

Phil, Sarah, Joe, Dan and James - Christmas Newsletter 2008.

Hello and a very merry Christmas to you all. Thanks to you whose Christmas cards and letters have already arrived. We bow to your superior organisation and time-management skills. Apologies to those of you who live in foreign climes as you will most certainly be reading this after the special day itself. I'm beginning to think that we are actually writing these newsletters for ourselves and that you are the excuse for us to document our family life, so thank you for being an excuse for us and please forgive us for any gushing about our wonderful children.

To be honest, when we looked back over the year and wondered what we should write about, much of the year has consisted of the ups and downs of family life. You know the kind of thing: taking children and adolescents here, there and everywhere; trying to make sure everyone does their homework (major part of the year); getting everyone to practise their various instruments; discussing issues with teenagers who learn how to debate at school and so are much better at it than we are; trying not to mind that the house is too messy and chaotic and just enjoying being a family together. In fact, this Christmas, more than ever before, we are looking forward to the rest, family time and chance of a few lie-ins.

James is looking forward to achieving a decade at the end of next January which seems somewhat incredible. He has continued to rock at electric guitar (9th birthday present), improve at swimming and beat all the teenagers at church in a "learn the books of the Bible" competition. Perhaps we should explain that this wasn't a competition to learn the Bible in its entirety (now that would be a feat), but the names of the books in order. A new talent for acting has recently been discovered, as James played an elf in the school Christmas production of "*Santa's on Strike*" and proud parents that we are, we have to say that he was the loudest and funniest of them all. Not only did he know his lines, but everybody else's too.

This was the year that Daniel became a teenager and he celebrated the occasion with a mammoth film-watching, game-playing, food-devouring sleepover. Hard to believe that the baby who never slept for more than 20 minutes at a time is now 13, but easier to believe that he is still keeping us awake! Daniel is still carrying on with playing drums and keyboard and the old drum kit has been replaced by a fancy, new-fangled space-saving, electronic model which has a hole for speakers to be plugged in (yes!). So now we no longer have to put up with a drum kit in our bedroom. Dan took part in a holiday course at the EC1 Music Project with Joseph. They made a recording of a couple of songs and got a picture and write-up in the Islington council magazine. They were also in a band at school together and we got to go and hear them play at a school music evening. A lot of the other acts were incredibly clever, grade 8, classical students, but we have to say that the band's raucous, rocky versions of "*Jean Genie*" and "*Messing with the Kid*", although somewhat wild and crazy, were much more enjoyable. But then, as we always say, we are biased.

Well Joe is now in Year 11 and having to work hard. He has just finished his school project for which he made a film about ethical consumerism (and did a 4000 word write-up), so if you want to know anything about fair-trade, free-range or organic products then you know who to ask. Joseph has started to learn bass guitar this year, as he has had to leave the sax for a while until his brace comes off. He has been very involved in Model United Nations and went to The Hague with some of his classmates to take part in debates with pupils from all over the world. Each delegation gets to represent a particular country or interest group and it is a lot of fun meeting up with such diverse groups of students. Joe also spent two weeks away during the summer, one at Fleet Camps near

Weymouth with his church youth group and one with friends at the perennially muddy Soul Survivor in Shepton Mallet.

All the boys joined forces in March and formed a band for Sarah's aunt and uncle's golden wedding anniversary party. It was probably just as well that the assembled party only saw the beautifully rendered version of "*Lean on Me*" and not the disputes beforehand. As always, they made us, and the grandparents, very proud – the children that is and not the disputes.

Another big thing for the boys this year has been going to a couple of MangaCons. These are large, sci-fi, animé conventions. Many people go dressed up as a character and Phil and Dan ended up making a horrendously large Japanese sword (out of wood) for Dan's costume and James was interviewed by a BBC television crew, so you never know, he might appear on CBBC at some point.





