beforehand, just the tolling bell marking the end of our stay in the EU.

The rest of December was pretty much the same as the rest of the year with lots of on-line meetings and sittings. Tara has some smashing times at Paws Play ... although the field became progressively more waterlogged as the month went on and the rain fell.

For Ian, the highlight of the month was him passing (with 87%) his Intermediate Radio Amateur examination and getting his new callsign.

As we leave 2020, the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine is in use and the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine has just been approved, COVID-19 rages and is currently outstripping its height last summer and we are properly out of the EU. At this time last year we hadn't even heard of COVID. What will happen this year? Whatever, may we wish all of you who read these notes a very, very happy, safe, well and (perhaps) prosperous 2021!

November 2020

Looking back on November is a little tricky ... not much happened. We were put into "Tier 3", the highest tier of Covid-19 control, not because of the infection rates in Durham but because Newcastle and its surrounding boroughs were high and to London we're all the same. Then from November 5th we were put into a form of Lockdown, but schools and most shops stayed open and everyone kept going to work. The only thing that changed was that restaurants and pubs closed. During the day and early evening everything was normal – traffic levels were high and the only way of telling anything had changed was that more people wore masks. Evenings were quieter, but only a bit. After that we went back into Tier 3 which meant that schools and shops stayed open and everyone kept going to work. It was hard to tell. However, the Government announced that we'd be allowed to mingle over Christmas, although that was largely because people would have done it anyway so we got the worst form of regulation where rules follow practice! It'll inevitably cause a surge in infection in the New Year, but there you go. At least it looks like there might be a vaccine.

All the while the courts stayed open (albeit with controls and variation), we continued remote interviewing and most meetings were on Zoom, Teams or WebEx. Not much changed! Hannah's schools stayed largely Covid-free so her teaching practice wasn't disturbed much.

Tara was upset by the five days of Guy Fawkes night! Not surprising – we were too! Bangs, whistles and flashes started on 4th (the evening before lockdown) and went on until 8th. The amount of money that people spent must have been significant. We think it's about time the Government stopped the sale of explosives to the general public. It wasn't a nice period – a panic stricken dog is not very nice for anyone. However we found the wonders of valerian and skullcap tablets (which sounds like something from Game of Thrones) and now refer to them as "Tara's Valium". They helped enormously although a spaced out hound can be fun to watch!

We made use of the PawsPlay facility a few times, which Tara loves. However, she rarely manages the full 50 minutes without getting flaked out so we will start to take a picnic with us next month – it's a nice spot for a picnic and there are never any other dogs around!

October 2020

October saw a return to something like normality. Everyone pretty much got on with their lives (although that was set to bite us later). Judicial sittings were normal-ish (with only two on the bench), and meetings settled into the new normal of Zoom/Teams/Skype/whatever. We've realised that something is missing from these, so although they are cheaper (no expenses) and quicker (no travel), they miss that important chatter before and after, where a lot of important work was done. That work now isn't being done and a kind of malaise is creeping in to things. That may well get worse before it gets better.

Ian "attended" an RSGB conference via Zoom, which was excellent, worked brilliantly and which he thoroughly enjoyed and he also "attended" a talk streamed from the Gairloch Museum which was

great, too. He would not have been able to attend these in person, so were a huge bonus offered by the pandemic response.

We're also noticing that the communication of efficient and effective companies is doing better than before – they have instigated technological solutions really well so that staff can work from home properly, having phone calls diverted to them, being able to access their office systems and using the last six months to employ more staff to cover the shortfall due to illness. Less efficient companies are still talking about the effect that the “coronavirus pandemic”(a phrase they use as a kind of trump card) is having on them as an excuse for poor communication and awful customer service. We assume that as we go on, these less efficient companies are the ones that will fall by the wayside.

We squeezed in a trip to the caravan in the highlands, which we'd like to say was lovely but it was plagued with heavy rain and strong winds! Tara had a great time, though, and is now not so fazed by such weather! A high point this month was finding a fantastic secure dog-exercise field where we can let her off the lead and she can run free. Lovely!

September 2020

September was an interesting and busy month for us all ... it came as a bit of a shock after the last few months of comparative leisure.

