



It's that time again - the annual report on the activities of the Notley family neatly enclosed with our Christmas Card.

 Well we saw in 2002 on the beach in West Africa during our stay in Benin with Richard's  sister Liz and her family. A fantastic holiday was had by all - it really was the round of parties and relaxation it promised to be - champagne on an incoming French Navy frigate - Karaoke and pizza nights; cocktails on the beach at sunset. Despite the dodgy tummies that we all suffered with - some more than others - we'd do it all again - hopefully we'll be able to squeeze in another visit before Liz and Paul move on to their next posting. Mark learned to swim after one half hour lesson in Liz's pool - so we were able to ditch those armbands for good.

Mark turned 7 in April and celebrated with a bunch of school friends and members of his football team at a 10-Pin Bowling Party at Pine Ridge Bowl. It was very much a boy thing and that will be par for the course for the next few years.

We had our first family theatre outing at the beginning of June when we went to see Chitty Chitty Bang Bang on the last day of the half term holiday - fantastic family fun.

At the end of June Adam reached the milestone age of 10 - double figures at last - and chose to celebrate his big day with a trip to Chessington World of Adventures with the family and a couple of friends. The Black Buccaneer ride was a major hit with the older boys. We'd also recommend Tomb Blaster and Vampire. Looks like we'll be going back again next year and beyond - it could be the source of a few birthday treats for some time to come

July saw the start of the school summer holidays and once again Richard, Adam and Mark headed off on their annual boys camping weekend. This year they chose the Isle of White and found a lovely campsite at Compton Farm on the western side of the island. Meanwhile Laura stayed at home and had a very enjoyable girlie weekend with her sister Debbie - who was over from Canada. We took in a West End show - Bombay Dreams - highly recommended - and a meal in Chinatown followed by an evening stroll through St James Park.

The boys made the most of their time off school by participating in a variety of day camps. They spent a week going to Camp Beaumont at Claremont in Esher. This is the crème de la crème of day camps - all archery, grass surfing, mini-karting, swimming and volleyball etc. etc. They then had a couple of weeks at day camps at the local School sports centre - mostly football which suited the boys down to the ground.

In August our annual Summer holiday was spent in Switzerland and France. We started with a long weekend visiting friends in La Tour-de-Pielz, between Vevey and Montreux, on Lac Lemman. This was followed by a relaxing 5 days at my parents in Mielan and then we had a weeks camping in Les Sables d'Olonne in the Vendee. On our first night we ran into friends Hugh and Deanne and their daughter Hannah who unbelievably were staying at the same campsite with the same tour company (Carisma).

It was their last night so we shared a meal together at a nearby restaurant before they packed up and we unpacked. The weather wasn't too great for us for the rest of the week but we managed to fit in cycling, canoeing, mini golf and the odd bit of swimming and sunbathing.

In September Mark started Junior School at "The Hermitage" along with Adam. As it was only in the next building to his old school and nearly all his friends transferred it was a fairly smooth transition. Much more home work now though - which keeps Laura and Richard on their toes. We also hope that he will grow into his new school tracksuit by the time he leaves!

September was also the start of the new football season. Both Adam and Mark play for Knaphill Wanderers teams in the Surrey Primary League. Mark plays left midfield for the U8 'Whites' and Adam is in the U11's who are now playing on full size pitches and the off-side rule has come in for this age group. Richard gained a youth coaching qualification earlier this year and also took a Referees course and exam and is now a qualified Referee complete with all the kit, watch, whistle, book and red and yellow cards. When he used to quote Monty Python scripts he now quotes the rules of the beautiful game. Football training takes up Wednesday and Thursday evenings and every Sunday morning is now spent on a football pitch somewhere in the wilds of Surrey.

I went on a company weekend to Tunisia towards the end of September. SPSInfoquest merged with a French company called Business and Decision in April and it was their 10 year Anniversary (SPS meanwhile was 20 years old) so it was in honour of this milestone that all staff were invited on this jaunt - Hammamet in Tunisia is a very popular French tourist destination. We had to attend a 3 hour company meeting on Saturday morning but the rest of the time was our own. So it was tough but I squeezed in a bit of swimming and sunbathing, a game of tennis and a trip to the market. There was a Gala dinner in the evening but it was somewhat destroyed by a sudden Tropical storm which quite literally blew away the marquees and barbecues. Full marks to the Sultan Hotel who successfully rehoused all 600 of us indoors and resumed all the festivities after only an hour's delay. I brought back a few presents from Tunisia- framed scorpions for the boys, a set of Onyx dice and a cuddly camel for Richard. Unfortunately I also managed to come back with really serious food poisoning bug and was ill for about two weeks after that. A pattern emerges ... so never again.

Then in November and nothing to do with the food poisoning incident, I was made redundant from SPSInfoquest. I was there for just over 7 years in the end. I was secretly quite pleased since the last year although I was working three days from home I was having to commute to St Albans two days and sometimes more per week and this was no fun. So now I am temporarily a Lady of Leisure while I recharge my batteries and take a bit of a break until the New Year/the Spring - then I will start job-hunting for something part-time and much nearer to home.

Adam had his first school trip away from home staying at HindLeap Warren in East Sussex for 5 days at the end of November - and a very muddy and enjoyable time it was too, taking part in Forest Adventures, night walks and obstacle courses etc. He came back in one piece but minus 4 pairs of underpants and two socks!

It's now December and the party season has begun. Richard and I will shortly be reliving our not so distant youth when INXS and Blondie hit Wembley Arena on the 18th of December. School's out on December 20th and then it will be a family Christmas at home. Joining us this year are my sister Debbie, her fiancé Bill and Richard's Dad. We can't wait.

It's now time to get all those cards written and start putting up the tree and the outside lights - this year Alexandra Gardens is one of those streets competing with Blackpool illuminations - we will resort to our single strand of white fairy lights above the garage but I don't think we'll be winning any prizes - somebody down the road actually has a family of carol singing penguins lighting up their front lawn!!

Looking ahead to 2003 it should be quite an eventful year. Our latest home improvement project is an ambitious glass roofed Kitchen extension and new patio etc - our planning application is just going through at the moment and we should know by the end of January whether we can go ahead or not come the spring. My sister Debbie now back from Canada and living in Northfields gets married in August (on an Island on the Thames near Kingston) and I am going to be her matron of honour - so my diet starts January 1. We can't believe it but Adam will be starting secondary school in September and I will reach the big 40 milestone in October - I'd like to do something special to mark that occasion - I've got my heart set on a holiday in Mexico but if I don't get another job I'll have to settle for Tequila Slammers at Chi Chi's in Leicester Square. Well you can but dream.

Signing off for now then....

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year

Laura, Richard, Adam and Mark

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