

CELEBRATIONS! THE 90'S

The cycle of life brings forward some predictable phases. One of them is weddings. So just as we and all our contemporaries were married in the 60's now, in the late 80's and early 90's, our offspring were at it and there was a crop of nuptial celebrations. Chief amongst them were the marriages of Stephen and Donna on June 1st 1991 and Kathryn and Paul on May 22nd 1993.

After little more than a year living and working in Croydon, both Stephen and Donna found jobs in Bournemouth and moved to a small flat in Christchurch Road, not far from the East Cliff. Jenny and I had always liked Bournemouth, it is an attractive place which held special memories for us, so, although we regretted the distance they were away from us we were happy to see them settled there. In fact in 1989 I applied for the Headship of a school in Bournemouth but failed to win through at interview so we came very close to relocating there too. (I have often thought how different my final years would have been had I been appointed.) Meanwhile Stephen and Donna's relationship grew in strength and commitment and in 1990 they decided to raise a mortgage and buy a flat together. They found a good quality conversion in the central part of Bournemouth. It was a one bedroomed attic flat with a small balcony. The house backed on to the central park with a beautiful walk down through the gardens to the Pavilion and seafront. It was ideal for them, but at £52,000 on the expensive side! To tie the knot still further on 1st June 1990, on Grandma Lawford's 80th birthday, they became engaged to be married and both the Selvey and Upson clans descended on a hotel in the centre of Bournemouth for lunch to celebrate the event. One year later, on 1st June 1991, they were married. The wedding was fabulous. They adopted a high risk strategy by arranging for an open-topped veteran car to transport the bride to Church and by holding the reception on a pleasure boat cruising in Poole harbour, but it paid off. The weather was fine and warm. The bride looked magnificent, there were some very touching moments, and as the sun came down over Poole harbour there were fairy tale aspects to it. It was a unique occasion, an unforgettable few hours. We were happy for them and proud of them both.

Kathryn's journey to the altar was not so dissimilar. After leaving home she rented a room for a while with a young couple until she and Paul also raised a mortgage and bought a flat. Their flat was above a shop in a parade near the centre of Chingford,

London, Paul's home town. It was relatively spacious with a downstairs kitchen, a lounge, two bedrooms and a bathroom above, and a reasonable sized garden. Paul, already an accomplished DIY'er, redecorated and opened up the loft space to create a super studio. It was an ideal starter home. Their wedding day in May 1993 was also a magnificent occasion. The day dawned clear and beautiful and although the cloud built during the day it remained dry and warm. Like Donna, Kathryn made a beautiful bride and the day was about as perfect as it could be. I was so proud of her. The Church was only yards from the flat and I shall never forget our extended journey through the back streets in a white Rolls Royce. I was honoured to be able to sing Panis Angelicus as a tribute to their relationship after they had taken their vows. After the Church service everyone descended upon a hotel in the heart of Epping Forest for the reception which was more formal and conventional than Stephen's but it was none the less a lively and entertaining evening. For me, giving my little girl in marriage was an emotional event but the most heart-rending part of the whole occasion was the parting at the end of it all. Bidding her goodbye and watching her drive away into her future was hard. All the nostalgic flashbacks of her youth tumbled through my mind and as the car disappeared from view there was an overwhelming sense of loss.

For the two girls the early 90's was marred by health difficulties which seemed to come to a head around the time of Kathryn's wedding. Both girls were affected by Bulimia which lowered their general health and exacerbated more serious conditions. Kathryn suffered a dose of glandular fever which left her with Post Viral Fatigue Syndrome (ME) which pulled her to the depths and made life a struggle in the lead up to her wedding. At the same time Donna's hereditary blood condition erupted and only a few days after playing her role as Maid of Honour to Kathryn she landed up in hospital for major surgery to have her spleen removed. In retrospect it was one of God's miracles that things ran so perfectly.

