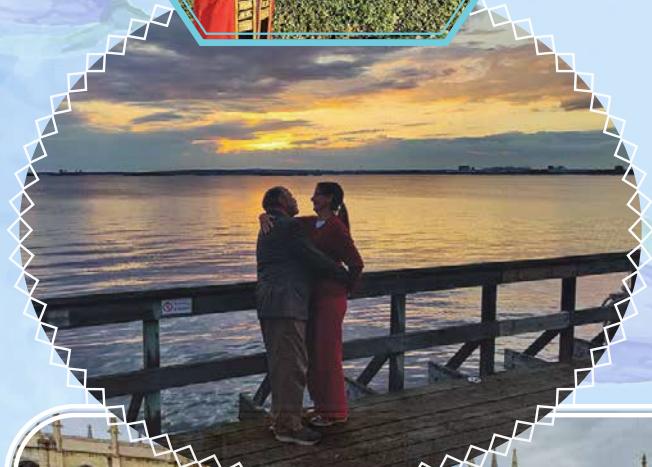
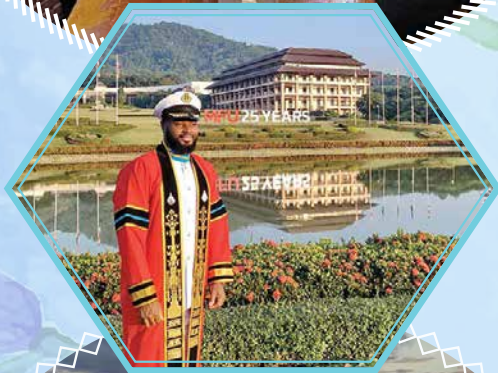


The
Oxford Omnibus Oxford, England

No. 5 Christmas 2024

Greetings and good wishes for Christmas 2024 and New Year 2025

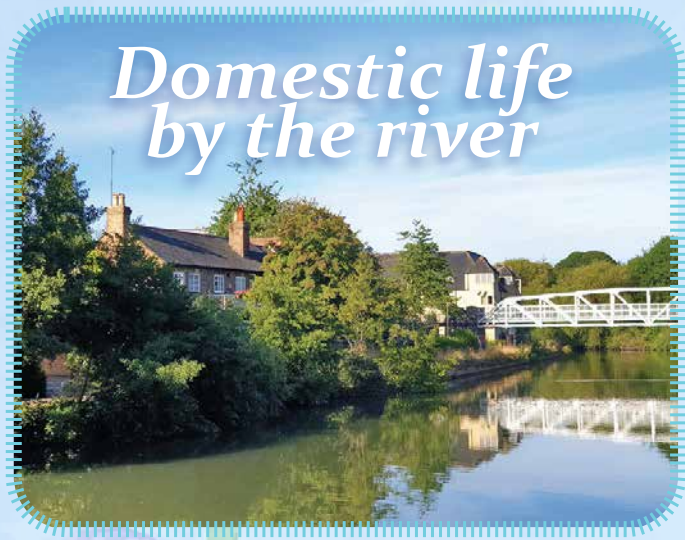


As life barrels along into autumn and winter, it strikes me that this has been a politically and emotionally exhausting year, what with the world being in such a mess and alarms and excursions (and much, much worse) on every front. In the UK, we did have the exciting victory of the grown-ups in a landslide (current performance a bit shaky, it must be said), but deep anxiety (despair even?) is the only possible response to news from that strange, fractured country across the Atlantic; what now are the risks ahead for them and the rest of the world? Are liberal values (the pretence, anyway) entering a dark era of decline? And Ukraine, Lebanon, Gaza, Sudan? Unbearable, insupportable.

At the local, domestic level, things are pretty damn good; it's the world stage that casts such a dark shadow: such wickedness, violence, stupidity and waste. It all leaves one weak with misery.

