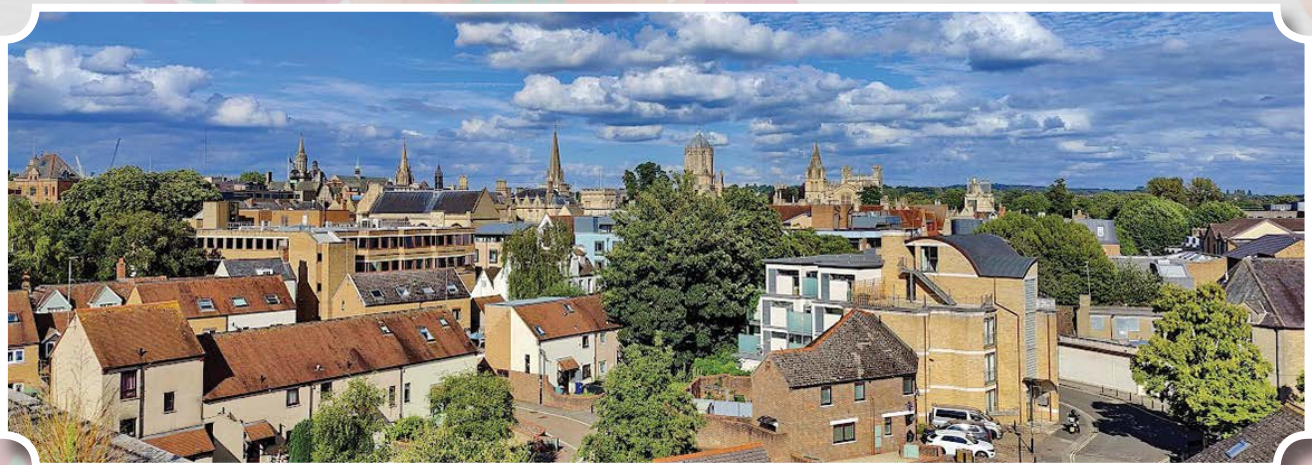


# The Oxford Omnibus

Oxford, England

No. 4 Christmas 2023

*Greetings and good wishes for Christmas 2023 and New Year 2024*



The annual stock of Christmas cards was delivered to my Oxfam shop in early September. Along with the arrival of meteorological (then astronomical) autumn it was all a sharp reminder of winged chariots, 'that old bald cheater' and the ultimate desert of entropy. We are hurtling on, as ever.

Another Christmas (good heavens!) and another Oxford Omnibus. So here are the stories of the year of a relatively quiet life in Oxford – a year very similar in pattern to the previous one, I realise as I put this bulletin together; not repetitious at all, but evidence of a settled life within generous bounds; lots of places, sights and people familiar to readers of OO, but seen, I hope, from new angles and in new configurations.

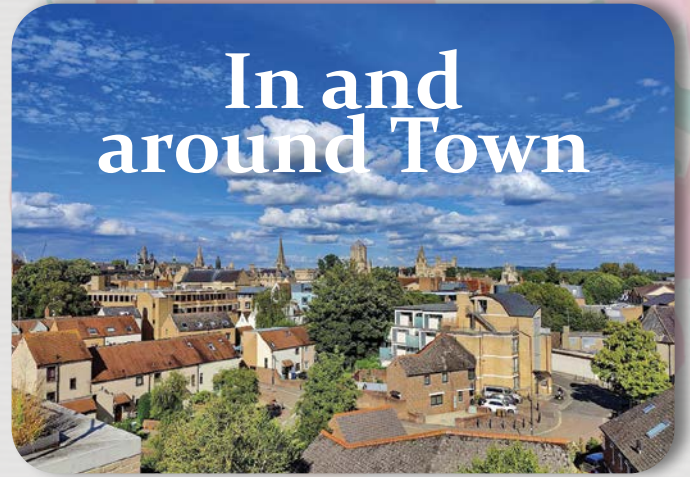
In the big wide world it's been a tumultuous year of absurdities, disasters and horrors of all kinds. I wrestle constantly with this dichotomy: as I wander round M&S doing my weekly food-shopping, order my books from Amazon, put the bins out for emptying, it's hard to reconcile such mundanities with the realities of war and wildfires and woeful political shenanigans worldwide. It all seems to belong to a distant realm of insanity.