Lois went to Denmark to follow up on her research project into her forebears. Denmark was on the list of places that didn't require quarantine after a visit, which was great ... and controls for Scotland and the North-East hadn't been put in. It was a short window of opportunity which opened just right for her. She had a great time and more details are included in the travel blog you can access from the “Adventures” link in the menu.

Hannah started her teacher training course. She'd already visited the school but this was the start of her course itself. Lots of administration to start with, of course, and then down to real work. She is having a whale of a time and thoroughly enjoying things so far.

We got up to the caravan for a lovely week, mid-September. Although it did rain a lot! (Maybe the location suggests we should expect that.) We hadn't been for a long time for various reasons, so it was great to get back up there. We had bought Tara a grand new cage to sleep in – somewhere larger – and she found that very good.

Lots of Court sittings, of course, and remote work too ... we're all getting used to this way of working which we find very satisfactory. But on top of all that, Ian got into school as a Governor, being very careful but seeing the way in which education can flourish in a COVID-safe environment. It was super to see the students being responsible and following the rules properly – for them it's just the way to do things, so they do!

August 2020

August saw a return to something close to normality. Traffic was pretty much back to normal and apart from wearing masks in them, shops were back to normal too. Tesco deliveries were easily available and there was little or no queuing outside. In terms of our activities, that was pretty much back to normal too, with judicial sittings returning to normal (but only two on the bench, not three, and more work being done over video systems) and Lois taking part in some medical research too.

Following the submission of her PhD thesis, Hannah had a lovely week in Edinburgh in the caravan; we had managed to get a booking during what would have been Festival time between everyone

cancelling their bookings but before they rebooked! The site ended up full to capacity, but there was a two-day window when bookings were easy ... and we caught it. We took her there, dropped the caravan off and then left her there ... with the reverse at the end of the week. All worked well and apart from a couple of days of rain it worked brilliantly. Edinburgh was odd without the throngs of people who would normally be there for the Festivals and the Fringe ... but maybe that's not such a bad thing since it was getting a bit silly in terms of overcrowding and overcharging. We also got dental appointments!

The high point, apart of course from the PhD submission, was that Ian became the first chair in the country of a panel recommending a new magistrate after a remote interview. Exciting, and the rest of the country will now learn from our experience.

Tara has had a great month, developing her own ways and enjoying the opportunities to see a bit more of people around the place. She is still a bit nervous around new people (I think we've all found it a bit odd, actually) but that is disappearing.

July 2020

Lockdown was relaxed as the month began. Actually, in practice, it relaxed rather more than was intended ... it looked like everyone pretty much got back to normal. In England anyway – Scotland was a bit more careful and things reopened rather more slowly there and as a result, people took things a bit more seriously. Here, people just got back to their business, congregating in huge numbers as the seaside and following football matches where they also managed to deposit a huge amount of litter; I suppose if someone disregards a social distancing rules, they will also disregard littering rules. Traffic noise pretty much got back to normal. And Ian and Hannah had visits to the hairdressers!!!

Ian had a terrific "big Zoom session" as an old school reunion, which was great fun. Hannah also visited the school where she'll be undertaking the majority of her teacher training course next year and came back full of excitement and wanting to get on with it NOW!!

Travel, as we said, was getting back to normal and so we were able to go across to Runcorn for a funeral of one of Lois' distant cousins and we were able to have a lovely post-interment lunchtime meeting with a large number of her family. It was very nice to congregate in groups again – although we both found it a little overwhelming to start with. Then we got to revisit the caravan – Scotland lifted its ban on tourist travel. Mind you, most of the motorhomes in England also came up the A9! It was nice to get back up there for a while, although the weather was awful and so were the midges. Having said that, we managed a couple of nice walks that included the beach which was quite crowded ... 5 or 6 people were there (see photo above). Tara got introduced to the sea by doing a bit of paddling but wasn't really impressed. She was very intrigued by the sea and its sparkly bits, though! Once we got home, it was all hands to the pumps to prepare the tourer for Hannah's forthcoming trip to Edinburgh ... but more of that later.