But it's Christmas, the New Year in prospect; let's lift a glass and hope for better things. The two sets of Olympic games were a reminder how magnificent, creative, collaborative and sociable we humans can be when given the chance; how much we can achieve together across every dimension of difference; maybe, one day, those qualities will win and the dark forces will wither and be banished.

Domestic life by the river



A comforting view of the nestled house (and the newly painted bridge) taken by Marie on one of her early morning walks

Here, at River House, we've kept going peaceably without any great dramas (except maybe the lapping of the water of the Thames at our outer wall last winter, and rising levels this autumn). Raymond's coming to the end of his first year as a fully-fledged employee of the University and has won a merit award for his 'outstanding' performance in a very tough job; his rigorous gym-routine continues as ever; his lifetime loyalty to Man U is being sorely tested. I've been writing, traveling a little, reading a great deal, seeing lots of friends, managing the frustration of the persistent indifference of publishers to my work. We have two weeks in South Africa coming up at the end of November – our first serious holiday since we returned from Thailand four years ago; our first opportunity for prolonged time together for ages.



Though the Virginia creeper threatens to smother the house, it is a lovely contribution to the verdant excesses - here in late October



I love the little green cypse our garden has become.



Last winter the river was over the towpath in front of the house but was no threat to us, though it was an anxious time



Back to Thailand on campus. Raymond returned for his delayed graduation ceremony. In this uniform-loving country, even students need the full kit.



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



Our bridge fully enclosed for renovation and repainting



Christmas deliveries were very satisfactory again in 2023



The full works - with a fiery Scotch bonnet in Raymond's gravy



An extravagant Italian cake from Ray and a wonderful pop-up London from Mark and Rose for my 79th

With only minimal control of Nature's exuberance in our small garden, we've enjoyed a year of various gratifying displays. The pretty pink flowers of the wild geranium (*geranium maculatum*, I think) took over half of what used to be the lawn and stayed in bloom for months. Following carpets of yellow and pink primroses (*primula vulgaris*), they overwhelmed the self-seeded Canterbury bells that had dominated last year. We had four of the big trees densely covered in white blossom in the spring, as well as the small pear and apple trees (sadly, rough weather and a marked absence of pollinating insects resulted in a desultory crop).

The Virginia creeper stormed across the whole of the front of the house, up over the guttering and onto the roof; to open the windows, we had to trim round them halfway through the season though the tendrils were soon expanding their domain, creeping through the gaps and filtering light in the rooms. This growth of this huge, energetic, extraordinary, elderly, single tree will, as usual, be cut right back to ground-floor level in November, after the last of the scarlet leaves has dropped. (Our landlord suggested taking it out completely, but I couldn't bear the thought.)

The little gardenias have done well; the foster-care loquat and myrtle look healthy enough, although the former was battered in a storm and has been assaulted by some leaf-eating creature. Spring bulbs were a great pleasure – and now it's time to plant the next batch for 2025.

With so few butterflies around, it was a joy to see two red admirals in the garden in mid-September; other than them, a handful of large and small cabbage whites and only a few others, all season.

We've seen lots of local friends and enjoyed visitors from further afield (see pages 9 and 10) and it's been lovely welcoming people to the house – though I do miss a dining room for proper meals; what had been the dining room when I moved in became my study – a solidly beneficial trade-off with occasional regrets.

More than a decade here already and hoping for another to come. Left to us, we won't be moving anywhere, I think.

Gardening (or not)



It was a great year for flowers in the garden. This straggly old rose did very well



Among the very few butterflies this year, a red admiral lifted my spirits in September



Pippa reads in the garden amidst the wild geraniums that took over the lawn



The sitting room set up for evening guests



Dinner at Head of the River



Introduced to us by Ralph, a teaspoon of this raspberry vinegar in a glass of water makes an invigorating drink



Merton College chapel on a bright winter's day



This lovely old cinema in Cowley is now community-owned. I'm a minor shareholder



The grand setting for a fine piano recital in the University Church of St Mary

In the (occasional) bright sunshine of summer, against a bright blue sky, the (now refreshed) limestone of which much of Oxford is built glows with a golden warmth; it highlights the grandeur of the structures, the sometimes extravagant ornamentation, the extraordinary skill of the craftspeople who built it and those many who've restored it. Daily life on the streets habituates you to all this glory; you have to pause, adopt the eyes of an observant tourist to recapture the excitement. One tends to march about purposefully from place to place without taking the cue from the looks of wonder on the faces of the hundreds of thousands of tourists who flock here every year to be entranced.