Prior to these celebrations Jenny and I had one of our own. In 1990 we reached a significant milestone – our 25th wedding anniversary. To mark the occasion we took a day trip to Penshurst Place and went out to dinner at the Long Reach Tavern in Whitstable. We were showered with gifts and to mark the occasion we treated ourselves to a cuckoo clock whilst on holiday at Tittisee in the Black Forest. Landmark anniversaries tend to bring you up short by alerting you to the speed with which life is passing. Somehow the brain compresses time and 25 years seem but a fraction of reality. Nevertheless it is a time to reflect on good times past and value your good fortune and Jenny and I certainly did that. Similar emotions were stirred in July 1992 when I celebrated my 50th birthday. This was a more depressing landmark. For me it seemed to signal the end of a phase in life, the end of advancement and the start of a downward slide towards retirement. It seemed to coincide with a time when it was necessary to reassess and reorder my attitudes to life. Things at work were not so secure and I remember gleefully appreciating that, at 50, I had reached pensionable age. Little did I realise that in only nine months I would be drawing on it! Nevertheless it was a happy occasion. I actually celebrated my birthday at a small camp site in central France en-route to a holiday in Annecy. The family therefore gathered a week

previously and we all went out for a meal at the upmarket Giovannis Restaurant in Whitstable. It was a moving occasion and I was struck by the show of love and generosity. I was particularly flattered by the thoughtfulness and care taken with the selection of gifts. It endowed such value. Over the years at Christmases and birthdays I was constantly humbled by their extravagant show of affection. Much the same can be said for my constant soulmate, Jenny. As selfless as ever, she made every effort to make my 50th birthday special. She organised the celebrations and bought me a 'Romeo and Juliet' statue for the garden but above all, she reminded me of how lucky I was to have found her. So whilst I may not have been too keen to reach 50, the affirmation of what a wonderful and harmonious family I had around me was thoroughly uplifting.

During the 90's, needless to say, our immediate family grew apace. Not only did we gain a daughter and son-in-law but the friendship of Chris and Roy Selvey, Donna and Paul's parents. Over the years we came to share an increasing number of family events as we jointly celebrated the births and christenings of our grandchildren. The first to appear on the scene was *George Daniel Upson* born on Christmas Day 1994 to Stephen and Donna. Next came *Connor Lloyd Selvey* born on May 15th 1995, Kathryn and Paul's first. Then *Jordan Lewis Selvey* born on 15th June 1997, Kathryn and Paul's second. Then *Mary-Anne Upson* born 23rd June 1999 and finally *Jenna Rose Selvey* born 12th August 2002.

Perhaps the biggest gathering of the clan was the baptism of George and Connor on 10th September 1995. The event was held at the Church of St. Martin-in-Herne and included the baptism of Paul and Donna. Afterwards we all assembled for a reception back at home. Everybody came. All the great-grandparents, including my mother were there along with near relatives and friends. Even my brother attended – one of only three brief visits in 30 years! Similarly we celebrated the baptism and first birthday of Jordan on 14th May 1998 at Doddington Parish Church and afterwards at a private room in the local pub, and also Mary-Anne's baptism in 2001 at St. Ives Parish Church near Ringwood and afterwards at the Gresham Court Hotel in Bournemouth – Stephen's place of work. On each occasion Brenda, a close family friend of Chris and Roy in Essex, made and decorated a most beautiful celebratory cake. We also gathered regularly to celebrate birthdays, especially the early birthday parties of the grandchildren. These often became an excuse for the adults to party and the children's birthday teas were followed by barbecues or drinks. There were, however, other significant birthdays which brought us all together for lunch parties, notably Kathryn's 21st in 1990, the 30th birthdays of all the new Mums and Dads, Jenny's 50th in 1996 and Richard's 21st (Donna and Paul's younger brother). It was celebration all the way and with each successive event the newly extended family found an identity and bonds strengthened.

Back at home the family occasion became a characteristic of the 90's and beyond. Since both Stephen and Kathryn lived at a distance their visits were necessarily infrequent and always involved a stopover. Contact with the grandchildren was therefore sporadic, the more so with George and Mary-Anne who lived so much further away, so every visit became an occasion which Jenny would prepare for meticulously.

