

Nover's Cottage

All Stretton

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Dear everyone at All Saints

This comes with Christmas greetings from All Stretton as we all face yet another potentially challenging Christmas.

I think of you often and hope and pray that the St Nicholas Fayre and the Christingle, Carol and Christmas services come and go (or have already come and gone) in the best way possible in whatever form they take this year. Though I do miss not being involved in all of that I have not missed the endless doing of it all!

It is lovely to know that you have Sherine joining you in February and to know that you will be in such good hands as you enter the next phase of your journey as a Christian community serving the people of Holbeach. I had a long and friendly telephone conversation with her after her appointment was announced, and I was so heartened by it, and so happy for you all.

We have been in All Stretton for almost three months now and have got the house pretty much operational – though we still need some shelving in the study and some cupboards in the spare room so that we can unpack the last of our boxes. But we do have the pictures up, which always makes a house feel like a home, and Phil Bigg's lovely water colour of All Saints now has pride of place in our study, above a Rowland Hilder print of Lincoln's Brayford pool with the Cathedral in the distance and my other church paintings and prints alongside. It looks well there.

We have spent the first of our garden vouchers on three shrubs with winter colour, which are now in situ and thriving, and a lovely bird feeder, and we plan a trip to a specialist nursery to purchase a couple of native rowans, a damson known as a 'Shropshire prune' and a few other fruit trees and shrubs. These will go into some of the spaces and into area at the top of the garden that had become a complete wilderness, from which, with a bit of help from our daughter's boyfriend and a lovely neighbour with a chain saw, we removed 6 builders bags of seriously overgrown holly and brambles and some leylandii, laurels and self-seeded trees. We have become very familiar with, and very grateful for, the accessible and easy to use council tip in Craven Arms. So, though the garden is much more established than the garden at the Ludlow house we thought we'd be moving to, there is still lots of scope for further planting. Once we have a new shed in place, we will be able to clear the rather lovely cedar summer house of all the garden tools etc. and use some more of the vouchers to buy some cane furniture for it and a new lawn mower, having left our big one in Holbeach for Sherine.

We had the wonderful surprise of a huge box of Taylor's bulbs through the post the other day. It will be a challenge to get them all in before the winter well and truly sets in – but a huge thank you to John and Julia and the results will be a wonderful annual reminder of Holbeach and the fens in our very un-fen-like stepped, hillside garden!

The house is proving just as lovely as we hoped, though we had to completely dismantle one very old wardrobe to get it upstairs and rebuild it in situ with screws instead of nails, and we still have the fridge freezer and freezer in the dining room, until such time as we buy smaller ones to fit in the allotted spaces in the kitchen and utility room.

Milly loves it here – particularly the garden – which though it is smaller, has far more interesting beds and borders and she loves exploring and digging and will spend hours out there if either of us are working in it. Unfortunately, she has developed quite serious heart failure and so our walks are not as

long as we might otherwise have liked. She can still manage 3 miles quite easily on a good day and 5 miles at a push, but she doesn't set the pace in quite the way she used to! She is on lots of meds and we will keep her going as long as she is happy.

Unpacking, erecting coat hooks and shelving, doing a bit more of the downsizing that we didn't manage to finish before we left (the charity shops are still doing well out of us!) and doing what gardening we can while the weather had been good has kept us both busy. Alongside that, having had the piano tuned, I have started playing again and have, of course, spent more time with Annie, my pony, and got her used to being ridden in a rather different environment that involves hills, narrow paths, rapidly moving, noisy water, going through fords, and drifts of fallen leaves (which she has discovered make quite a nice snack when she is out and about). Features she has never really encountered before as she has always been near open fields and dykes.

I have been rather nice to go to church and sit in the pews, and I divide my time between the town church in Church Stretton and the village church in All Stretton which are both in the same benefice. The churches are less formal and more evangelical in style than All Saints, which I don't mind at all except that I am finding the liturgy a bit lightweight for a regular diet and I am seriously missing Barry on the organ, as though there are number of very capable musicians and singers around there seems very little scope for 'big' organ pieces or even the fun stuff that Barry would slip in from time to time to make me smile. I really like the vicar, which obviously makes an enormous amount of difference, and it has been encouraging to discover how committed to living out their faith in the world many of the congregation are, and there is a genuine desire to seek God's will for their churches.

People are so friendly here and even young people will give you a cheery 'Hi' on the street and we have felt really welcomed into village and church life, and Roger into the local Quaker meeting. It is unfortunate that the latest wave of Covid has made us reluctant to invite the neighbours round as we had hoped to do before Christmas – but maybe a lunch party in garden when it's warmer will be the answer.

It hadn't registered with us how different the weather would be here. We have a lot more rain – but it is often soft warm rain and a day can contain several showers interspersed with periods of bright sunshine. We also experienced our first proper power cut with Storm Arwen – only 20 hours but including 6 hours without water – so nowhere near as bad as some had it, but sufficient for us to wish we still cooked with gas!

In January I will write to the bishop here and ask about getting permission to officiate and see whether I can be useful in any way, but Shropshire is crawling with retired clergy – I still haven't met all those in the congregations here – there are eight of them I am told! – not all active but many of them are, and it makes me sad for East Elloe that we struggled so much to find adequate cover and support while we had so many vacancies.

There are things that feel a bit weird and disorientating after leaving full time ministry but we are loving the house, the garden and the growing familiarity of the shape and folds of Caer Caradoc as seen from our bedroom window each morning that changes daily with the sun, mist and snow, diurnal rhythms and seasons.

And extraordinarily we live here. We are very lucky and feel very blessed.

If any of you are ever passing – do please give us a ring or drop us an email we would love to see you.

Thank you once again for your huge generosity. We will have so many things to remind us of you all.

You will all be in my prayers for 2022

Rosamund