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Dear Friends

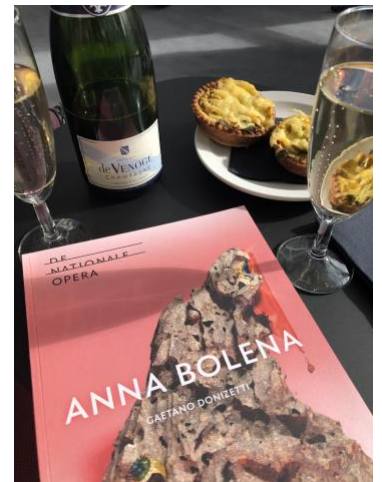
As we enter this festive period with raging inflation, the risk of power blackouts, avian flu decimating traditional poultry-based Christmas menus and the ever-present threat of nuclear obliteration, we bring you our traditional seasonal greetings. We hope to satisfy your need for something lighter. You may remember that due to a stationery ordering failure, last year's letter was printed on offensively thick paper / thin cardboard that was almost impossible to fold. We have attempted to return to a more traditional weight this year.



The big excitement at the start of the year was the return our annual Burns Night bash after it had fallen victim to lockdowns in 2021. This came with two novelties, firstly requiring everyone to undertake a lateral flow test for Covid, and secondly a late substitute bagpiper as the usual one was self-isolating. Other than this, it followed the usual format – the Gordons were as gay as ever and the willow was comprehensively stripped. We are looking forward to

more of the same at the end of January.

We have had a couple of traditional, romantic séjours this year. For Saint Valentine's day, we made the epic trip across the river to Liverpool. A schoolfriend of Alex, Armand Rabot, who is now a professional opera singer, was singing love-related duets at the Liverpool Philharmonic Hall. We combined this with a stay at the Hope Street Hotel and availed ourselves of their spa where John ascertained that his previously broken pelvis was not as fully recovered as he had hoped. He discovered this whilst swimming in the pool, in case you were wondering.... For our wedding anniversary, we



opted for another location accessible by an underwater train journey, Amsterdam via the Eurostar. The main cultural interlude of the trip was to see Gaetano Donizetti's opera Anna Bolena (Anne Boleyn). With the benefit of hindsight, this might not have been the most romantic choice of subject matter for a wedding anniversary. We did,



however, have a splendid dinner and swiftly cast away all thoughts of beheadings. We managed some other theatrical diversions during the year, most notably Romeo and Juliet at the Grosvenor open-air theatre in Chester, the Lavender Hill Mob with Miles Jupp at Theatr Clwyd in Mold and a recording of the News Quiz at the BBC theatre in London.

Our major trip of the year was a holiday to Aberdeenshire to take in the annual Lonach Gathering and stage one of the Tour of Britain cycle race. We were joined for the whole thing by Anastasia, Alex O and Alex F, with John's father and brother David coming for the

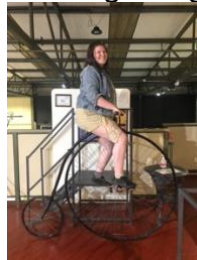
gathering. It was also a great opportunity to catch up with John's aunt and several cousins. Meeting the extended family has not deterred Alex O in his plan to marry Anastasia, and the holiday included a trip to Inverness to have him measured up for a kilt for the occasion. We took the caravan, Anastasia and Alex O had a camper van and we had a pen and gazebo for the dogs, all making for a proper encampment. We stopped off in Saint Andrews on the way up, mainly for John to reminisce about his days as a student and to cycle one of his old training routes to Crail, Anstruther and Pittenween before anyone else had got up. From there, it was up to Strathdon and the Lonach Gathering. Although the gathering is on the Saturday, you can camp on the field from Thursday afternoon to Monday. We took full advantage of this. Rather than describe our activities, we include below an artistic montage of pictures. After the games, we moved a few miles down the road to Alford for the week, continuing the local activities and immersing Alex O in local events and family history. Anastasia was particularly excited to spot a photograph of her great-grandfather in the local museum.



Family encampment



Alex with a well-known local road sign ('Lost')



Anastasia at the Transport Museum



Champagne for Helen's new qualification (more below)



Tour of Britain in traditional Scottish weather, John in the background



Pie night



Alex on top of Benachie



Glen Garioch distillery where John bought an extravagant "Black Jock" Forbes of Inverman in bottle of whisky straight from the barrel.



