

Ehrwalder Straße 9
D-82467 Garmisch-Partenkirchen
Germany

Tel: int-49-8821-73981

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Well! 1997 has been quite a year for us with a disaster, with threatened changes all round but also happily, with much to be thankful for.

The happiest news was the birth of our seventh grandchild, Timothy, son of Stephen and Connie in Düsseldorf, in July. Patricia spent a week there while Connie was in hospital, looking after his sister Sarah who is rapidly growing into a totally charming little girl. Stephen is still travelling enthusiastically to look after his colleagues and customers in the Far East and Australasia.

Paul, Rosalind and their family had two holiday trips to the Far East and Australia this year, in order to keep in touch with some close friends who have emigrated. The last trip was marred by Fiona falling off a horse in Indonesia and breaking her arm. Unfortunately it didn't set properly and had to be reset a couple of weeks ago. Both she and her sister are keen riders although it is Felicity, small and riding a big horse, who most often seems to be deposited on the ground!

Our third family, Michael, Nicky and the three boys, moved from Paris to Aberdeen, where Michael has a new position in the Total organisation. They are living in Torphins some twenty miles west of the city and are seeking a house in the area at the moment. Patricia is a bit apprehensive as she is off to Scotland soon to look after the boys for nearly a week while Nicky returns to England to work out her notice at her former job there.

The year started well for us when we visited two of the families over the Christmas period and were visited by Paul and family for a bit of skiing just after the New Year. We also spent a week in France, skiing with Michael and family in Serre Chevalier.

In May we took an organised holiday in Crete, with a company that specialises in archaeological tours. It was great fun though, being farthest south in Europe, we did not expect it to snow! There was also an "activity holiday" in Newcastle, tidying up the house at Berne Avenue in August. It was lovely to see so many friends again, both those kind enough to entertain us, and those able to come to the party we had. The weather was gorgeous and North Staffordshire seemed a most attractive place to live.

We have also taken advantage of the travel demanded by the job and had various weekends away, including one in Tennessee to visit Kerry Kelly, my recent colleague in the secretariat, followed by one in Toronto to stay with John Gittins, one of our oldest friends, now a distinguished emeritus professor of geology there.

The project goes on at a frantic pace with ever more contacts and demands (more than 20 presentations in ten countries in the last six months). Patricia's hard work editing is bearing fruit with the gradual appearance of the ten volume final report from the first phase. At the

moment we are preparing for a further Symposium in March to which as many as 600 people might come!

However, despite the undoubted success of the project, the carpet was slipped from under us in May, when the director of my institute announced that the secretariat could no longer stay in Garmisch after the end of 1997. The German ministry that sponsors the project was as taken aback as we were by this decision to throw us out! Since then there has been much activity to find the secretariat a new home and, most encouraging, to try to ensure that we continue to run it.

Then, on top of this, just after we got back from the lovely sojourn at the house, the owner of our flat here decided to sell it and asked us if we would mind moving out! At that moment it seemed as if someone, somewhere, was trying to tell us that it was time to retire!

Well the problems are gradually sorting themselves out. The flat will be sold with us in it and we can stay indefinitely. The secretariat will move to the GSF, a large research organisation in Munich working in the field of health and the environment. Furthermore we can stay at the Institute in Garmisch for the first four months of next year to run the Symposium here. After that we shall be faced with some commuting (it is about sixty miles or so) since we have decided that we ourselves are not going to move out of Garmisch, except to return home. So we are looking forward to an interesting New Year at work.

But what of the disaster? As some of you already know, it struck on the way home from skiing in France. Driving on a sunny afternoon between Turin and Milan, the car simply stopped and caught fire! We were able to get ourselves out together with most of our luggage but, within a few minutes, the car itself was completely destroyed. While it was all happening we had little else to do but use up the new film in the camera to take a spectacular series of pictures. These proved to be useful when dealing with the authorities and the insurance, for publishing on the back of the Newsletter we edit, and of course for impressing friends and acquaintances. We have spent much of the year sorting out the consequences but now have a spanking new red (not flaming!) car to replace the old one. We were actually very lucky: an hour before we had been descending from the Alps through a series of long tunnels and, if it had happened there, this letter might have been a lot less cheerful.

I think this, in every sense, is enough!

With the very best wishes for Christmas and the New Year.