The 90's



50th Birthday Party



The Parish Pantomime



Steve and Donna's Wedding 1991



Suffolk 1993



Kathryn and Paul's Wedding 1993



The Countryman 1994



1996



The Arrival of George. December 1994



The Arrival of Connor May. 1995



George and Connor 1996



Ben and Max 1998

Unfortunately there were developing problems which curtailed our ability to visit them. Jenny's Mum became increasingly frail and prone to fall and could not be left on her own and Jenny began to develop agoraphobia and became evermore nervous about travelling. As the 90's proceeded our visits therefore dropped away and although we managed day trips to Kathryn just 80 miles away, we ventured to Bournemouth less and less. For much of the time I visited Stephen and Donna on my own three or four times per year, combining my stay with a visit to my mother in Hampshire, but towards the end of the 90's traffic congestion on the notorious M25/M3 motorways made even these journeys unreliable and I ventured forth less and less. At the same time, as family and professional commitments grew, Stephen and Paul were less able to spare weekends away from home. Whilst this did not impede Kathryn from coming with the children every two or three months, we saw less and less of Steve and Donna and, of course less and less of George and Mary-Anne. The result was that with just brief snap-shots of their development every six to nine months it was difficult to feel involved. I'm not apportioning blame. It's just what happens when families move apart and make their own lives, but how I have envied those grandparents whose families live close enough just to pop in. It would have been so nice just to have mucked in and done all those grandfatherly things. Jenny and I did contemplate moving to be closer to the family, but which family? In the end we felt it was wiser to stay where we were known and had friends. Thank God for the telephone! That was the instrument which has kept us together and in touch with all the day-to-day happenings within the family. Kathryn and Jenny talked to each other for 15 to 20 minutes every day and never failed and, every Sunday, we always telephoned Stephen and Donna so we kept well abreast of the trials and tribulations of parenting in the 90's! We may not have seen very much of the grandchildren but we certainly came to know something of their developing personalities, especially Kathryn's little brood in Essex.

The 90's were the all important home and family building years for Stephen and Kathryn. It was the time when new relationships and responsibilities determined the pattern of life for years to come. It was an exciting time of acquisition, experiment and advancement. Both Stephen and Kathryn moved from their premarital love-nests into property more appropriate to family life. Stephen and Donna moved from central Bournemouth to St. Ives, a residential area to the west of Ringwood. Here they bought a 3-bedroomed bungalow, 145 Sandy Lane. Unfortunately it was not a good time to sell property. There had been a slump in property values and they suffered a £14,000 loss on the flat – a debt which had to be carried forward on to the mortgage of their new home. Undeterred Stephen set to to remodel the bungalow. Like Martin Luther King he "had a vision" and within hours of taking occupation he took the ceiling out of the lounge to reveal the bare rafters above. I thought he was mad but over the following weeks, as his vision unfolded, I was forced to yield to his design flair and acknowledge his guts and determination to follow his instincts. He created a really pleasing and unusual room. Similar transformations occurred in the kitchen, loft, bathroom and bedrooms over the following years, a slow process achieved in snatched minutes from a working schedule which sometimes could only

be described as lunatic! Stephen changed his job several times during these years, moving each time into more advanced areas of computer aided design. Throughout, the end product was the print industry which imposed publication deadlines that often forced him to work to exhaustion, 24+ hours on the trot. It was certainly a lifestyle for a young man and I worried for his future. Kathryn's Paul in Essex was put under similar pressure. Although his career had moved in a different direction, towards the design of packaging, he too was plagued by the need to meet tight deadlines and he also worked long hours. However, Paul was rather more settled than Stephen and changed jobs less often. Kathryn and Paul also moved. For them the problem of negative equity was alleviated by the value added to the flat by Paul's loft conversion and make-overs. They bought a four bedroomed house in the village of Doddington, about three miles north of Brentwood in Essex, 18 The Gardens. It was a nice house in a nice location. Paul also set about the process of improvement and created rooms straight out of the glossy pages of *Ideal Homes Magazine*.

On the financial front there was also cause for celebration. The 90's were a time of capital accumulation ending in a bank balance of in excess of £200,000. Strangely enough our fortunes changed at the time of my retirement from full-time work in March 1993. At that time I received a lump sum payment of £50,000 which, with the assistance of a financial advisor, we invested in a range of with-profits bonds. We found we could live quite comfortably upon my £17,000 per year pension. It was index-linked and therefore rose year by year in line with inflation. This meant that the earnings we received from our respective part-time jobs were saved. Within five years this had accumulated to well over £100,000. Added to this was the revenue acquired from a couple of endowment policies we had started in the 70's, including the mortgage endowment intended to cover the £9,000 we owed on the house. These had performed exceptionally well given the inflationary trends of the 70's. For example, although we raised the premiums, the £9,000 policy actually matured at £26,000. There were also conversions of Insurance and Building Societies into public companies which netted us a pay-out of around £10,000. Over time we therefore added substantially to our portfolio of investments. Strong performance on the Stock Market saw these grow by around 60% giving us unparalleled security for the future. Unfortunately it was not to last. The turn of the century brought with it a severe downturn in the financial markets and growth went into reverse losing us thousands. It was disappointing but in the end it is all roundabouts and swings. As the Stock Market crashed, property prices hit the ceiling and by 2002 the value of the house had reached a staggering £250,000. Overall therefore, our assets remained at much the same level.