Ah well! We must carry on, day-to-day find meaning and pleasure, hoping that realism and radical good sense will break out somewhere sometime soon. In the meantime, enjoy the good things still available to us, have a happy Christmas holiday and good prospects for 2024.

It's been a wonderful year for meeting old friends in Oxford and further afield and there've been lots of visitors at home and meals and treats around town.

The local weather – sequential heavy rain and bright sunshine – seems to have been good for the natural world and Oxford has been sumptuously verdant this year – trees and meadows seemingly unrestrained in their exuberance, amazing spring-time blossom, the blackberries by the river, prolific. What's in store for the next few months remains a matter of anxiety.

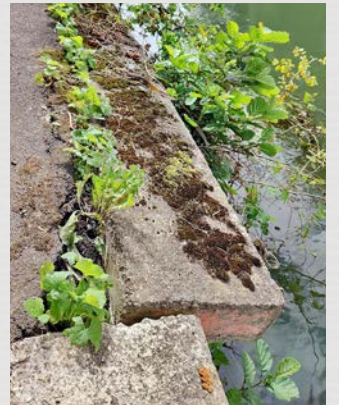
I think our principal, habitual pleasure is eating out, though we have good food at home and Raymond cooks interesting high-protein meals in bulk to take for his workday lunches. We both eat one meal a day (he, lunch, me, supper) though he drinks hefty, fruity protein shakes as well from time to time. I do my best to limit sugary treats – though with the super Paperboat café and pâtisserie just a few minutes' walk away, it's a tough call.



Panorama of Oxford from the top of Westgate shopping centre



A lovely late-winter day on the Cherwell with Magdalen tower in the background



The slow collapse of this section of the towpath close to our house has been driving me mad; no number of alerts to the Council has resulted in any action



Early daffies in the nature reserve just along fom home



Early on a chilly Sunday morning the young Hugman athletes were out and about with hundreds of others.



The young Welsh Hugmans with an old uncle



Fine planting in the Memorial Gardens at Christ Chrch



This was one of the most unusual sights just downstream of our house - an enormous regatta of some kind with racing below Folly Bridge. Serious boats like these are not usually seen upstream of Folly Bridge.



Showing off my workplace to Ralph



Marie and Ralph persuaded into the Barbie booth after the (wonderful) film



*Pippa and son Frazer at our generous pre-opera picnic at New College. The opera was so awful we spent the second half finishing off our feast in the cloisters.*



*Rob and Raymond eat Eritrean at Lula's*



*The energetic Lula in her Eritrean restaurant*



*Ian, Pippa, Rose and me on the occasion of a dinner at Wolfson College. (Photo by Mark.)*



*Claire is delighted by a sumptuous pudding at one of our monthly lunches at The Ivy*



*Summer supper with my favourite family - James, Claire, Ellie, Jonah and Ursula*



*Ian's portrait of Pippa and me at the Head of the River*



*Liz, neighbour and local historian with Daniel, co-owner of the wonderful Paperboat cafe on Folly Bridge (our local pâtisserie)*



*Raymond took me to the fabulous Dancing Dragon for my 78th birthday treat*



*Dinner with Sandy, friend and gardener, at the Head of the River*



*My lovely, clever Dutch friend, Jet, on a flying visit to Oxford*



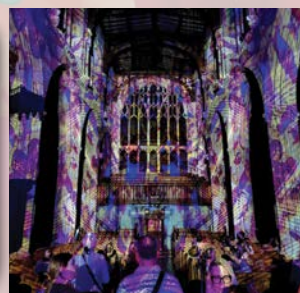
*Two good friends in the summer sunshine - Stewart with poet and narrow-boat occupant, Joe*



