



# The Jackson's Christmas Letter 2015



It has been an interesting year, one way or another. We enjoyed more travel in the UK than in previous years. However, for the first time since we retired in April 2010 Mike has had no consultancies and associated travel at all during 2015.

Early in the year, Hannah and Michael raised the possibility of coming over to the UK during the summer. And on that basis we decided that we wouldn't go to Minnesota this year but instead take a road trip holiday around Scotland at the end of May, something that we had wanted to do for several years. In the event, Hannah and Michael had to postpone their UK visit. By then however, Steph and I had already worked out an itinerary for Scotland, and booked bed and breakfast accommodation. But then we decided to make our annual visit to the USA as well, and we enjoyed almost three weeks there from early September.

## 5, 4, 3, and 2

Those are the ages of our grandchildren – Callum, Elvis, Zoë, and Felix. It was a big year for Callum who turned five in mid-August, and started kindergarten during the first week of September, just a few days ahead of our arrival in St Paul. After an thorough check about local school opportunities, Hannah and Michael settled on the Nova Classical Academy (NCA), about 15 minutes away by car. Callum won his place in a ballot. It has a 'traditional' curriculum, including Latin, logic, and rhetoric. During our visit we got to hear a couple of recitations that Callum had to learn and present in front of his class. The kindergarten schedule has been quite a challenge for him, after the informality of day care for so many years. He was quite exhausted after a long day at school, and soon settled down to a good night's sleep. Now that Callum is a pupil at NCA, Zoë is almost certainly guaranteed a place there when it's her turn to start kinder. We had great fun with them during our visit. They certainly kept Grandma and Grandad entertained and occupied.



We made it up to Newcastle just twice this year, but Phil and Andi and the boys visited us a couple of times during the summer. Elvis and Felix spend four days each week at their day care centre just 100 m from home. As Phil compresses a five day working week into four days as a Senior Research Fellow at

Northumbria University, she can spend Fridays with them. Elvis graduated to a bicycle on his 4<sup>th</sup> birthday in September; Felix has become an expert scooter rider.



It's wonderful to see how all our grandchildren are growing and their personalities developing. We wish we could see everyone more regularly, but distance and work commitments make that difficult. Next year might be the first time we have all the family together. That would be something to look forward to.

## Busy times at No. 4

We had a busy year around the house. In February we finally got around to having a proper loft access hatch and ladder installed, something we should have done years ago. No more fetching a step-ladder from the garage. In mid-May, we discovered that the underfelt on our roof had deteriorated badly, so had that completely replaced. Just a week later the worn-out tarmac drive was replaced with brick paving, and an electric garage door installed in mid-June. Hannah says that the house now has kerb appeal!

## National Trust and English Heritage

This has been our fifth year as National Trust members, and whenever the weather permitted we had quite a number of day outings visiting thirteen properties. We also became members of English Heritage this year (annual membership was a Christmas present from Hannah and Philippa and families), and visited nine. We are fortunate that within less than 80 miles of home there are many NT and EH attractions to visit. English Heritage has given us access to many different types of property – ruined castles and the like that are not part of the National Trust's portfolio. However, many of these are day outing 'hanging fruits' and we will have to go much further afield next year to visit a whole new range of venues, probably spending a night or two away in bed and breakfast accommodation. Being NT and EH members certainly is an incentive to make the best of the better weather days. Actually, on reflection the 2015 summer was not too bad, although August was cold and wet.





## Fàilte gu Alba

Our Scotland trip lasted 13 days, and 2,260 miles. On Day 1, we headed to Mike's sister's home in Fife, just across the Firth of Forth from Edinburgh, for one night. And then we headed north through Aberdeenshire, taking in the Cairngorms and Culloden battlefield, up the east coast to John o' Groats, across the top of Scotland through Caithness and Sutherland, down the west coast as far south as Ullapool, and then over to the Outer Hebrides (Lewis and Harris, North and South Uist, and Eriskay) for five days. Returning to the mainland via the Isle of Skye, we headed further south on the west coast into Argyll and Bute, before heading southeast towards Loch Lomond and on south to home. We took in a couple of National Trust for Scotland gardens at Inverewe and Arduaine, but undoubtedly one of the highlights of our trip were the mysterious Calanish Standing Stones on Lewis.



Mike visited the Outer Hebrides (for bird-watching) in 1966 and 1967, but had not returned since; Steph had never been to the islands.

Despite the generally poor weather at the end of May, we actually didn't do too badly. And looking at all the photos we took (almost 1000) there were many bright days as well. The weather did not stop us doing anything at all, which was quite a relief given the number of weather fronts that came powering in off the Atlantic.



The Outer Hebrides have not lost their magic, although a lot has changed in the past 48 years, most conspicuously in the housing. In the late 60s, most residents lived in thatched, stone

cottages (or 'blackhouses'), but almost all of these have now been abandoned.

We had long desired to make this Scotland trip, and now that's something crossed off our 'bucket list'.

## The Windy City



During our most recent visits to the USA since 2011, we have aimed to make a road trip to various parts. It was Arizona and New Mexico in 2011, the Minnesota Riviera in 2012, Oregon and northern California in 2013, and the Great Plains and Yellowstone last year. Having made our long road trip to Scotland, Mike didn't fancy another one in the USA. But we did get out of the Twin Cities, if even for just three nights – travelling to Chicago and back by train. With temperatures hovering around 80F, we had a wonderful visit in that great city.

Mike's blog continues to prosper, and he has posted several accounts of our NT/EH outings and the Scotland and Chicago trips; there's a search engine on the blog:

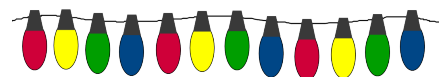
<https://mikejackson1948.wordpress.com/>

Steph is always busy keeping the garden looking lovely. 2015 has generally been a good garden year. It's remarkable that even in November there was so much colour to see.

So, that's a brief account of our year. Retirement continues sweet, and we're already thinking about our travels for next year. Fortunately we are keeping fit and well, apart from the odd creaky joint here and there. We trust our Christmas Letter finds you in equally robust health.

With our best wishes for Christmas and  
New Year 2016.

Mike and Stephanie



Happy  
Holidays!