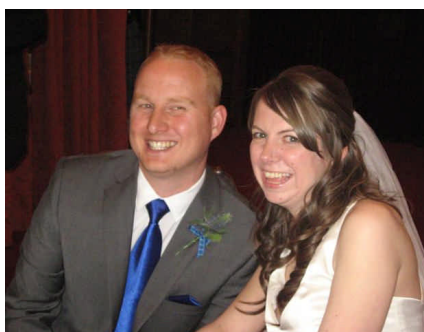


Phew! What a year! Tom gets married to Helen, Jessie gets engaged to Pete and Eliot retires.....OK OK OK I know, Eliot has been practising retiring for years. But now its official! Even the Government recognises it, and has rewarded me the princely sum of £108.69 per week. How anyone can be expected to live on £15 a day I have no idea, but it's nice being paid, rather than shelling out tax and NIC's!



However, I have been bombarded with various charitable requests that I give my £100 fuel allowance to a good cause, and at least one person I know has refused to do gift aid on the charitable donations they make on the basis that 'the Government needs the money'. Well, I suppose they do, but that could be because they manage to waste mind bogglingly large sums. The national computer system for the NHS is a case in point. The National Audit Office estimates that £12.7 billion was poured into this disastrous project - which never reached fruition, and is now to be 'dismantled'. As far as my other pensions are concerned, at current (appalling low) annuity rates it will take eighteen years just to get my money back! So I have to live to at least 85 just to feel I got any value out of them at all! But I have every intention of doing so! And I see the Government thinks lots of us are going to live to a hundred and possibly beyond. Will their enormous Ponzi scheme – otherwise known as state pensions - work? We shall have to wait and see!

Anyway, enough of my annual political comment, lots of more exciting things are going on. Have they found the elusive Higgs boson at CERN? Be great to know. I could never understand when I did my O level physics how matter worked. All the particles discovered then – and since – do not weigh anything. In fact, they are barely there at all, they are really just electronic fields, so how is it that things 'seem' solid. Well, I offer you a prediction. If, and it's a big if, they 'prove' the existence' of the Higgs (sometimes known rather stupidly as the God particle) then they will also find that its made of lots more smaller particles, that will require an even bigger machine to be built to prove that they are there!



As I indicated at the start of this letter, it has been a very exciting year for us. The big event has to be Tom and Helen's wedding. Married in Cardiff with a lovely group of friends and close relations they had a lovely reception at which Helen looked gorgeous and Tom made one of the most relaxed, amusing and touching wedding speeches I have heard. Ably supported by his best man, Lewis, we learnt a lot of (good!) things about our son! Very much their event, they also hosted a pretty stunning reception at Field House. It was organised by Meg who put in a huge amount of effort to make sure it was a success. Somehow we got 120 people into a marquee on the Field House lawn. Of course, many of them we did not know, but, lubricated with large quantities of Stroud organic ale, lashings of Welsh champagne, and an enormous pig roast everybody enjoyed a beautiful sunny afternoon. And then a Ceilidh got everyone on the floor for a great evening's entertainment, lit up with fireworks and hot air balloons. Amazing!

I have to admit it took us a little while to recover, and Meg's birthday, our 40th wedding anniversary and my own milestone birthday were celebrated with rather smaller numbers at a number of select

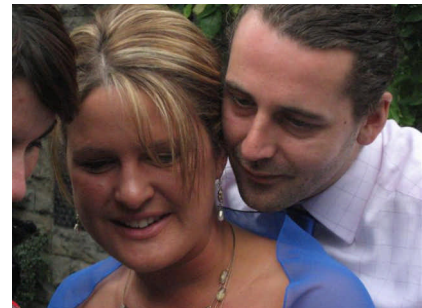
dinner parties. But these were much enjoyed and a number of old (metaphorically and actually) friends popped in to see us and wish us well. Ted Simon, our motorcycling guru, stayed, always good company and his Ted Simon Foundation, started this year, will hopefully encourage young travellers to write about their experiences. Lovely to see John and Sally Burton, and lots of others .



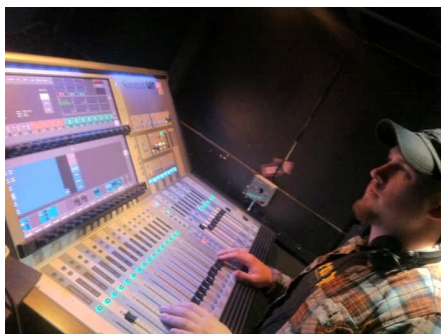
Meg and I did manage to fit in a holiday. We went to Sicily for the first time, and it wildly exceeded our expectations. It was one of those whistle stop two centre coach trips where you see an awful lot in a short time, but it was absolutely outstanding. There were so many highlights that its hard to pin the best one down, but the Valley of the Temples outside Agrigento probably takes the prize. The harmony and beauty which the Greeks achieved in their temple building literally take ones breath away. The unfinished temple of Olympian

Zeus is on a scale that is positively gigantic; the picture shows a little Meg standing by one of the statues that formed just a small part of the upper frieze of this mega temple. Incredible!

We are delighted that Jessie and Pete have decided to get married. Final arrangements are still in the melting pot. Ideas have ranged from a formal wedding at Blenheim Palace (it's cheap in the winter months) to a midsummer night's dream style magical ceremony in a wood somewhere (remains a fantasy so far), so we wait with interest to see what finally gets settled on.



Sam shows no sign of wanting to get married. A succession of quite beautiful girls seems to pass through his hands – literally – and in Sam's inimitable way they seem to remain friends after



whatever happens between them. His enthusiasm for live sound engineering seems to go from strength to strength, and he has been on tour a number of times during the year. We are very proud of his independence and ability to support himself – well almost – the telephone call saying 'Dad, the boiler's blown up, its two grand to replace' or 'Dad, I need my wisdom teeth taking out, it's £290 (what's happened to the NHS?), still seem more regular than I would perhaps regard as ideal, but there you go.

Lots more I could tell you, but room is running out. Lost three sheep, but had three lambs, still got three hens, and even get the occasional egg, lots of trout in the lake – and it hasn't dried up. This year we tried our hand at crayfishing and have got enough in the freezer to have our own little Swedish style crayfish fest! When we do we'll toast your health. Skol!



Eliot and Meg X