*Longhorn cattle in Christ Church Meadow, just a stroll from home in the centre of the City*



*In the summer, a bunch of magnet fishers from Northants worked their way along the river extracting these heaps of detritus*



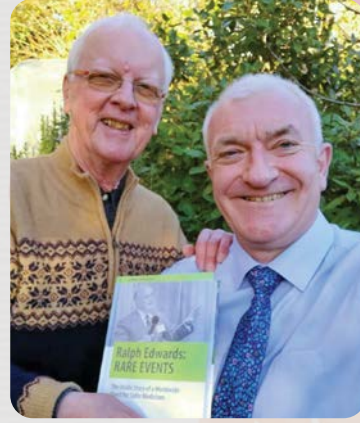
*Luxmuralis was an astonishing light-show in the University Church; it was glorious, immersive and (as Daniel remarked) 'trippy'.*



*Christmas with my second family in Oxford, James, Ursula, Jonah and Ellie - and many of their family.*



*A confident bunch pose for promotional photos. [Polo Images]*



*Author Ian and one of his support team with the newly-arrived book*



*Ralph with the story of his life and his work at UMC*

## Rare Events

After a couple of years of struggle, my friend Ian's book about the life and work of Ralph Edwards and UMC was published; it's done remarkably well selling over 2,000 copies. We had a celebratory dinner at The Ivy and a photo shoot at Ian's temporary academic home, Wolfson College. It's a very good read even, I think, for a general

audience. It's a bit pricey which makes the sales figures even more impressive. Ian's now in the final stages of his book on Anders Celsius (great Swedish scientist) and has another historical/biographical project in the wings. He and Pippa are, much to my displeasure, abandoning Oxford and following Mark and Rose to a new home in Bristol.



*Celebratory dinner at a favourite restaurant (The Ivy) with Ralph, Marie, Ian, Pippa and Raymond*



*Protagonists in the book with author and support staff. [Polo Images]*



*Echoes of long-ago EQUUS marketing - Northumbria's bear campaign master image*

## Bears

Clearing out the garage, I found a whole bunch of old artwork from the days of EQUUS. Northumbria's bear campaign was one of our great projects, ambitious and ground-breaking for a bus company (typical of Commercial Director, my old friend Tony Kennan). It was wildly popular and attracted a lot of publicity. The photo of the master image is on this page; it and most of the other bus stuff I'd accumulated (including Roy's Rotherham Transport badge and ticket machine) went off to a national transport collection.

# Ghana

Raymond went back to Ghana for a month over Christmas and was there when his sister's twins were born – Aria Rivera and Aika Kyara – sisters to Obapa and Kwame. Now an uncle four-times over, there were celebrations for new arrivals and a festive goat (slaughtered on site) for Christmas dinner. He had a great time but was not unhappy, I think, to return to Oxford.



The charming welcoming party for Raymond's arrival in Accra - niece Opaba and nephew, Kwame.



Raymond's Mum's shop in Accra

## Language success

It was thrilling (though not surprising) to get Raymond's spoken English national test results – a distinction! It was one of the credentials he had to achieve for his continued permission to remain in the UK. He's now secure until the end of 2025 when we have to go through it all again – for, it is to be hoped, the last time.



Raymond's certificate of distinction in his spoken English test for his residence permit



Family portrait with new arrivals



The arrival in Accra of Raymond's sister's new phone sent from Oxford



The new twins in their Oxford outfits.