For holidays this year, we thought we would pick up our boots and get back to our roots (yeah!), well Phil and the children's roots, and visit Wales. This whole project was inspired by Sarah reading the *Cool Camping Wales* book. Our first visit was a few days during the May half term when we visited Graig Wen in the Snowdonia National Park. As we set off for Wales, the heavens opened with the most torrential rain we had ever seen and we were wondering whether we had made a huge mistake, especially when the friends we were going with bailed out. However as we arrived the rain stopped and it kept mostly dry for the time we were there. It was the most beautiful place. You could camp where you liked in some 40 acres and best of all you could build camp fires (and cook your sausages on them). The campsite ran down to an estuary, along which a cycle path ran some 4 miles to Barmouth. With no road and no cars it was completely safe for

the kids to cycle (we walked and caught up with them eventually) and cross the toll bridge into the town. You don't get that freedom in London. The rain may have stopped, but whilst we were out one day, the wind picked up and we found that part of our tent had blown down and been nibbled by sheep (we were able to mend it with sail tape). This storm continued during what seemed like a very long night, with Sarah convinced that we were about to be blown away. We made it to morning to find that the tent opposite us had indeed blown down and the people been forced to seek shelter in the farmhouse. Undaunted by this adventure, we thought we would once again visit Wales during the summer. This time to a campsite, called Tyllwyd in mid-Wales about 20 miles inland from Aberystwyth. The place is like paradise on earth, being situated in a valley with hills, dotted with sheep, rising up on either side and a mountain stream, which later becomes the River Ystwyth, bubbling through the campsite. In fact we kept our milk and butter cool in the stream. It is extremely remote, the nearest small village being 15 minutes drive along mountain roads. However, every silver lining has a cloud, or in this case, many dark rain clouds and I don't think we had a dry day throughout the whole holiday. When it did stop raining, the midges would come out and they really loved Phil's pale, celtic skin. The teenage contingent was not happy with the lack of mobile signal, but James made some friends, found a dog to take for walks and once again enjoyed the freedom which comes from being in the middle of nowhere.

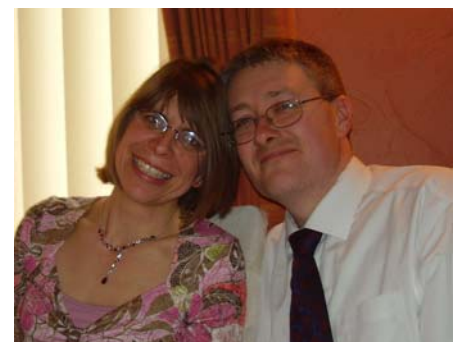


During the summer holidays we also baby sat three guinea pigs for a friend. The ten days we had them turned out to be the perfect amount of time to own a pet, just long enough for the novelty not to wear off. We loved those guinea pigs, they would sit on our laps to watch TV in the evenings, not run away when we picked them up and generally be cute and cuddly. They even cut the grass for us.

Phil's work continued to be interesting and challenging - I started the year by recruiting another new engineer (Brian from Dublin) and continued to design and build television studios and other facilities. The company's workshop is very near home and so the boys have got used to coming in and Joe spent a week after his summer term finished with me and the team building a multicore for his school's PA system. Over the summer we installed a 'virtual studio' for the College of Law here in London. This is basically a small green room where presenters and guests (or should I say M'Lud in this case!) sit behind a small green desk but by the magic of computer imaging it looks like they are in a big traditional TV studio. Although every one of our customers is dashing to upgrade all their facilities for HD they are being very canny with cash and so my department is expanding in training and so I am currently writing a syllabus for that.

As ever I like to tell you which bands I've seen/been listening to - only one gig so far! I saw the Counting Crows at the O2 Wireless festival - and only them because a friend was the TV supervisor and got me a crew pass! Anyhow - CDs (or downloads!) to spend your Christmas tokens on - Seasick Steve's "*I started out with nothing*", Billy Bragg's "*Mr Love and Justice*" and Steve Earl's "*Just an American Boy*". Top tunes!

Sarah continues as the busiest Mum in the world - she is still helping with the school PTA (she oversaw the production of a very nice calendar which raised funds for St Johns's) as well as organising discos etc. She's still very involved in the Hand in Hand for Asia charity and all this alongside three boys! We're both really looking forward to the Christmas break and seeing all the relations and avoiding getting up at six AM! We're still worshipping at New Life Church (twenty years now - if Paul our minister is reading this!) and one of the things we've done is the new website - no longer is it hosted on a machine in the cupboard under our stairs but at a proper hosting facility with databases and all that fancy web 2.0 stuff! www.newlife-london.org.uk if you want to see.



Well all that remains is for us to wish you a very Merry Christmas and all our love & best wishes for 2009. Please do drop in;
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