A busy boating day on the Cherwell

What you can see on the streets is pretty astonishing but it gets even more remarkable as you explore behind the walls, inside the buildings and gardens. My own College, Worcester (see page 6), is one of the glories of the city; there are plenty more wonderful places too, many of which I have still yet to see.

Christ Church Meadow is a jewel in the middle of the City, that great, open expanse of meadowland surrounded by woods and tree-lined walks along the banks of the Isis (Thames) and Cherwell. A small herd of old English longhorn cattle graze the meadow. This summer I was thrilled to find they had mowed the meadow and there were great bales of hay scattered across it. I've never noticed this before and was delighted to think that there was haymaking in the midst of urban life.



Stewart and I occasionally go to concerts in Trinity College, his alma mater



Trinity College chapel



The Cowley Road Carnival provided a loud and colourful afternoon's entertainment



There was a large, lively turnout on a grey day for Oxford's annual Pride march



At the tail-end of the march was a gay fire-engine which I always find a touching endorsement



Unearthing items from a long-lost favourite. So many people in Oxford mourn the passing of the great Boswells store - a victim of modern retail dynamics



With Magdalen College in the distance, the Cherwell flooded the school playing fields last winter



It was wonderful to see haymaking in the middle of the City - here on Christ Church Meadow



This is the lovely woodland that is under threat from a daft proposal for a new river crossing



Controversies

These trees had been felled before members of the protest group chased off the men with chainsaws



Members of the campaign group gather for a march to County Hall

The authorities in the ancient city have struggled with traffic management for many years. (One, mad 1960s plan, thankfully abandoned, was for a bypass running right through Christ Church Meadow.) The introduction of zero emission zones (ZEZs), low traffic neighbourhoods (LTNs), reduced speed limits, and many more, provoked the usual protests and controversy which continue to seethe in local chat groups and occasional street campaigns. Pollution has fallen in the City centre and the continued prioritization of pedestrians and cyclists has greatly improved conditions for anyone not wedded to private, four-wheel transport. The buses work well and are popular.

While the architecture of many of the University and college buildings is unsurpassed in scale and beauty, there are some recent horrors; the territorial imperialism for ever more land and ever more buildings is less endearing. Whole swathes of previously domestic dwellings have been taken over through the years and there are constant new plans for expansion. (There is reason to applaud such growth, but conditionally.)

A secondary element of one of these plans has been causing a good deal of anger and distress to people - including us - in our home neighbourhood. The threat

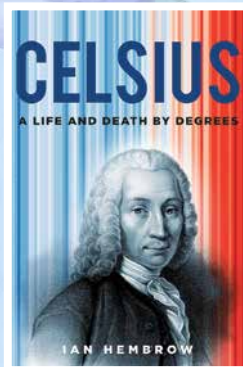
is the felling of acres of mature trees and the destruction of a lovely stretch of riverside woodland just upstream from our house (carpeted variously with daffodils, bluebells and primroses, full of nesting birds). The plan is for a pedestrian and cyclist bridge linking a proposed, huge University development on our side of the river with the west end of the City. The bridge is unsightly, destructive and redundant (there are other crossings very close by) - and possibly illegal too.

Members of the local protest group confronted men with chainsaws earlier in the year and stopped them after they had prematurely - and illegally - felled half a dozen mature ash trees. Since then, the area was patrolled daily for a while (I joined for a couple of shifts), we've marched to County Hall, and have been lobbying councillors. We raised £10k towards the cost of a judicial review and our application was granted. I (and many others) have been leafleting to support the campaign. Depressingly, our local Labour and Green councillors are enthusiasts for the scheme.