The Christmas goat that Raymond bought for the festive feast

## Ui



Portrait of Ui in September - a selfie he sent me



Ui sent me this pic of a weighty catfish he caught for supper

My Thai foster-son is now 26 and is, at last, I think, settling down to a life that may bring some independence. It's been a long, rocky road for a young chap with no decent education and next to no real family affection and support (and no cash). He's been largely in my care for about eighteen years now; we've managed more or less to avert disasters and his own good sense has steered him clear of many of the pitfalls that have snared his contemporaries. In maturity though, he's a decade behind his Western contemporaries and I remain anxious about his holding on to such security as he now has. He's affectionate and appreciative; we have chats four or five times a week – both relying very heavily on Google translate to supplement our video calls in (for me, now faltering) Thai. That he never showed any inclination to learn English remains a perplexing disappointment.



*A typical gorgeous pastry from Chivit Tamma Da*

*My friend, Joakim, the Swedish genius restaurateur at Chivit Tamma Da*



*All the principals at Baan Rai Arun after the sale was completed*

I had an intense and memorable few days in Thailand at the end of last year when I went to seal the deal for the sale of my land and forest. My land-agent and lawyer had done a wonderful job preparing the documents and meetings; it all went as smoothly as one could possibly wish. The buyer is a local family from whom I had actually bought a couple of small plots in the past. We survived the complex and multiple bureaucratic processes at the Land Office then went out to the farm. I met the loyal and hardworking family who have looked after the land for years and gave them their severance pay which I had long promised for the time of the sale. It was quite emotional, largely subdued, as is the Thai habit, though the woman threw her arms around me in a quite untypical gesture. The sale was a huge



*With Mr Tin and what remains of the old ox-carts*

relief after years of fearing it would never happen. I got the impression that the new owners will not cut down the trees.



*My home for twenty years, with new Thai tenants; almost cleared of vegetation and at a much lower rent than I paid*



*Chiang Rai's splendid clock-tower behind a maze of cables*



*Dinner for one at the little restaurant where Ui and I dined almost every week for years. He was out of town at his grandmother's while I was there.*



*Dinner in the Night Bazaar (with its memorable ladyboy cabaret and music) where I had eaten dozens of times in the past*



*The lovely Dusit estate in the very centre of high-rise Silom, Bangkok*



*Afternoon tea with Pravich at the Dusit café*



*Bizarre branding in Silom*

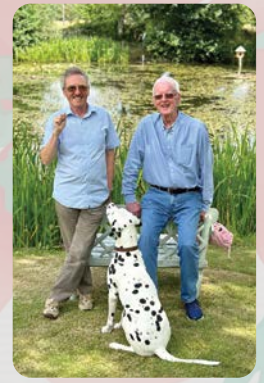


*Bangkok airport on my way home after an intense and successful expedition*



# Kentish journey

*The fine old RNLB lifeboat, Chieftan, on which Mark and I had a short trip along the coast. (Mark's photo)*



*With Tony Fincham on his extensive Kentish estate*

Revisiting old haunts and friends in the Garden of England is becoming a happy annual habit for Mark and me (we have already booked the hotel for 2024). We stayed again in the classy, grandly named Continental Hotel in Whitstable. We browsed the arts and crafts stalls round the harbour (painters, ceramicists, blacksmiths, leather and metal workers, jewellers, card and poster makers); sat on the seawall with drinks and ate huge portions of chips from the famous V C Jones shop on Harbour Street; took a trip out in the lovely old, retired RNLB life boat, Chieftan, with its brass fittings and hardwood veneers. We visited folk-singer Chris and his partner, Nikki and Gawain in Deal, and, for the first time, Tony Fincham, who'd been a pupil at Tonbridge when I was there and had got in touch out-of-the-blue after more

than fifty years.

We scoured the countryside for the best cherries (it was the height of the season) and each bought trays of eleven kilos to bring home. We spent a mesmerizing hour in the astonishing Macknade country food shop, delicatessen, butchery and wine store. An underwhelming visit to the Brogdale National Fruit Collection left us disappointed and stories about funding and uncertain planning made us anxious about its future. (We were told that they were victims of organized theft of fruit – gangs invading by night and stripping whole orchards of their crop.) Walking along the seafront to Tankerton, we had a splendid meze meal in JoJo's on the cliff-top.