We spent a lovely afternoon attending a "socially distanced social event" at HoG near Hartlepool. It was a get-together organised by Lois for the Trustees in the hospital grounds. It was the first time we had attended any sort of big get-together for many months and felt a bit odd; very pleasant, just odd! We had to keep well away from the buildings of course and over 2 metres from each other, so there was quite a lot of shouting. . and there wasn't any drink (or toilets) but apart from that it was great. It was actually a highly successful and enjoyable event!

Thanks for the nice comments about the "family roo" video.

June 2020

As we entered our fourth month of lockdown, June was an interesting month of contrasts. We had to cancel a lot, but also did some extras that we wouldn't have done otherwise. The cancellations included our long planned for trip to Devon to try out Mike Green's stone-circle solstice calculator – a stone circle in a field in Devon. We mentioned it in the travel blog at the time. We booked a cottage a year ago. . . cancelled it as a result of COVID-19. . . and rebooked for next year. More positively, we held a fantastic Tarot exchange over Zoom, including a breakout "room" for the readings themselves. We're getting good at this videolink stuff! The Sunderland Faculty of Education and Society wouldn't let viruses get in the way of their research conference and continued it – very successfully – over MS Teams. And court sittings kind of resumed, although they were different and sometimes over Skype for Business. The weather was lovely at the start of the month and we got some great barbecues in. . . although it then turned to winter weather! We had an anti-Christmas dinner ("anti" in the sense of opposite rather than against) on 25th June, including a Christmas tree, beef from Campbell's with all the trimmings and we were even allowed a guest! Even more positively, Ian took an on-line course in amateur radio (something he's wanted to do since he was 14), took the examination on video and passed so he's now a licensed radio amateur (callsign M7IGN). He is dead chuffed and is now learning Morse code!

Last month we included the throwaway remark 'We even have a "family roo" on most days.' and as a result we've been asked "What on earth is a family roo, when it's at home?" Well, rooing is a bit like a howl that some greyhounds use to let everyone know they're there. The pose is a full-on "howling-at-the-moon-nose-in-the-air-and-neck-fully-extended" look. And the sound is lovely. With Tara, the tail is wagging like mad. She (and we) love doing it together, hence the family roo remark, and we can start it off by one of us rooing ourselves so that everyone joins in. It's a remarkable noise. . . goodness know what it sounds like outside, mind you!

May 2020

May was. . . well, May really. The weather crashed from arctic to sweltering and then back again. We took advantage of the warmer bits by having several barbecues which got us out of the house. . . albeit only onto the deck!

We got on with our third month of lockdown, although there were some minor adjustments. We all got used to a wide variety of videoconferencing platforms. Our preference remains with Zoom - it being, in our experience, the best functionally, the most reliable and easiest to use - but we've also had to cope with MSTeams, Skype, Skype for Business and Webex, all of which are different in their setup and operation, all behave differently and all have their idiosyncrasies. We've learned that running two video sessions simultaneously across our broadband is only JUST possible and not while a Netflix stream is also going on. However, we've also found how to share a connection on one PC between broadband and mobile data which solves the problem. It went through bizarre fun to just "what we do".

Hannah had a super birthday given the circumstances, having a couple of Zoom sessions with various groups as well as a pizza meal including Ben who joined us virtually. We think she deserves a proper party some time. . . when we can! Tara perfected her stair work and can now run up and down with some panache whenever she wants to! She has got into the habit of wandering up to the landing when she wants a bit quiet time or to check out what's happening next door or across the road, taking advantage of a high vantage point and floor-length windows! No fools, these greyhounds. She really is part of the family now – or is it that we are part of her pack – and is becoming a champion member either way. We even have a "family roo" on most days.

We took advantage of the variations in rules by going for a picnic during the warmer part of the month, which was just lovely! And Hannah had a properly socially distanced meeting with Ben.

April 2020

April. . well, what a month that was! We all learned a new way of living. For archive purposes: we all had to stay in our homes except for specific designated activities (shopping, exercise, medical, key working). For us, we got into a routine pretty quickly – Hannah did Tara’s morning walk as exercise for both of them followed by a bit of yoga or a workout for Hannah before breakfast. We had a quiz session after our family breakfast to get the brains going. Lois and Ian did either a long walk early afternoon or later in the evening with Tara, depending on the weather, and we went shopping when we had to. The evenings, we have to admit, have been taken up utilising our Netflix and Amazon Prime subscriptions, BBC iPlayer and so on. Any platform where we can avoid interminable adverts, really!