Throughout the 90's we lived well and wanted for nothing. It was a strange sensation to have more money than we knew what to do with. We did invest in the house. As a 30's built property it was beginning to demand attention. From the moment we moved in I regularly devoted two weeks of my summer holiday to routine maintenance, alternately spending one year painting the windows and doors at the back and the next year dealing with the front. By 1990 I was spending an increasing amount of time chasing wet rot in the doors and window frames. We therefore

decided to replace all of them with UPVC double glazed units, a process which was organised in three instalments across five years and cost around £10,000. The difference was unimaginable. The house instantly became warmer and quieter. We thought it was a good use of money. After my retirement in 1998, like most people with time on their hands for the first time in years, we also began a systematic refurbishment of the interior. We had already replaced the lounge suit and carpet and invested in a new television, video tape recorder and a CD audio system with money from the 1993 retirement windfall, but the majority of the house had not been decorated since we moved in in 1978. Room by room, therefore, we painted and papered in a more modern style. We also replaced the entire fitted kitchen and had a new bathroom suite fitted. The make-over included the installation of an automatic washing machine, something that Jenny had resisted for years preferring instead a twin tub machine. We also replaced the gas boiler which instantly reduced our gas bills. Beyond this I also acquired two new cars – a Rover 1.4 to replace the lease car I lost upon retirement from KCC in 1993 at a cost of about £12,400 and a Toyota Carina E 1.8, the smoothest and quietest car I had ever owned in 1996 at £14,250. All of this was eminently affordable and, whilst we were still at work, the savings continued to mount despite the extravagances.

For the purposes of comparison our accounts for the year 1999 to 2000 showed the following expenditure:

Some bills were paid by monthly Direct Debit:

House Insurance	£367.11	+130%
Contents Insurance	£222.61	+83%
T.V. Licence	£104.00	+46%
Gas Service Contract	£127.00	+90%
Trailer Tent Insurance	£ 44.00	
Camping Club Subs.	£ 31.75	
Car Insurance	£240.52	1989
Car Tax	£ 55.00	No Cost
Car Recovery	£ 50.00	Lease Car
Car Service	£240.52	
Gas	£395.33	-21%
Electricity	£311.67	+5%
Water Rates	£166.05	+36%

Council Tax	£ 75.00	+11.5%
Denplan	£ 26.09	
Insurance	£ 9.43	
Budget Account	£200.00	

The general living costs expressed in the total of supermarket bills was circa £440 per month.

By 1999 Jenny's accounting system had become more refined. By then almost every transaction was made using credit cards and we seldom used cash. In the previous table the percentage changes since 1989 have been shown in the second column. Insurances in general went up steeply during the 90's, a result, in part, of the industry being taxed but the overall number of claims increased too. Since the 1987 storm, which caused phenomenal structural damage across the country, the weather had become more volatile. Damaging gales and flash flooding became more frequent leaving insurers with no option but to raise premiums. Gas and Electricity prices also became subject to a Regulator during this period. His task was to prevent profiteering by the supplying companies. He did a good job!

During the 90's my values and attitudes to life were completely transformed. Retirement brought me face to face with the prospect of old age. I hadn't really thought about it before. I was forced to think myself out of the work ethic and to consider what I was going to do with the rest of my life. I surprised myself at how uninvolved I wanted to be once the drive to succeed had dissipated. I had always thought of myself as a people person but I found that I lost my need to be with people. I preferred to be on my own and left to my own thoughts. I came to realise that precious few people were really interested in me as a person. They were more concerned to pour out their own problems and anecdotes than they were in listening to mine. Unlike Jenny I had no really close friends. My friendships were with work colleagues and were founded upon shared challenges and mutual support. As soon as that ceased the associations dissolved. Things at work moved on without me. They were too busy keeping afloat to maintain any contact. I also found myself less inclined to be patient with other peoples' opinions and their point scoring tendencies in the public arena of committees. I had one disastrous foray into school governorship which affirmed my intolerances. I was happier on my own. Retirement conferred a freedom the like of which I had not known since I was a child. To be liberated from the demands of other people was a wonderful release. To wake up each day to a blank sheet of paper just waiting to be filled with whatever took my fancy was akin to being released from prison. I relished it and found myself avoiding commitment to anything outside the home and family. It might seem selfish but I found commitment imposed restrictions upon my freedom to be me. Social interaction almost always ends up as role-play. You are never truly yourself. You try to be pleasant no matter what the circumstances, you build a persona in order to fit in, and you try to live up to other peoples expectations. I felt I had had enough of all that. The sub-conscious yearning for peace, tranquillity and predictability in life was beginning to surface and assert itself. There were some strange rediscoveries and reversals of thought pattern. I remember in the first weeks of retirement realising that I had not really looked at the sky since I was a boy! The reflection was symptomatic of a new tendency to look back on life rather than look forward, after all if the future was to be mostly predictable and free of demands then there was little need to think ahead. I quickly fell into the routine of living for today and pondering