*Gawain and Nikki in their garden in Deal.*



*Mark and me at sea in Kentish waters*



*An expansive G&T in the bar of The Continental Hotel, Whitstable*

## Serious stuff

I've just read Rory Stewart's new book, Politics on the Edge. He's an intelligent, conscientious, affable chap (in spite of being a Tory); the book is a blistering account of politics behind the scenes and a damning portrait of many of the big figures in recent UK public life. Much of the material leaves one gasping with anger and distress, wondering what hope there is for rescue of our declining and disintegrating nation.

Such joyful escape was also provided by Vaseem Khan's Midnight at Malabar House and (to come) the sequel, The Dying Day. I think part of the pleasure of good crime writing (I include Vera in this) is that one comes away with hope that complex problems can be solved and that truth and justice will win in the end; that painstaking attention to facts and evidence and detailed understanding of human nature bring serious rewards. You don't see much of that in the real world.

The last few months have revealed so much that is wrong with Britain – crumbling schools and hospitals; NHS and social care under terminal pressures; hardship, poverty and homelessness increasing; bungled immigration management; the rich getting richer while wages are squeezed and eroded; self-serving politicians taking us all for a ride; dithering about climate change and the end of the world; – ah me; what can we do about it?

Foreign affairs, wars and unimaginable disasters, are almost too much to contemplate; it does feel like a runaway world driven by flawed human beings with irrepressible urges to destroy, the war in Israel the latest nightmare.

I leapt at the Guardian's offer of better than half-price for Richard Osman's new Thursday Murder Club book as a chance to immerse myself in something entirely de-

I don't see what else we can do but be good to each other, care for the vulnerable, find what purpose and meaning we can from day to day, make the best of the undoubted riches we still have. Tell that to the generation of mad leaders across the world!



# River House

*Folly Bridge and island on a lovely, calm day*

**W**e've had a few guests staying or visiting this year. It's been lovely to sit outside for drinks or food on the few balmy evenings we've had. We're not really furnished for seating more than four at a time for meals inside (I sacrificed the dining room to have a study) but the sitting-room is more than adequate for cocktails and snacks for a small crowd throughout the year.

The garden's been doing wonderfully well being more or less left alone to do its own thing – including enticing a visiting hedgehog and lots of birds. There's been a great display of geraniums (especially on the balcony) and my two little gardenia shrubs have flowered profusely. Only a handful of apples this year, but a dozen or more plump pears were a delight.

The renovation of our pedestrian bridge has been postponed again resulting in a lot of gnashing of teeth locally as we all take the long route into town via one of the two closest bridges. The work is supposed to be taking place over the winter for a spring-opening. We'll see if it really does get going.

Raymond has a new job at the University Department of Population Health, providing logistics support for enormous, complex, international clinical trials; he can now get to and from work by bike or bus in a matter of minutes.

I've continued to work my two mornings a week at the Oxfam bookshop (where I'm a very happy chap) and have done a good deal of writing, especially my 100 Words project (for which I am still seeking a publisher). I've been reading a lot and seeing a few films and shows – Barbie, Oppenheimer, Life of Pi and more (for anyone who doubts it, Barbie is excellent – clever, satirical, very funny). Claire and I treat ourselves to lunch at The Ivy once a month, as well as the occasional film, and the ever-energetic (ex-Probation) Stewart sets up lunches, films and walks with his partner, Evelyn, or other friends.

With Raymond in Ghana last Christmas, I re-organised the garage with new shelving and storage boxes (alongside Raymond's home gym) and friend Ian and his son Frazer skillfully constructed a



*Raymond tries out some evening wear at M&S*



*My Dutch friend Jet took this pic of me in the garden*

massively complicated flat-pack metal bike-shed for the resident cyclist.