Shopping was interesting – while we are not vulnerable, we fall into the “at risk” category so are trying not to go to places where other people are. . as we’ve been advised – the government has asked us to use home deliveries whenever we could. However, Tesco were completely overwhelmed and their home deliveries and click and collect were simply unavailable a month ahead. This appeared to be so right across the country. They didn’t give any information or any help. . availability simply stopped. Morrison’s and Iceland kept going pretty well with a much better web portal than Tesco, as did Sainsbury’s - and Lidl were fantastic. Our concern has been that if we had to isolate for a fortnight, we couldn’t have eaten! But Morrison’s and Lidl, between them, came up with the goods – literately. Loo rolls became available as the month went on as did pasta, both of which were simply unavailable for the first half of the month.

What are the up-sides of our month, then? We had planned to go up to the Highlands for Easter, but that wasn’t within the rules so we didn’t; so we had a lovely Easter at home. . the supermarkets near to home having a surfeit of chocolate eggs! We also had a couple of barbecues when it was warm (Lidl did well for those) but apart from those days we were in an arctic airstream (literally) and it was cold. Above all, though, it was quiet – it still is. Lovely and quiet! It’s quieter than our Highland retreat now! Very few cars go by and going for walks has been lovely; indeed we have found some beautiful places to walk close to home (see above right). Brandon Woods, for example. . we didn’t even know that they existed before and they offer some fantastic walks in near solitude! There are also lots of open spaces – grassed, lit and maintained by the Council. . wonderful. The air itself is fresher and cleaner than we’ve ever known. . and the clarity of views is fantastic too. It just shows the crap that we pump into the air normally.

Oh, and Tara has learned to go up and down stairs. She sounds a bit like a drunkard coming down, but greyhounds are hardly built for stairs!

Perhaps the most uplifting of all the activity going on at this peculiar time is the “clap for our carers” on Thursday evenings at 8:00. We took part in them – from a high platform on the deck in the garden so that we could see over the hedge. At first we felt a little guilty at our surprise of the enthusiasm of the people of Brandon, but then felt quite emotional at the solidarity of the support for those who are in the “front line”. We haven’t used pots and pans to make more noise yet (as some do) – we’ll keep that for next month.

Towards the middle of the month came the news that the lockdown would continue for another three weeks at least – no surprise there. Settle in.

March 2020

WOW! Well, how things have changed since last month. And it's all happened since the latter half of March. For those reading this as an archive - Covid-19 hit the UK hard and serious controls had to be put into place. Around the middle of the month, the government gave strong advice to everyone to stay indoors and not congregate. That was just before a nice weekend when everyone went to Snowdon and Ben Nevis, thus congregating. People went to pubs, some restaurants stayed open. It was exactly what one might have come to expect, really. On top of all that, lots of people with camper vans tried to go to Scotland to isolate and one story had it that 30 such vans turned up at the Ben Nevis visitor centre car park (where there are no facilities) demanding to stay there; police were called and it was all a bit messy. So the government had to get heavy, putting out a direction, rather than advice, that we all had to stay indoors apart from very specific listed reasons. Schools closed, clubs, pubs and restaurants closed, and so on. This was all backed up by law which was hurried in.

For us, we settled in to a routine which included outings for only getting groceries and exercise (which included Tara of course). The huge news was that we managed to get some toilet roll on Friday 27th March! The first available for weeks. We still don't know why everyone panic bought toilet roll - Covid-19 causes neither diarrhoea nor sneezing - but the nation ran out. We're a funny bunch aren't we! The joke of each morning saying in a Geordie accent "Day 4 of lockdown in the house" quickly became stale. Two interesting things struck us. First, just how quiet it is without traffic. Round here rivals the Highlands for quietness now. The loudest thing is the birdsong! Some would regard it as spooky or even scary - we think it's the silver lining of all this. The other is the lack of sociability. We understand the social distance requirement but we hadn't expected people that we see on our daily exercise walk to avoid eye contact or any greeting! That's a bit odd and maybe will settle down as we all get used to this strange way of living.