But it's still a wonderful place to live, with riches and opportunities for all who have eyes to see them and funds to enjoy them. Homeless people are a feature, too, a reminder that all is not well here, nor anywhere else across the country.



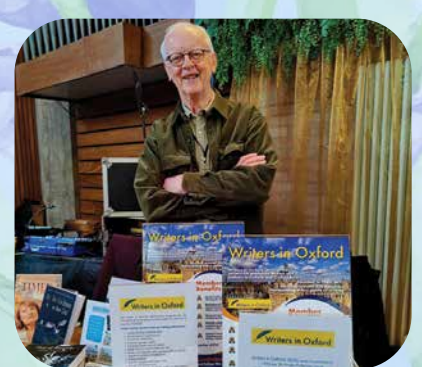
Ian introduces his new book, Celsius, to members of Writers in Oxford



Ian's new book published in September. A handsome volume and a good read it is too!



Hugman at work. Oxfam bookshop in The Turl



At the Indie Book Fair I organised a modest stand for Writers in Oxford. Mr Neung (of OO fame) designed the materials for us



The Rose and Crown. A fine evening with Ian and Pippa



Marie and Ralph on the renovated and repainted pedestrian bridge close to our house. After a couple of years it was opened for a few weeks then closed again for further work.



Mark and me in the Lebanese restaurant in the Westgate shopping centre



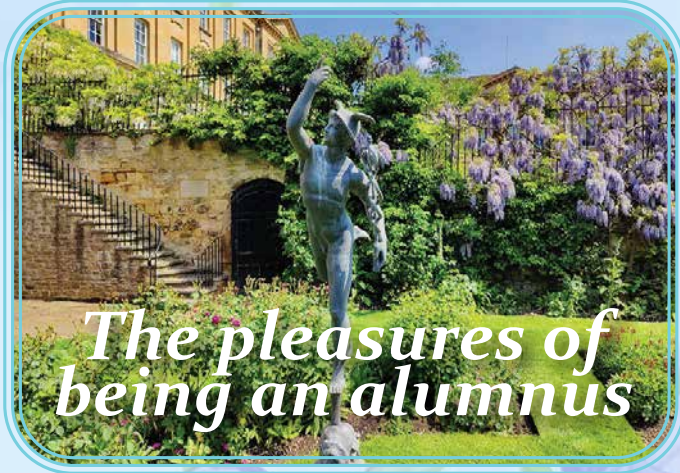
Reception in the garden for old members

While I was too young and unformed to plunder the cultural and academic riches of Oxford in my undergraduate days, I was, from the beginning, deeply appreciative of the beauties of Worcester College and the amazing privilege of spending four years in its embrace.

Now, more than half a century later, I love it as much as ever. I am always entranced by the magical transition between noisy urban life and the peaceful elegance of the quad as you enter through the porters' lodge. The buildings, the gardens, the great lake, all make a place of beauty and harmony. My pleasures are not nostalgic; they are present.

This year I've attended alumni and donor events and tours of the garden as well as enjoying casual strolls under the trees with visiting friends. It's always a delight.

The College has achieved exceptional standards of service and quality in its catering; the food and drink are excellent, the staff are well trained and highly professional. One of the managers and I have become friends; I have plans to take him out for a meal at a place that I think would not offend his standards – maybe The Ivy (where Claire and I have lunch every month). I think he would enjoy the occasion – not least, for him, being on the other side of the service divide for once.