After no rise in the rent for nine years, our landlord called to negotiate (how good is that?) and we agreed a new three-year deal. I remain happy being a tenant, maintenance and repairs all being taken care of – and next year a repaint of the whole exterior. We have a good landlord and we are ideal tenants – so it's looking settled for the future.

It's a peaceful haven with the endless quiet entertainment of life on the river passing by. Raymond bought an inflatable paddle-board but, so far, has had only one short, tentative expedition. It's not something I shall be trying, full of admiration though I am for his adventurousness.



*Colin, my friend of 70 years, in the garden at River House before a College dinner*



*Barbara and Steve at River House. Steve was a contemporary at Worcester; a distinguished couple, they visit from New York from time to time.*



*The lovely room where I spend a good percentage of my time*





Ellie, Jonah and James snacking in the sitting-room



Ralph and Marie tuck into home-made burgers during their stay



Marie and Ralph brought me this magnificent piece of hefty Swedish ceramics saying it clearly had my name on it.



Ian and Frazer did a splendid job of fixing up a bike shed for Raymond while he was visiting the family in Ghana.



While Raymond was in Ghana I had a major reorganisation of the garage. Raymond's gym is in the foreground.



New facilities inside and outside completed in January.



Raymond's sneakers get their regular wash and brush-up.



Raymond looking triumphant after his first outing on his inflatable paddle-board



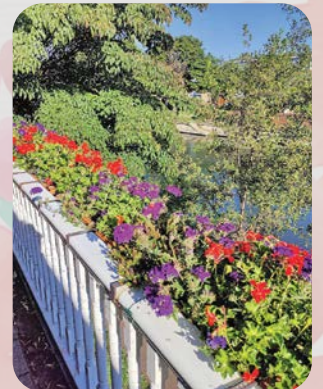
Shaky first embarkation



Preparations for a massive pot of ratatouille to accompany daily protein for Raymond's lunches for a week



The fine vehicle of my ace handyman and tree surgeon, Chris



The balcony flowers were looking lovely this summer



Some of the delights of this year's garden



I was given this magnificent bunch of peonies - such gorgeous, swanky blooms



This hedgehog ambled right past my chair when I was reading in the garden



Elegant birthday boy and beautiful wife, Marie



Raymond on the jetty



# The Professor's 80th

Passing the college boat-houses on the way downstream on the Salter's steamer



Old friends on the way to lunch at Worcester College.

Ralph Edwards (it's Rafe actually) has been a friend since probation days of the 1970s, then employer when he was director of UMC in Uppsala, followed in that role by his wife Marie. They often stay at River House, feel Oxford is a second home and chose it for the celebration of Ralph's 80th birthday.

Friends and family came from all over Sweden and the UK for a festive boat-trip, dinner by the river and lunch the next day in Worcester College (where I was an undergraduate sixty years ago). It was an extravagant and sociable affair, characterized by lots of good food and drink and by the renewal of old friendships and the making of new ones. There was a great, diverse mix of generations with a scattering of ages from fourteen to late eighties.

The sun shone and, but for a brief squall on the river, the weather was kind. The wonderful, young jazz band on the boat was a memorable feature of the entertainment.



Sunday lunch and croquet in the glorious grounds of Worcester College



Raymond and some of Ralph's family at the Head of the River



Marie and Gunnar, the lovely man we know as 'The Admiral'. On a sailing trip we once went to his island home in the Stockholm archipelago



# Sicilian days

*Courtyard of San Rocco, the HQ of the institution whose guests we were*



*Rafe and Marie walk down one of the ancient, cobble streets on our last morning in Erice.*



*My refurbished monk's cell in San Francesco monastery.*

Once more, I had the great privilege of an invitation to take part in a meeting in the medieval, mountaintop town of Erice. This year's was about ecopharmacovigilance (studying the serious problems of pharmaceuticals in the environment). Marie is a director of the institution that hosted the meeting and Ralph and I went along as contributors and supporters. In the cosy old buildings, we made some progress towards a statement about what needs to be done, while outside it was cold, windy and damp most of the time.