upon past achievements rather than the possibility of any future ones. That was quite new to me.

I was lucky in being able to step down gently from full-time employment to full-time retirement. The five years at Christchurch College gave me the opportunity to adjust to more free time and to prepare for my total divorce from work. I found it surprisingly easy. I took on some of the household cleaning, found it therapeutic and thoroughly enjoyed it. In 1998 I also joined the local Allotment Association and took on a plot. With a third of an acre at home and an allotment the old interest in growing our own vegetables was revived and, for some years, we not only supplied ourselves with most of the basic staples but half of the neighbourhood as well. It was hard but satisfying work which kept me fit and occupied. We kept detailed records of our harvests, a great part of which was either stored or frozen down for future use. Jenny also worked hard to preserve beetroot and make delicious jams and pickles. There was nothing more satisfying than sitting down to Sunday roast lunch, always a religious rite in our house, to a plate full of your own produce. During the winter when I was not so busy outside I always found something to work at during the mornings and was seldom without a project of some description, be it repair work, writing, jigsaws or whatever. In the afternoons both Jenny and I relaxed to crossword puzzles and reading. I also maintained an interest in collecting. I collected David Winter Cottages – ceramic models of classical buildings, and also models of vehicles from the 1940's to the 1960's assembling over 100 of them during the 90's. I was never once bored and in my preoccupations time just flew by.

In the mid 80's Jenny moved from her job at Woolworths and joined the staff of 'Geerings' – a local newsagent, stationers and gift shop. She was very happy there. During the 90's her schedule settled to four mornings and one afternoon per week to allow her to balance the demands of work and home life. Despite my help at home, however, her responsibilities began to mount as her mother showed increasing signs of frailty and confusion with some of the more basic tasks. Our problems began in the summer of 1992 when she fell and broke her femur and had a hip replacement. Her mobility was permanently impaired and she became affectionately known as 'Nanny Sticks' because of her reliance upon them. From that point she seemed to accept her limitations and Jenny had to adjust her level of care to meet her increasing needs. It was a responsibility she took very seriously. Jenny loved her mother and felt she owed her everything. As the years lapsed Jenny did everything for her. In 1998 she gave up work to look after her full-time. There were a number of traumas. She suffered badly from ulcerated legs but it was her susceptibility to falling over that became the most alarming problem. There was one occasion when she fainted and fell but could not get up. She spent the entire night on the floor of her bedroom without us knowing. Needless to say we became increasingly vigilant and evermore reluctant to leave her on her own. We hung on to a fortnight's holiday each year, but only through the good auspices of an organisation called 'Volcare' who provided live-in respite carers. Throughout the 90's therefore we handed over to a succession of young girls from all parts of the world and of very different temperaments and abilities and hoped that they would cope. Under the circumstances we were less

inclined to venture too far. Stoical as ever Mum accepted the upheaval with a smile even though we knew she hated it. She had remarkable control and even during her worst traumas never uttered a word of complaint. Jenny's only real challenge was getting her to eat. She was so finicky that Jenny cooked specially for her at 6pm (whereas we ate at 8pm). Whilst she would never criticise, her body language told the story of a particular aversion to meat and it was often hard work to get her to eat properly. Although it diminished Jenny's efforts in cooking we did not worry unduly. She had a private stash of shortbread biscuits which she used to supplement her diet and which, with chocolate and sweets, kept her fully fuelled!