The pleasures of being an alumnus

Mercury in the Provost's garden



Claire and me dolled up for evening theatre in College



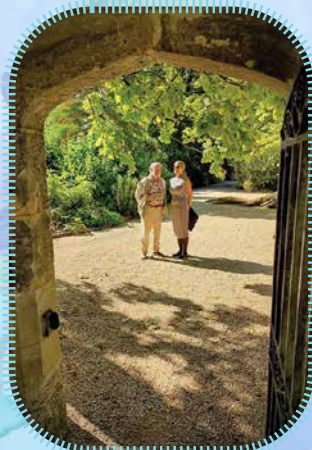
Under some of Worcester's sumptuous wisteria



Andrew is deputy catering manager at Worcester and a supreme professional



Cloister and quad



Marie and Ralph in the gardens by the lake



I arranged a gardens tour for members of Writers in Oxford. Here, remarkable Head Gardener, Simon Bagnall, shares horticultural mysteries with the group.

Reflections on this and that

I'm still far from being at ease in retirement. I find it hard to settle to anything with conviction or commitment, feeling that there must be (or ought to be) some more pressing demands that require attention. Even when writing or reading, when I can lose myself for hours, I am often not entirely at peace. My time is pretty much filled – submissions to publishers; work on the Writers in Oxford website; films and concerts; meals with friends; reading two or three books a week – but I still feel as though something is missing. If I wasn't (willingly) forced out of the house twice a week to work in the Oxfam shop, I'm not sure I would stir myself to get out and about much at all. I love holidays as much as ever; I don't feel anything is missing from them. Maybe there's something to be learnt from that.

Some of this stuff is very deep. An example: I've hardly ever watched TV during the day even when there were prospects of good entertainment. Even if I have nothing to do, I feel daytime-TV is evidence of sloth (or something equally disreputable). It's weird, not least because I am, historically, not usually someone given to self-denial. But there is a streak of puritanism (maybe my mother's Scottish Presbyterianism lingers, perish the thought).

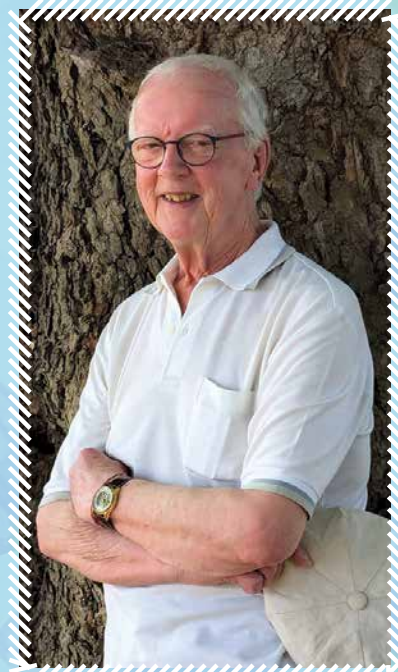
Still useful...

In November I was in Riyadh for a Ministry of Health risk communication workshop, a topic in which I became something of an expert over the years (and wrote a great deal about it, including a book). I've worked with the Saudis on a number of occasions, always welcomed as a valuable colleague and much enjoying their company. I was gratified to be invited, but also anxious that I might have lost my edge, might not be close enough in touch with contemporary theory and practice; after all, it's several years since I was reading and teaching with any regularity. I did some reading and research for the trip and think I made a good fist of it, but it may be my last appearance on the international professional stage. It's past time for the elderly to protect their dignity while it lasts, for the young to take over.

South Africa

We set off at the end of November for two full weeks in South Africa – a plan to make good the disaster of our previous

trip in 2015 (you may remember that Raymond was deported halfway through because of an innocent oversight with his visa). We have four days on Safari at a resort in the Sabi Sands game reserve; five days in Cape Town; and five days on the Garden Route east to Hermanus via Franschhoek. By the time you read this we'll be on our way home, blessed, I hope, with fourteen days of summer sunshine and warmth. Pics and story next year!



A portrait by Roy on a visit

Christmas 2025

Next year, the plan for us both is a trip to Ghana to see Raymond's family and maybe have a few days' travel in the country. It's been a couple of years since Raymond was there, and many more for me. I was a frequent visitor for work in the early part of the century and, especially, for additional reasons, after 2010 when I first met Raymond. It's a great prospect!

