

The new century came in with a bang! As the clocks struck midnight the heavens lit up with the graffiti of a thousand fireworks and echoed with the clap of as many explosions. The world celebrated. Streets and houses were adorned with bunting and lights, family and friends gathered to party and the booze flowed. Not to be left out the whole family descended upon Greenhill Road. We all sat down to a lavish feast bedecked, as was fitting, with formal evening wear. At the stroke of midnight we too put a match to £80's worth of fireworks. It was a memorable start to a new millennium. For Jenny and I, however, the celebrations were somewhat dampened by the loss of little Max, our Border Collie. We were still reeling with the shock and grief and trying to come to terms with the vacuum. It was not helped by Ben who wandered aimlessly in search of his playmate.

As the dust of the new year settled I felt I needed to be busy and began to lay plans for a make-over of the patio area of the garden. After having redecorated the house it was the next logical step. In a February of uncharacteristically fine weather I demolished the old shed, built a pergola in its stead and laid out a new patio complete with a water feature and a surrounding ornamental wall. It was creative and rewarding work and we were well pleased with the result. After 18 months of full retirement gardening had moved more towards the centre stage of our lives. Jenny had become adept at collecting seed from a wide range of annual bedding and vegetables. As a result by March each year every available horizontal surface in the house was occupied by seed trays. Both the garden and the allotment consumed a large proportion of our time during the season. When we were not cultivating we were watering, weeding, reaping, freezing and processing. We produced far more than we could eat ourselves and passed our surpluses around the neighbourhood. Jenny also invested more time and effort into flower beds and containers to produce a feast of colour during the summer months. Such was our interest in nurturing plants that we became reluctant to take time out during the growing season for holidays. The situation with Mother also meant that we had to lay careful plans for respite care before we could take a single night away from home. This was easier to arrange at off-peak times so we began to take our annual holiday break in mid-September.

At the end of July 2000 we welcomed a new Border Collie puppy into the family.

'Meggie', as we christened her, was a sister to Max – the same parents but the next litter on. Poor Ben at 16 years old took one look at her and decided to call it a day. One week after she arrived his back legs gave out. It was pitiful to see his sad disbelief at his sudden incapacity. I took him to the vets and petted and consoled him as the lethal injection was administered. Surprisingly his parting was less painful. We were expecting it. He was very old and the quality of his life was diminishing by the day. After a long and happy life it was right for him. We missed him, of course, and to compensate I devoted more time to rearing and training Meggie. She had all of Max's intelligence and more and from the outset showed an amenability to obedience training. She caught on to things quickly and needed little reinforcement to learn the ropes. For the following 18 months I took her to weekly training sessions and, had I been more willing to practice and persevere, she showed all the ability to reach Crufts standards. As it was I wanted a dog as a companion not an animal conditioned to perform.

In September 2000, when Meggie was barely three months old, she came with us on a cottage holiday near Wells in Somerset. It set the pattern for the years to come. In 2001 we had a lovely break in the Peak District and in 2002 we stayed in a village outside Ilfracombe in Devon. In each case we slipped into the easy routine of having a full English cooked breakfast, visiting and exploring some attraction during the morning, stopping for a pub lunch and then of lazing away the afternoons and evenings with books. Age was beginning to show! It was about this time that Jenny's reluctance to travel far from home became increasingly noticeable. She hated the journeys. She had always been slightly agoraphobic and was never happy in wide open spaces but now her anxieties grew more acute and she became less inclined to fight off the symptoms. Since travel had always been one of my ambitions for retirement this was a disappointment. Not wishing to thwart my ambition she was happy for me to take additional holidays on my own and I fished around for a travelling companion. A chance conversation with Peter, a member of the local church congregation, led to an immensely enjoyable tour of Crete in May 2001. Unfortunately before we could plan a sequel he was arrested and imprisoned for molesting children – a facet of his character that I knew nothing about. In June 2002 I therefore took off for a walking holiday in Ireland alone. This was organised by the Holiday Fellowship – the organisation who hosted the Field Club holidays I enjoyed during the 50s. Although the weather was characteristically wet, the 12–14 mile walks each day were challenging and rewarding and the camaraderie between members of the group allayed any feelings of loneliness.

Back at home the shadow of death had hardly lifted from the demise of the dogs when it fell once more to claim the lives of our two mothers. My mother died in November 2001 and Jenny's mother followed in January 2002. The end was mercifully swift for both of them but the final years were tortuous. My mother's problems began when an over-zealous chiropodist dug too deeply into a callous on her foot. It ulcerated, refused to heal and finally became infected. This, plus the discovery of diabetes and the MRSA bug, led in stages to the amputation of a toe, the foot and finally most of her leg. Not a happy situation for an active 85 year old. She was hospi-

talised for some time and was finally forced to take up residence in a Nursing Home. In the end the diabetes with additional complications claimed her life. For Jenny's mother the crunch came on November 5th 2000 when she fell for the second or third time in as many days and once more ended up in hospital. The prognosis was not good and it seemed likely that she would be bedroom bound for the rest of her life. By this time the responsibility was bringing Jenny close to breaking point. It seemed certain that Mum would routinely need lifting and Jenny's developing arthritis had reached a stage where she could not cope with it. Although she had vowed never to allow her mother into a home she felt that now she had no alternative if mother was to have any real quality of life. With the help of Social Services we found 'Elliot House' a wonderful residential home in Beltinge, Herne Bay just two miles from home. She moved in two days before Christmas 2000. There, for the next 13 months, she received a level of care which we could not match. She had a nice room with her own things around her, a good neighbour, good meals and 'puddings' a luxury she did not get at home! She was thankfully very happy there and we visited at least three times a week. One Saturday at the end of January 2002, however, we received a phone call to say that she had fallen and might have bumped her head. We visited but she was asleep and seemed OK. Hours later we were informed that she had been rushed to hospital. There she was diagnosed as having a serious chest infection and although she rallied, one week later she quietly died. Jenny was devastated. Her adopted mother had been her rock and she had lived with us for over 20 years. Her departure left Jenny with an unfounded sense of guilt and created a big hole in our lives which took some time to fill.