Although we did not go away with a completely clear conscience our holidays during the 90's were also worth celebrating. We had nine good holidays and a disaster that put an end to our camping days forever. We always took our holidays during the last week of July and the first week of August – not a good time for gardening enthusiasts. Fortunately there were fringe benefits in having carers to look after Mum for we were also able to prevail upon them to water the garden, look after the dog and tend the house. It was therefore a service which we came to value greatly. We enjoyed three super holidays abroad during this period, all of them under canvas, although the canvas changed in 1994 when we sold both our trailer tent and caravan in favour of a top of the range folding camper, a Conway Countryman, for which we paid £4,250. In 1990 we camped at Staufen, a small town near the Rhine. It gave us access to the picturesque Black Forest area of southern Germany. We were impressed, not only by the scenery, but also by the cleanliness and care for property. The contrast with France, just a few miles to the west, was unbelievable. For me, yet another area which I had taught about for years came alive and I was fascinated. I was equally excited by our next continental holiday to Annecy in the French Alps. This was the most picturesque of all our holiday destinations. We explored the beautiful valleys, took ski lifts into the mountains and journeyed by train to the glaciers at Chamonix, within sight on Mont Blanc. It was fabulous. Unfortunately two days before we were due to return the camp site owner alerted us to problems at home. Jenny's mother sent us all racing with her fall and hospitalisation. Stephen raced from Bournemouth to be there both for her and the dog and we packed up and raced across France travelling 850 miles in one go. Our last foray abroad under canvas was to the Dordogne in 1995. This too was a beautiful holiday. The weather was perfect, the camp site excellent and the 'Countryman', our camping unit, lived up to expectation and provided a very comfortable home. I can still taste the French bread, cheese and wine lunches! In the intervening years we travelled to a range of places in southern Britain. In 1991 and 1993 we towed the caravan to the Isle of Wight and the Stour Valley in Suffolk. The visit to the island was particularly evocative. We had not been back to Shanklin since our honeymoon 25 years earlier and it was 30 years since the first romantic weekend at Easter 1961. Of course it was not the same. Some things had changed beyond recognition and any thought of rekindling the feelings of the past were thwarted. Typical of the English climate, our first holiday in the Countryman to the South Hams district of Devon in 1994 was a wash-out. Although we had some nice days my abiding memory is of dampness and of having to buy

rainwear. Paradoxically the reverse was true of the ten days we spent at Sandringham, Norfolk in 1996. The weather there was perfect and the visit far more memorable. We explored the whole of North Norfolk including the Broads and saw the Queen Mother and Prince Charles at the Sandringham Show. We saw out the 90's with holidays to the Malvern Hills and Goodrington, Devon in 1997, Lyme Regis in 1998 and Ringwood in 1999. Ringwood was the disaster that finished it for Jenny. Only 24 hours after we had arrived I suffered from acute food poisoning and spent three days on the loo. Jenny, not able to drive, was stranded with the dog on the camp site powerless to do anything. She was not amused. As soon as I was able we packed up our things and raced home. Subsequently Jenny decided that she was too old for camping and preferred the luxury of hotels or cottages. It was the end of an era.

1997 brought a redirection in our holidaying habits. Volcare began to offer us carers to cover weekend breaks and, for a number of years, we were able to make off-season visits to some of the major tourist attractions in the southeast which we had never seen or were worth revisiting. So we went to Hampton Court, Windsor, Portsmouth Dockyard, Oxford and Blenheim Palace as well as Eastbourne, Lewis and Midhurst. On each occasion we stayed Friday to Sunday at really good quality hotels. It was nice to taste the luxury and even better to wine and dine Jenny and give her much needed breaks from the routine drudgery. In 1999 another precedent was set when Stephen and I took a holiday together in Italy. One of my aspirations of retirement was to travel but with agoraphobia, mother and arthritis Jenny was not interested. Travelling alone is not to be recommended and Stephen volunteered to accompany me on a tour to Venice, Florence and Rome. It was a magnificent journey through renaissance art and architecture with a splash of ancient Rome thrown in for good measure. It was an amazing experience. To see first hand the works of Da Vinci and Michaelangelo was breathtaking. We enjoyed the holiday and each other's company so much that we contemplated other adventures. It set the scene for an annual holiday without Jenny.