Priorities

I have two books in hand: one complete (100 Words on Things that Matter), submitted and rejected by publishers twenty times; the second, the sequel to *Out of Bounds*, already lengthy but yet incomplete. I must find the grit to make progress with both.



Nephew Andrew with wife Laura who was race director for this Welsh winter Parkrun



Laura did a sponsored half marathon for the Paul Sartori Foundation Hospice



Press accolade for Laura's heroic exertions



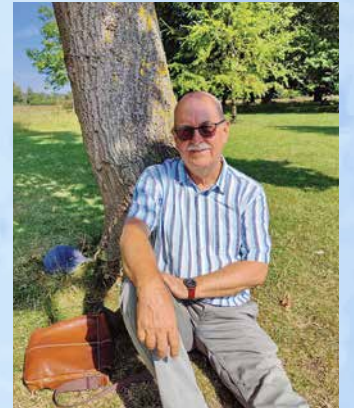
Great-niece, Chloe, after playing against Aston Villa in her first game for the Welsh Academy. She's something of a star and plays for the County too.



My brother Iain's Morgan has finally been reunited with the family in Wales and come home to its own garage. It's about 50 years old and immaculate. Iain died in 2011



Roy lived on our street in Balham when we moved there in the mid-80s. He's been a great friend ever since. Here, on a chilly day, at Osney Lock



Roy, on a rather warmer day on a walk in Christ Church Meadow



Ian and Rob onstage for one of their wild performances. [Pic-Ian]



Rob and Marina in Thailand. [Pic-Rob]



Family and friends

Ian and Pippa on a disappointing day out to a Cotswolds Distillery anniversary party. We were not impressed.



Raymond's (our) niece, Obapa, in Ghana, after the operation to correct the bone structure of her knee. Now with the cast off she seems to have made a full recovery



Raymond's sister's twins on their first birthday last December



Claire and I manage to have our lunch at The Ivy more or less every month. It's always a treat! This was an overwhelming basket of lovely doughnuts



My dear friend Bui in his office in Bangkok. Now sales director for a large sugarmill manufacturing company, he's achieved great things



Geoffrey worked for EQUUS and then for UMC for twenty odd years. He drove up from Clematis Cottage in Dorset for a few hours in Oxford in September



Ben was passing through Oxford and stopped for lunch. He and I met when I and EQUUS were deeply involved in public transport.



Jonah, son of James and Ursula, came all the way on his longboard to visit me, just before he started his first term at university.



Lunch at Head of the River with Tish and Ian

Ian and I have known each other for ages and have kept in touch over the decades. He has an unwavering dry sense of humour and an amusingly sceptical view of the world.



Ian and Tish out in Christ Church Meadow



Angela is one of the clever people I've met through Writers in Oxford. She has an unusual house perched on the bank of the Cherwell with a deck on stilts above it.



James and Ursula took me for my first ever trip to Glyndebourne



Mark is a friend from Balham days - we've not met for twenty-five years or more but have kept in touch at Christmas. Here in the Oxford Botanical Garden in autumn



Friends for more than 70 years, Colin and I met up at a Worcester alumni event. [Pic Worcs. Coll.]



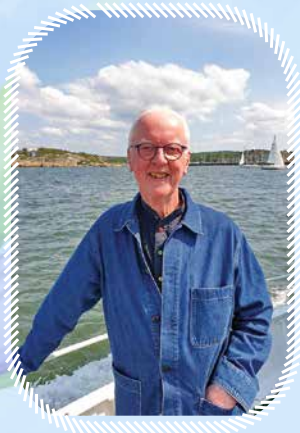
My friend and neighbour, local historian Liz Woolley on the Town and Gown 10k run for muscular dystrophy in the spring



Boarding the old steamer for our trip round the archipelago



Fine lunchtime desserts onboard



Sunny, open water



Swedish interlude

Heading home with the great Karlatornet in the background

I spent five days with Marie and Ralph in Gothenburg. There was some rain but also glorious sunshine and 27 degrees one day under bright blue Swedish skies. We saw Swan Lake at the Opera House – the definitive Nureyev version, we were told; a wonderful evening prefaced by delicious food and bubbly in the restaurant.