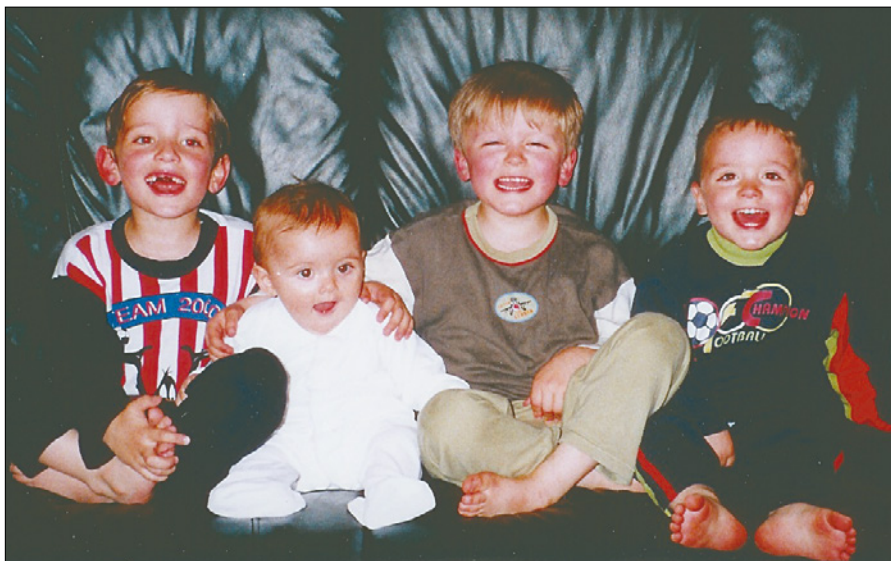
On her last visit to Grandma, just days before her death, Kathryn disclosed that she was three months pregnant. So the cycle of life turned full circle and in June we celebrated the arrival of Jenna Rose, a much wanted girl to balance her male dominated family. A few weeks later, on July 21st, the whole family gathered for lunch at a hotel in Brentwood, Essex, to mark the occasion of my 60th birthday. It was another of those heart-warming, touching meetings where I was reminded of how much I was valued by my nearest and dearest. Stephen and Kathryn's extravagant gestures were overwhelming. Kathryn bought me a beautiful watch, the first really expensive watch I had ever owned and Stephen reduced me to tears with the surprise of tickets for a touring holiday together in Andalucia, Spain – an event which turned out to be a wonderful experience. As always, however, it was Jenny who worked to make it all so very special. She arranged everything to ensure that I had a thoroughly memorable time – an act of love which meant the world to me. Little did I know how much her love would be tested in 2003!

In February 2003 we both succumbed to a severe bout of viral flu but whereas Jenny recovered I did not. In March I was diagnosed with Post Viral Fatigue Syndrome – Myalgic Encephalomyelitis (M.E.) which proved to be a particularly debilitating, long-term illness. It changed my life completely. I found I could do nothing which stressed the muscles without penalty. As an outgoing and active person I suddenly had to face a life of confinement and inactivity. This meant no gardening or physical work of any kind and no walking beyond about a mile. Consequently I had to give

up my allotment and sit and watch Jenny struggle with the garden. I also had to forfeit long walks with Meggie and give up any thought of travel. It was not easy. Jenny was marvellous as always. She took on the work I could no longer do and bullied me into doing nothing, even when I felt I was able. Even so improvements in my condition were followed by relapse after relapse and the constant dashing of hopes was as hard to cope with as the frustration. As I write in February 2004 the illness still has me in its grip and I am watching poor arthritic Jenny struggle with digging the vegetable plot when I yearn to be doing it myself.

Fortunately it is not all doom and gloom. It does not do to feel sorry for yourself and give in to adversity even if it is difficult at times not to. There is something about the human spirit that enables you to fight back. They say that when God closes a door he opens a window and that has certainly been true for me. In my confinement I have discovered talents I never knew I had and I have become so absorbed by new activities that my days are as full as before. I have taken up painting and have astonished myself at the results. I have also sat at the organ and have discovered that, with a minimum of effort, my repertoire of hymns has suddenly grown from a dozen or so to hundreds – sufficient at least to play occasionally for local church services. Where has such a sudden upsurge of ability come from particularly at a time in my life when I needed something so badly? I am humbled by the probable answer!

So where do we go from here? Who knows! I am obviously hoping to recover from my illness and to return to normal, in which case it would be nice to add further chapters to this book describing new adventures and new challenges before I finally pop my clogs. Realistically, however, I am more likely to have to settle for a more mundane future. For me this is likely to be the biggest challenge of all.



The Grandchildren 2000. George, Mary-Anne, Connor, Jordan



The Patio Make-over 2000



Ben meets Meggie 2000



60th Birthday Party





Stephen, Donna, George and Mary-Anne. 2003



Connor, Jordan and Jenna. 2003