1997 was also notable for another venture although in the long-term the results were disappointing, even hurtful. During that year Jenny became interested in gaining some knowledge of her birth parents. She understood that they were dead but she was keen to learn something of their medical predispositions for the benefit of the children. An item on the local radio gave her access to a professional detective who specialised in tracing lost relatives and she employed him to research her background. Within two weeks we were astonished to learn that her birth mother was alive and living in Southampton. The detective made contact to ask whether she had any interest in meeting her long lost daughter and, as a result, telephone contact was made and a meeting set up. I cannot imagine how Jenny felt. It must have been horrendously difficult to comprehend and thoroughly nerve-racking to see through. When they met it was like seeing a mirror image, they were so alike. But it was not the emotional reunion that Jenny might have expected. It was pleasant enough and we learned something of her life story, including the fact that Jenny had a half-sister. Unfortunately though there was no apology or explanation for giving Jenny up for

adoption and she was not willing to share any information about her father, indeed she seemed not to know! It was as though she had wiped the whole episode from her memory. Far from giving Jenny the sense of identity she craved, she succeeded only in reinforcing the idea that she was not wanted either then or now. It was a great disappointment. For a while afterwards Jenny kept in touch by telephone but there seemed little enthusiasm from her mother to develop the relationship and she let it drop. Not, however, before she had met her half-sister. She lived on the outskirts of Paignton in South Devon and we diverted from our holiday in the Malvern Hills especially to see her. That too was a pleasant enough meeting. It transpired that they were both the illegitimate consequences of liaisons with soldiers in Wiltshire during the war. Her sister was the eldest. The link between them was tenuous, even unreal. They were not at all alike and there was little sisterly magnetism between them, which was hardly surprising given the fact that they had never met. It was not long before that contact also ran into the sands and petered out. It is an episode which Jenny kept secret from her real Mum, her adopted Mum, and it is one I have always fought shy of talking about for fear it would upset her. I can only imagine how hurtful it must have been.

Whereas the 80's was the age of the personal computer, the 90's was the age of the internet. Although at first tentative and not particularly user friendly, by the year 2000 hardly a company or organisation was without an internet website and a new generation of search engines had made them eminently accessible for everyone. By then people had also grasped the power and potential of E-mail and internet shopping and banking was beginning to make an impact in the marketplace. As with most innovations, once the basic technology has been mastered, there is a period of refinement and miniaturisation. Bulky desktop computers shrunk in size to sleek, portable laptops/notebooks, machines with vastly enhanced memory and power. There was a large upsurge in the range and sophistication of software which constantly widened the possibilities for home users. With ongoing research the potential for digital technology became more fully understood. The vinyl record became extinct, compact discs and CD Roms became the order of the day and digital photography crept on to the scene. The digital revolution also had a huge impact upon telephones. The mobile phone became an essential accessory to modern living and, in little more than five years, almost everyone had one. Text messaging arrived with them and a totally new language emerged which left us 'oldies' bemused and puzzled. The marriage of digital technology with satellite communication also heralded a revolution in television and radio. Pioneered by companies like Sky Digital new subscription channels became available and the overall number of channels increased tenfold and more. Pay-as-you-view was also introduced as an option giving access to movies and big sporting events. Digitalisation improved the quality of sound and vision markedly and it was not long before the improvements were captured on DVDs offering an alternative to magnetic video cassettes. Hardly a month went by without some new process or accessory being launched. The speed of development was amazing. Most of my generation were dumbstruck and had difficulty understanding it all. We all approached computers with caution and suspi-

cion. Memorising long strings of actions necessary to make them function was problematic and we fumbled over the keys. I acquired my own computer when I left work in 1998 but my abilities did not advance much beyond the first wrung of the ladder. The young picked it all up immediately and became computer literate with astonishing ease.

For the first time in my life the advances of the 90's seemed to be more than matched by decline. The most noticeable was the obstacles to travel. On the roads traffic volumes routinely reached a level beyond the capacity of the road network to cope with it. The slightest glitch in traffic flows on some motorways was sufficient to cause tailbacks which could take hours to clear and in a number of notorious spots there was often gridlock. Motorway journeys became totally unreliable. They were also more risky. Traffic overload is one thing. Traffic overload at 70mph is quite another. The slightest mistake could be fatal. More and more people drove on their nerves, the general level of frustration amongst drivers rose and with it their susceptibility to a new terror – road rage. Off the motorway network where there was the possibility of escape from congestion, progress could be painfully slow. It was hardly a satisfactory alternative. Neither were the railways. Years of line closures, cutbacks and under investment had reduced the network to an inefficient shambles. By the turn of the century, therefore, one of life's most precious freedoms, the freedom to travel, was showing all the symptoms of choking itself to death. There were other negative trends which became similarly irksome. Robotics was beginning to dehumanise people as consumers. It became almost impossible to communicate with manufacturers and suppliers without running into a barrier of electronic bureaucracy. Sometimes it was impossible to find a human being. Now, as never before, profit and the success of the multi-national company took precedence over the powerless individual consumer. Old traditions were being elbowed aside. Nowhere was this more noticeable than in the abandonment of Sunday trading legislation. During the 90's the traditional British Sunday all but disappeared. It became a shopping day just like any other. More and more people were drawn to work and to spend, spend, spend. Churchgoing, the gathering of the family around the table for Sunday roast, the idea of a day or rest – all part of a valued British institution began to wither and die. Even the idea of a nuclear family was threatened by changing attitudes to sex and marriage. Sleeping around and casual sex became normal and marriage was increasingly seen as a temporary arrangement. Now I concede that some of my observations might smack of intolerance and that might have something to do with my age. Like generations before me I worry about changing values and new trends and where they will lead. But with the wisdom of age, when I have the time to ponder on the greater things of life, it occurs to me that all is not lost. I can't help wondering why HIV/Aids, which suddenly appeared on the scene in the 90s, appeared when it did. Was it a sheer accident of nature, some coincidence of mutation that so effectively applied the brakes on promiscuity, or is there a greater power at work?