But, in common with just about every other monthly update since we began them, this month we had some work done (and like just about every previous report, it was the last bit of work to be done). This was to streamline the garage storage. Ian of ISWORX got it done just before the lockdown and it looks fabulous!

January/February 2020

After the rigours of Christmas and New Year (which in fact were not all that rigorous at all), January and February have been much quieter. The high point was a trip to the Highlands, a Travelodge stay. Full details about that on the Travel Blog in "Adventures". Apart from that, it's been very quiet indeed. . apart from us having incorporating our open stairs closed in. Ian from ISWORX did a great job as always. We had our birthdays too, which was nice. February was even quieter. . looking back I think we kind of hibernated! One point of mention is that Hannah found that her role with Orangebus/Capita was not as billed; it was market research rather than product research! Not even close to her desired career pathway, so they parted company (amicably). She's now decided to follow mum and dad's footsteps and go into teaching and in the meantime is concentrating full time on her PhD writeup; as a result it's going very well indeed now. She has also started working p/t as an intern at the UTC which is really great experience for her and is retaining her role as a STEM ambassador at the UTC in Newcastle. All very good indeed and she is looking forward hugely to getting under way with her new career direction.

December 2019

Looking back on December to summarise it for you is quite tough ... because not very much happened, really! A glance through our diaries shows that Lois and Ian spent nearly every day doing some sort of voluntary work ... Hospital Trustees, Research Groups, Patient Groups, Judicial work, Advisory Committee stuff and so on. It was, depending on how you look at it, either a mad week or one that showed a marked lack of diary control! Hannah continued with her job – which has now graduated away from "new job" to just "job" as she settles in to professional life and the joys of

commuting and, towards the end of the month, a Tyne & Wear Metro strike which was carefully timed to hit end-of-year festivities as well as a key NUFC football match. Season's Greetings to the RMT!

More positively, Tara gained Kennel Club recognition as Flomur Tara, her "posh Sunday name" after a protracted email discussion between Ian and the KC followed by a really, really helpful telephone call with Lesley from the Club who painstakingly and with enormous patience talked Ian through a whole new world of terminology including "sires" and "dams" which previously he had thought were about mediaeval kings and irrigation control, and "stud book" which is a phrase not well served by Google searches! It's a long time since Ian was fazed by terminology and he found it refreshing ... or maybe another word. Also, the Christmas food started to arrive ... by van from Tesco, another van from Iceland and a courier also in a van from Campbell's Meat in Linlithgow. Might've overdone it a bit ... indeed we had to nip out and buy another freezer to accommodate everything.

We also went to see "A Jazzy Christmas" at the Sage which careful readers will remember we saw last year. We'd booked the tickets in the "BT era" (i.e. Before Tara) and were now a bit stuck because she's not yet confident enough in us to be left for several hours ... not without us (although probably not her) "worrying". However, Hannah and Ben volunteered to look after her while we gallivanted. And we had a fabulous time. And then there was the Strictly final ...

Christmas itself was wonderful – mostly food orientated of course – but terrific. We all had a brilliant time and Ian got a pie in a tin for Christmas. Nuff said!

November 2019

November was a nice, quiet month (for a change!) We have been enjoying getting to know Tara and she us. We have established a reasonable routine, now, which makes for an easier life for us all. Hounds like routine, we find, and Tara is no different. She goes to bed and sleeps through without hassle and, like us, doesn't really like getting up in the morning especially when it's cold ... and certainly not when it's raining. She enjoys her walks on a set route for morning, afternoon and evening "pee and poo" sessions. She also loves going for rides in the car and we have had a couple of lovely visits to the Greyhound Trust people one of which was their Christmas Fayre at Hardwick Park. We have also had a super session at home with Vicky from Have a Good Dog (www.haveagooddog.co.uk) who started us on basic training (in fairness, it really was us rather than Tara who needed training). Vicky really was great and we got a proper set of notes, handouts and references as part of the fee, as well as a very enjoyable session. Thoroughly recommended.