Another day we had a brunch cruise round the archipelago. It was a lovely sunny day, the scattering of islands, islets and rocks with their colourful cottages and mansions sharp and clear in the bright light. On the lower deck of the small, elegant old ship, a fabulous buffet was laid out featuring Swedish favourites like fresh and smoked salmon, prawns, pickled herring, meatballs, potatoes and salads, rich cheeses and heavenly puddings. Along with a bottle of fine white wine, it was a dream.

From the commuter ferry we took into town and from the ground, we admired Scandinavia's newest, tallest building: Karlatornet, 246m, slim, elegant with the extraordinary feature of appearing to be organic, as if the edges of a great pod were being folded back, softening and energizing the full profile from its small, rectangular footprint. Surprisingly beautiful, difficult to describe.

Local public transport is really impressive: we took trams and buses as well as a ferry; everything worked well:

simple ticketing, clean vehicles, easy connections. An example to everywhere.

Sweden is wonderful in the spring – the air, the light, the sky all have special qualities of clarity and purity; the lilac and the chestnuts are in bloom, everything declaring its buoyant victory over the harsh conditions of Nordic winter.

I had a cottage home in Sweden for more than twenty years; never far from Ralph and Marie, we had some of the best times of our lives in the forest and out in the countryside. From deep-snowy winters to hot, outdoor summers, we had good times, just the three of us, or with friends and members of their families. We all remember the decade in the Wappa forest as particularly magical.

I also had wonderful times in Thailand, of course, over many years, but, in the end, what with the final grim problems with Chai, his family's brutal and exploitative pursuit of me through the courts for two years after his death, the long struggle to sell the farm, the country kind of exhausted me; the bright allure faded. Life was brightened by Raymond's four years in Chiang Rai, but that was not because it was Thailand, but because it was him – and we could live anywhere. There's nostalgia for Wappa; for Thailand, not really.



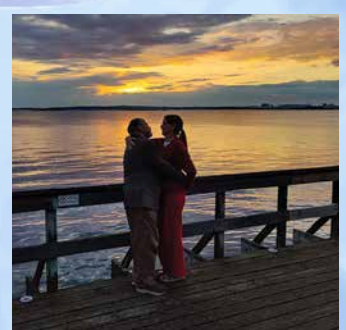
Waiting for the ferry into town. Memorial to Gothenburg's great ship-building past in the background



The ferry arrives



Evening in a fine restaurant by the sea



A romantic sunset after dinner



Old friends on a fine outcrop of Sweden's foundational granite



A huge Stena Line ferry passes in the distance below Ralph and Marie's flat



Karlatornet - at 246m Scandinavia's tallest building and probably its most elegant too. Pic by Skyscraper City



Trams, buses and ferries - Gothenburg's public transport works a treat

In what has now become an annual treat (accommodation for 2025 has already been booked) – Mark and I took ourselves off to Kent in July to visit old (and some new) haunts and friends. Car-less as I am, I love being driven so capably in Mark’s comfortable Volvo and the serendipitous pleasures it offers. Where shall we go today?

We stayed (again) in the exemplary Continental Hotel on the Whitstable beachfront, with our little balconies looking far out towards the Isle of Sheppey. There’s a fine, varied breakfast available and a spacious, relaxing lounge area for reading or evening cocktails. In town there are good restaurants, pubs and wine bars – one on the beach where you can sit on the sea wall with your glass in hand and watch the world pass by. The Neptune pub offers a blustery spot by the water for a quiet bottle of local ale. The town is full of interesting and unusual buildings, many of them clapboarded, as well as a great number of beach huts and renovated ex-fishermen’s huts available for hire at surprising prices.