The Poldhullie Bridge, built by John John bought an extravagant "Black Jock" Forbes of Inverman in 1715, before his untimely demise at the hands of the English



The Lonach Gathering

Aside from the fun and (highland) games, everyone has been working hard. Alex achieved a first in politics and philosophy at Sheffield, so we were proud, if slightly sweaty, parents at his graduation which took place at the height of the summer heatwave. He is now working in the pupil referral unit at a secondary school in Derbyshire whilst he contemplates whether to continue his studies with a Masters degree.

Anastasia, who already has a Masters is contemplating a PhD.



She is working for the Field Studies Council in Devon, teaching residential school biology trips. Not wishing to be left out of all of this, Helen got a distinction in her Masters in Psychotherapy and Counselling, She knocked it out of the park with her dissertation using Play-Doh and is now being paid for counselling work. John has no lofty ambitions for further educational achievement and uses what time he has available when not working to ride bicycles.



Desperate to prove that he has recovered from his broken pelvis, John appears to be experiencing yet another cycling-related mid-life crisis. When we went over to deepest Norfolk for the celebrations for the 40th birthday of Helen's brother Greg, John cycled there from Wales, over 200 miles. Early start to get there in time for supper. Not

content with this, he has now discovered bivouacking. When we went down to Plymouth in August, John cycled down over two days, sleeping in a graveyard near Bristol over-night. He feels he missed an opportunity here. A couple came into the graveyard to admire the stars. John feels he should have sat up in his body bag between the gravestones with a cheery “hi”. Whilst John cycled down through the heatwave, Helen took the more relaxed approach of a first-class train ticket.

After Plymouth, he continued for another two-day ride to London, again bivouacking en route. A couple of days of meetings in London and then a ride back North. Apart from riding bicycles, John also likes to watch them. In addition to the Tour of Britain mentioned above, we also went to one of the velodrome sessions for the Commonwealth Games.



We had the seats in the afternoon session exactly where there had been a horrifying crash in the morning session with a rider crossing the barrier into spectators. We also had a very pleasant afternoon tea in the Shard.

At the end of September, having put it off for two years, we both got Covid, the week we were due to get our updated jabs. The attack was mild and we have subsequently had our defences upgraded.

Aside from Greg’s 40th birthday mentioned above, there have been other major birthdays this year. In April, we were in Grundisburgh near Ipswich for Helen’s father’s 85th birthday. We “glamped” with Anastasia and Alex O joining us. This was our first foray into glamping, but we very much enjoyed it and repeated the experience in

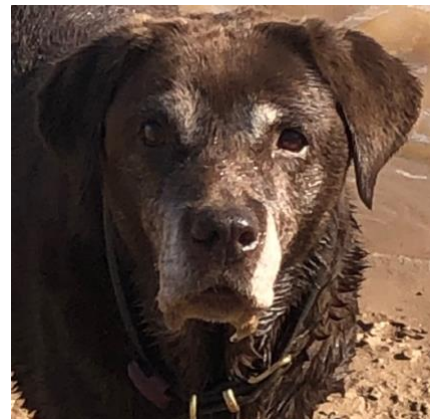


Norfolk for the previously-covered festivities for Greg. In November we had a major birthday double bill, with Gill’s 80th in Grundisburgh on the Saturday and John’s father’s 90th near Milton Keynes on the Sunday. It was great to see so many members of the two extended families.

It looks like this Christmas will just be the two of us and the dogs, as both children have better offers. All three dogs are in fine fettle,



although Tollie is getting increasingly creaky and crotchety. She has been prescribed swimming for the former. We know you prefer photographs to narrative for the canine update, so here you are....



As 2022 draws to a close, we look forward to 2023, particularly as this will feature **THE WEDDING**. We are still several months away, but excitement (and possibly expense) is already at fever pitch.

So here we are again, time to settle down in front of the fire with substantial book, a few mince pies and a flagon of eggnog, with the wind howling outside. Whatever your beliefs allow you to over-indulge in over this festive period, may your tankards, plates or stockings be filled with it in abundance.



Love and kisses

Helen & John