There is now a link in the menu on the left for Tara's background data including her pedigree and race results before she retired. And some photos too.

Apart from that, the month has seen a lot of interviewing for new JPs – Durham & Cleveland are right in the middle of a recruitment campaign at the moment and we've also had a couple of excellent events at the University. And Ian had a very enjoyable "black tie" dinner at the UTC to launch their new STEM initiative.

So all in all a very pleasant month with enough interesting things but a lot of enjoyable stuff going on too.

Oh, and the Christmas trees are up ... in November! I know!!

October 2019

Well, what a month October has been! We had the last bits of the new kitchen fitted and the decorating more or less done. In amongst that, Lois had a few days on holiday in London, visiting her family and catching up on some of the genealogy stuff she's been working on. We got the rubbish removed from the old kitchen (a truck full) and the old but still good fridge and freezer as well as a whole lot of other superfluous stuff went to the BHF charity shop. Later in the month, Ian did a quick run up to the North West Highlands! Alongside all that we attended an excellent Lieutenancy dinner and got on with our usual Judicial business; so all in all a very packed month!

But we know you don't want to hear about any of that! You want to hear about Tara don't you! It's a while since we had someone in the household that needed lots of care and attention - 25 years, in fact! Rescuing a greyhound is remarkably similar to having a baby! September saw Tara settle in, understand what a house is, what stairs were and what a Hoover is like. October has been much more about getting her into routines to that she feels comfortable as a new member of the family. What they say about a couple of hours' snooze for each half-hour walk is about right and we have found some lovely routes round about that keep us clear of the main roads. We have been pleasantly surprised by the amount of green space there is around here – loads of it. All of which makes for a wonderful smellscape to be created for a hound. We daren't let her off her lead, though. . she finds rabbits very attractive and will go for magpies like a shot; well, she did race at Sunderland after all (that's a local joke). But other dogs rattle her. . unless they are other greyhounds. We attended the monthly Sunday walk organised by the Darlington Greyhound Trust where she linked up with some of her old friends and we made some new ones!

September 2019

September was dominated by the arrival of Tara. But that wasn't the only thing that happened, so before we tell you about Tara, here are the other highlights.

We spent a wonderful week in Shetland. We've done Orkney before, so wanted to go a little further afield and do the northernmost extremity of the UK. Details are in the travel blog, of course, which you can access from the Adventures link in the menu on the left or by clicking [here](#).

On our return, we prepared for a lunch to which we invited some friends. It turned into quite a big "do" with about 20 people coming. We'd originally envisaged it being a barbecue but the weather was a little unkind to us - maybe not a surprise for mid-September, but annoying nevertheless. Instead we did a roast dinner (beef, lamb, pork, chicken, salmon and a veggie option too). It seemed to go down well and we had a very relaxed afternoon eating, drinking and chatting; it was very pleasant. In parallel, we had emptied the kitchen because, yes although we'd said we had finished the renovations for now, we got an excellent deal on a new kitchen so went for it. Not great timing, but. !

Alongside all that was the arrival of Tara who we adopted on 12th September. Tara is a four year old ex-racing greyhound, rescued by the Greyhound Trust at Darlington. Tara's first race was on 21st July 2017 in Kilkenny, Ireland and she raced 5 times before coming to the UK. Since she was trained in Ireland she has an identification tattoo in both ears. She raced at Sunderland 48 times from 8th September 2017 to her final race on 30th June 2019, winning six times. Unfortunately (or maybe fortunately for her) she wasn't all that good at keeping to her lane as she raced and there are numerous notes in her record about bumping which means that she bumped into the dog running beside her or crowded them – she didn't balk them, which would have meant that she interfered with them, she just wandered a bit. She also has notes about being slow away and running on. In other words, she wasn't a very good racing greyhound which presumably is why she went for adoption at quite a young age.

She's still settling in to life here - we've had a few sleepless nights and some "accidents" too, but things are improving by the day as she learns to trust us and enjoy her new life with us.