We went to Margate on a grey, damp day, saw Gormley’s evocative lone figure standing out in the water, strolled past Tracey Emin’s studio and braved the (horrible) Turner Contemporary for a perplexing and provocative exhibition of works by Ed Clark. The end section of the once-famous pier stood lone and isolated out at sea, stranded by storm and fire that destroyed much of the great Victorian structure decades ago. There wasn’t much else to do in a deserted, rainy and rather depressing town.

We had a fabulously extravagant dinner with Chris and Clare at The Sportsman (exotic tasting menu, home-churned butter); spent too long (and too much) in the stunning Macnade foodhall in Faversham; walked along the seafront and called in on Nikki and Gawain in Walmer; bought heaps of cherries to bring home. A great time!



On the seafront at Margate with the Turner Contemporary in the background



Comfortable cocktails in the Continental



Mark at RHS Wisley Gardens on our way home



Hotel balcony view of the beach



Lifeboat At Walmer



A lovely afternoon with Nikki and Gawain in their Walmer garden



Chris and Clare arrive for our indulgent dinner



Locally famous pub where generations of young people have partied



Happy memories of our trip in 2015; we’re off again on 23 November. These pics from Sabi Sands game reserve.



Members of the Advisory Group and their hosts on the last day of our mission in Riyadh [Pic - Saudi FDA]

On the outward journey I was (unknowingly) upgraded to 1st Class on the Saudia flight - and taken aback by the unexpected comfort and luxury of the experience. I think we were useful to our hosts and their staff; we were treated to the usual, generous Saudi hospitality. The pace and scale of Saudi construction and development are breath-taking.



Evening in Bujairi Terrace, a great playground of gastronomic, retail and social pleasures, part of the vast outskirts giga-project known as Diriyah, the city of earth'



View of part of the financial district from my hotel window. There were vast areas of cleared land and forests of cranes everywhere in the City.

Another year bites the dust...

I wrote a short piece about the 2004 tsunami for a literary competition and was short-listed, but that was the only fresh creative writing this year. I've written lots of stuff for the Nature Park campaign and for Writers in Oxford, and hundreds of emails, most of it disappearing from history within hours of its creation. I must focus soon on delivering something that will last a little longer.

We've both been fortunate in enjoying tolerably good health this year; with my 80th coming up soon, I'm grateful for that. I am, though, aware that my hearing is not what it was. I'm going to be trying some AI-assisted aids in the next few weeks - and deciding if I'm willing to pay the price of a long luxury cruise for them. Raymond is applying for a more senior post in his department - a job that would give him a salary more in line with his considerable responsibilities. His career trajectory has already been remarkable.

We've waited years for our quick route into town over the pedestrian bridge to be restored and it looks as though that might happen before Christmas. It saves ten or fifteen minutes on every journey - a great bonus if you're weighed down with shopping. Its re-opening will make a huge difference to the lives of hundreds of people.

A happy meeting took place this year with one of my mother's sister's sons and his three clever children (1st cousins, once-removed, I think); one (Sam) has just cycled the west coast of America, another (Tom) lives here in Oxford. In their twenties, they're good company - and a pleasing revival of previously dormant family relationships.

I wonder what 2025 will bring for us all? Will it fly past as the years seem to do these days or will there be some rich, indulgent periods where time slows down? I worry what shocks will frighten and threaten the world and what denials and prevarications will undermine our response to climate change. Airports are full and, yes, I'm amongst those still flying. How do you make sense of that?

I no longer know how to make sense of much of what is happening around me. I shall take up my pen, pick up a book, eat and drink indulgently, spend time with friends, relish the glories of nature, enjoy my lovely partner and home - and hope for the best. What else?

It's been a tough old year across the world. We hope you'll find some peace and contentment over the holiday period and that you, family and friends will enjoy good health, now and into 2025. Warmest good wishes from us on the Grandpont towpath.

Bruce

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