Within society at large fashions changed. The goal of equal rights for women, for so long the focus of legislation and legal test cases, was largely won by the 90s. The career woman became accepted and commonplace. One result was the domestica-

tion of men! Household chores now needed to be shared and the automated and low maintenance house and garden became the aspiration of many. This included the provision of food. We had reached the age of the ready meal, fast food and take-aways. Eating became increasingly international as society embraced multi-ethnicity and the long haul holiday became the popular manifestation of a shrinking world. The High Streets filled with Curry Houses, Pizzerias, Chinese Restaurants, American Diners and the like. Bangers and Mash began to feel outdated. There was also a surge in the popularity of al fresco dining. Barbeques caught the imagination of the public, especially the men who, once in the open air, assumed their ancient role of provider and attempted to do the cooking! As far as fashions were concerned we once again went through some peculiar phases. If fashion was about making statements then the message must have been about the freedom of the Romany and the Tramp. Body piercing and tattooing were in as were baggy trousers, torn clothing and boots. A great deal of it was particularly unflattering to women as if femininity went out the window when equal rights came in.

Back on the ground, facets of my life in the 90's were different and were fun. One completely unexpected development, a peculiar by-product of Church attendance, was Parish Pantomimes. In February 1990 and February 1993 I played the Dame in the village hall productions of 'Aladdin' and 'Dick Whittington'. Written by the Vicar, Patrick Sales, with music especially composed by Stuart Neame, of Shepherd Neame Brewery fame, they were hilarious fun. I had never before or since let my hair down so completely on stage. It was a giggle from beginning to end. Jenny even played the back end of the pantomime cow, in the course of which she became very friendly with the front end! We also went with a Church group to an open air concert at Leeds Castle. This turned out to be a new kind of middle class binge. People arrived with collapsible tables upon which they loaded feasts fit for a king complete with silver candelabra. The percussion section of the orchestra was augmented by the sound of popping champagne corks throughout the performance and a goodly proportion of the audience of thousands slid happily into a drunken stupor. The evening ended with a rendition of the 1812 Overture complete with cannon fire designed presumably to shock the masses into sobriety in readiness for their journeys home. Needless to say other outings with the Church were more sober and upright. For a number of years we made pilgrimage to Canterbury Cathedral by walking six miles through the woods on Easter Monday ending with a service of thanksgiving led by the Archbishop. Also, as in previous years, I continued to sing in the choir at the major church festivals and regularly made solo contributions to the annual summer concert and Christmas Carol service. On a more theological level we also attended, and one year ran, a house group to chew over religious ideas. We felt ourselves to be really part of the church community.

At home in 1998 we extended the family. Out of the blue we were asked whether we would like another puppy by the lady who had bred Ben all those years ago. At 14 (98 in human terms) he was now ancient and we were beginning to prepare ourselves for the inevitable. With both of us on the point of retiring we thought it a good idea. Training a dog would give me something to do. So we bought Max, a

beautiful tri-colour Border Collie – mostly black but with white and tan markings. He was a wonderful animal, super intelligent and all that anyone could ask for in a dog. He even rejuvenated poor old Ben and they used to run and play happily together. I loved him to bits. When, on Christmas morning 1999 he collapsed and died whilst out walking we were beside ourselves with grief. He was just 21 months old. One minute he was bright eyed and bushy tailed watching Connor and Jordan opening their Christmas stockings, the next I was carrying him home dead. After a decade of celebration, for us the century could not have ended more cruelly.