August 2019

August has been a month of getting on with life, really. There have only been a couple of excitements! We have both been settling in to our volunteering, catching up somewhat on things that have drifted by. For once we didn't do much in the way of holiday. . we didn't need to because we can go any time (did I mention we're retired). And anyway, Scotland is currently sinking under the sheer number of camper vans on its roads - best to stay away unless you have a camper van of your own. We nipped up to Edinburgh to collect Hannah from university - for probably the last time. We've done this for seven years, what with her first degree then her PhD, and it was a bit of a "lump in the throat moment" to drive away after we'd loaded up. We'd intended to have a "final breakfast" at Frankie and Benny's in Fountain Park, but they don't open until 9:00 and we were ready to leave at 8:10, so we went to McDonalds in Berwick-upon-Tweed instead which was very nice and a fitting "full stop" - or maybe a semi-colon - in Hannah's educational journey. Next month she starts her first full time job!

We spent a few days up at the caravan, which alternated between very hot and pouring rain on what seemed like an almost hourly basis, but which was actually only daily. The key entertainment was watching the croft owners using a mini-digger to remove rhododendron bushes (which are weeds up there). It ranks alongside "Bones" in entertainment value. Ian also had some work with UHI so than necessitated a trip to Inverness which is never a hardship.

We've kept the big new until last, though. You'll recall we we're considering adopting a rescue dog and we have spent a good deal of time in July and August visiting rescue centres, seeing all kinds of dog (often embodied in one animal). After a lot of thinking, an interview, a home visit and a great deal of reading around the subject, we have reserved Tara who will join us in September. We'll begin yet another chapter of our history as a family. . and we'll tell you all about it here.

July 2019

Last month I promised to tell you about the photograph of the Forth Bridges, above. Well, here you go!

In February 2015, Lois was in Scotland visiting Hannah in Edinburgh and decided to drop in to South Queensferry to see if she could find out about the building of the Forth Replacement Crossing, as it was called then. Construction had been going on since 2011 and it was due to open in 2016, so it was close to opening around the time of Ian's 60th birthday, she thought. Something linked to the bridge, like a visit to an exhibition about the construction might make a suitable additional birthday event. While wandering along the narrow road through South Queensferry and admiring the existing bridges that reached so high she spotted a small shop and studio on the High Street called Words & Pictures. Along with wedding and family portraits there was a nice print of the Forth Bridge and the Forth Road Bridge, plus another photograph of local architecture. These took her eye and she called in. She met Alistair Pryde, the studio owner and chatted with him. Between them a plan was hatched that involved a commissioned photograph of the three Forth bridges, to be taken once the new crossing had been completed. This was agreed and then the wait for the perfect shot began.

Alistair quickly realised, based on our brief and his creative knowledge, that a night-time photograph would be best, but even after the formal opening by The Queen the work on the bridge was still going on. There were overnight lane closures (with all the orange flashing lights necessary for those) and the bridge's own lighting design was still under discussion so was not yet in place. Furthermore,

there were still lots of construction paraphernalia on the bridge – portacabins, plastic sheeting and so on. It didn't make for a good photograph, so we waited ... sort of patiently. It wasn't until November 2018 that the works were finally completed and the construction paraphernalia cleared away. So Alistair had not been able to take advantage of the autumnal light which he favoured. Meanwhile he had been hunting around to select the best spot from which to take the picture. We waited for further news. The winter weather, however, was very poor which led to more delay. January 2019 Alistair had chosen the perfect location, but now faced another problem. The newly installed lighting to complete the bridge was an issue. Alistair wrote: "The lighting on the Queensferry Crossing continues to frustrate us because it is so much more intense than the lighting on the other two. So shooting at dusk is the solution to this dilemma and will give us the contrast that Ian wants, and will look spectacular in black and white."

On 9 July 2019, we collected the print!

The picture hangs on the end wall of our dining room, alone and spectacular. The causeway in the foreground takes you as you walk into the room from the other end and leads you forward into the picture. On the left is the new Queensferry Crossing, to the right is the Forth Road Bridge. Look beneath the Road Bridge and you can see the Forth Bridge.

Apart from the picture (which obviously took over the month, really) we've fitted in another couple of things. Ian had a very enjoyable couple of days at UHI sitting on their assessment boards. Always very good discussion and an excellent group of people. He also had a day at the University of Sunderland Graduations - it's always lovely to see the students crossing the stage.