It seems strange to be drafting our Christmas Greeting in October but as Ben keeps pointing out to me ‘we need to get everything sorted before mid- November’ as we will soon be on our travels again. By the time you receive this card and letter we will have departed for Perth, Australia, travelled across the Nullabor Desert, by train and hopefully arrived in Adelaide, on route to Tasmania, in time for Christmas.

We both started the ‘NHS Couch to 5k’ running programme in early January with the Birstall Running Club. Each Monday and Wednesday night throughout the winter months we joined a sizeable group ‘learning to run’ and exercising at the same time. Whilst Ben had run before, it was a challenge to me but a great experience for us both culminating in our first park run on March 18th. In June, we were both delighted to win a medal for the Watermead Challenge – 5 miles around the Birstall Lakes. Despite injuries, we both have kept running as part of our activities. Ben continues with his cycling and still occasionally goes to spinning classes. Peter continues to find happiness pottering around in his workshop and building –at a slow pace – his model railway.

2017 has been a year of travelling around and enjoying some wonderful family and friend hospitality. In May, we joined Ben’s parents, sister and fiance on a trip to South Africa. We flew out of Birmingham and headed to Durban via Dubai. We are indebted to family friend Erika for her kindness in hosting us in Pietermaritzburg. We took part in our first overseas parkrun by the Duzi river where amongst 600+ runners we had an a amazing welcome and shared a friendliness amongst the runners.

We headed further inland and stayed at Slievyre Game Reserve where we relaxed surrounded by some varied wildlife. We later used the Granny Mouse Hotel as our base to tour the immediate countryside and visit the Drakensburg Mountains. You can see some photos of us and our travels on our website – www.penprivate.com

Family events for both of us have been few this year. During the spring Peter compiled some of his Dads’ sermons into a bound book which he and his sisters felt was a fitting memorial to his ministry. A website has been created to his memory –www.revarthurmerritt.com . Peter’s sister Ann married Greg her long-time partner in August and we all travelled to Wakefield to celebrate that event. Ellie, Ben’s sister announced her engagement to Aled, in September, and we both look forward to that wedding in June next year.

Peter continues to work for a variety of clients and seems very happy to have landed the role of Financial Controller of a footwear company in Newcastle. He enjoys the once a month visit up there. All of his other clients are expanding and doing well. This month Ben reaches his 11th anniversary of being appointed stock control manager of Coles Nurseries in Leicester. They too remain a solid business and he and his colleagues move into new purpose built offices on their Thurnby site, in November. (This also means we have now lived together at Elmfield for eleven years !)

We decided to make an effort to celebrate our 5 th Civil Partnership Anniversary this year and hosted a barbecue, at Elmfield Avenue, on July 8th. The weather was kind and it was a joy to have many family and friends to share the event with us.

As mentioned above, Peter’s sister Carol and family travelled up from Weymouth for Ann’s wedding and we had all decided to take a short break together after the wedding. We flew to Riga, in Latvia. It was great to spend time together with Carol, Mark and April and we all enjoyed our time in this fascinating city.

The week after Latvia, we both had a busy time preparing for yet another holiday. On the evening of Thursday August 23rd we set off with our friends James and Jeanette on our motorcycles for France and Belgium. After arriving via Eurotunnel we headed south towards to Verdun. The weather turned inclement and after an initial sunny afternoon we were soon in a thunderstorm. It was so bad that heading into one French village James rode straight up into a cowshed to get out of the torrential rain. There we were, four soaked bikers amongst the cows and muck to the surprise of the French farmer who couldn’t speak any English. We had a very hospitable biker friendly Bed and Breakfast stop that night and the following day toured the Somme battlefields. Our week centred in Alle, Belgium, where we had hired a very comfortable gite. We enjoyed our Ardennes holiday, taking in tours of Luxembourg and skirting into Germany. After a final night in Le Touquet on the French coast, we all arrived home safely.

Prior to our barbecue, in July, we had a wood-burner installed in our lounge and naturally I then had to build a wood store. Ben is totally in charge of it as it was his idea but I have to say it is nice to watch a real fire on colder nights.

Apart from the Ardennes trip we haven’t used our motorcycles as much this year but continue to enjoy the odd ride out. We have explored a few new antique centres and still enjoy places of interest and visiting friends. We continue to expand and research our family trees. Ben has been contacted by the National Trust following our visit to Cornwall in 2016 and is recording extracts for them from his great grandfather’s memoirs which will feature in a 2018 exhibition.

This is our 6th Christmas letter and it has been fun reading the previous letters which reminded us of all we have done together over the past five years or so. Many of you share your own events and travels through facebook and other media and we both enjoy keeping in touch with all our family and friends through those channels too.

Our Christmas begins with our families in mid –November with two successive ‘Christmas Weekends’ first our visit to Weymouth and then Ben’s family coming to us. We celebrate Ben’s 35th birthday on December 1st then will pack up for the southern hemisphere.

We both hope all is well with you and your families and wish you a very happy and peaceful Christmas and all the best for 2018. For those of you further afield than Leicester we would be delighted to see and welcome you should you be passing through or nearby.

MERRY CHRISTMAS