## From north-west to south-east

After the meeting we set off across the island for Syracuse (Siracusa). The journey took most of the day – taxi, train, train, bus, train, taxi – but all the connections worked perfectly and the trains and coach replacement service were all splendid.

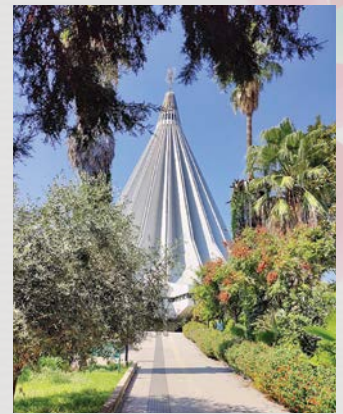
Syracuse is a wonderful, rich and interesting ancient city, with great Greek and Roman remains (huge amphitheatres among them) and endless old churches and renaissance buildings and streets. The Cathedral incorporates huge columns and some of the structure from the Greek temple of Athena (6th century BCE) it has a magnificent frontage in late High Sicilian Baroque style, dominating the vast piazza.

One of the thrills for me was seeing Caravaggio's Burial of St Lucy in the church built on the site where she was (allegedly) martyred in the fourth century. Syracuse was the city of Archimedes; there was a fascinating exhibition of reconstructions of many of his inventions and experiments (the Archimedes screw, for example).

Eating in the city was an endless delight. Special treats in several places were the aperitivo boards piled high with cheeses, cold meats, olives, bruschetta, croquettes, sun-dried tomatoes, caponata and lasagna, leaving little space for the two further courses the Italians expect you to eat (which we rarely did). One evening, I had a wonderful filet of horse meat (there was donkey too, but we didn't get round to that). For dessert, I had canolli every day while Rafe



*'The Ear of Dionysus' - limestone quarry and prison in Syracuse.*



*The 1990s church of the Madonna delle Lacrime, more impressive outside than inside.*

had an equal number of portions of tiramisu – usually with coffee and iced limoncello. On our last night we went mad and had drinks and dinner on the roof terrace of the Grand Hotel Ortigia while the sun set across the Med, spending a small fortune on exotic cocktails, delicious food and wine, with perfect service in the elegant surroundings.

It was all a reminder of our good fortune and privilege; also of the extraordinary achievements of Western civilization – art and architecture through the millennia, science, navigation, commerce, viticulture and gastronomy – as well as providing an echo of the suffering and wars out of which so many great things emerged and survived.



*Rafe asked the question as to whether or not this was a disturbing example of child labour in the Cathedral*



*A sumptuous aperitivo platter for two*



Last night extravagance - on the steps of the Grand Hotel Ortigia



Rafe and cocktail on the Grand Hotel terrace as the sun goes down



Marie descends the grand staircase in the Grand Hotel



This fine ship sailed in during our stay



A lovely avenue of shady trees in the Piazza Santa Lucia, near the church



The church of St Lucy, built on the site of her alleged martyrdom in the fourth century. The great glory of this building is its Caravaggio - The Burial of St Lucy



Exquisite illuminated prayer book in the Regional Museum (pages about A5)



The Cathedral of Syracuse, integrated with the Greek temple of Athena behind the wonderful Baroque frontage.



Interior of Syracuse's splendid mongrel cathedral, with its Greek, Norman and Baroque features.



Ortigia's colourful street market



A stroll on the east side of Ortigia island



Marie on our boat trip round Ortigia with Castello Maniace in the background

Here's hoping you can find the peace of mind to enjoy relaxed and companionable times at Christmas with family and friends and that 2024 will bring you some pleasures against the terrible backdrop of our times. It's absurd to be naively optimistic about the future, but we can hold onto what is good and beautiful and take comfort in it. Warmest good wishes from us both.



The massive Greek theatre, carved out of the hillside

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