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## *Dear Friends & Family*

Having spent last Christmas in Scotland, we are very much looking forward to a quiet Christmas at home this year. As those of you who follow us on Facebook will be aware, we started our festivities last Sunday, 15<sup>th</sup> December, with the feast day of Saint Drostan of the Picts (Drostan mac Coscreig of Deer). The date of the feast is mentioned in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century *Breviary of Aberdeen*, but it is somewhat lacking in further information and we are not aware of anyone else who celebrates this event. We therefore had to fill out the missing details for ourselves. As the Aberlour distillery is built on St Drostan's Well, we felt that this must be a key feature of the feast. The phrase, "he died, but his spirit lives on" is widely used, but is rarely this tangible. Some people have churlishly suggested that we have recreated this festival merely as an excuse for drinking a fine single malt. Perish the thought.

All told, it has been a bit of a mixed year. John's father sadly died in April.



Astonishingly, this year marked our 35<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. Every year, John is a judge for some international pension fund awards, the conference for which takes place in a desirable weekend break destination and coincides with our wedding anniversary. Being of an incurably romantic inclination, but also a slight cheapskate, John combines the two, so this year's wedding anniversary destination in May was Madrid, with a day trip to the 11<sup>th</sup> century city of Avila, up in the hills northwest of Madrid thrown in for good measure. The walls genuinely do live up to the hype if you happen to be that way.

To give a general impression of the brief trip, we include a montage of photos of Helen drinking Cava or Sangria in a number of locations in and around Madrid.



Like all good tourists, we also had a day in the Royal Palace and the Prado.

One of the current special exhibitions, on the theme of transport, included General Franco's cars. John was particularly excited that this included his six-wheeled Mercedes 540 G4 W31, a birthday present from Adolf Hitler in 1940. Benito Mussolini received one too. It transpires that

John had a model kit of this when he was a child and it is probably still in a box somewhere. More pertinently, Helen can confirm that there is a moment in a museum trip where it becomes apparent to all the other visitors in the vicinity that one's husband knows way too much for comfort about Adolf Hitler's preferences in limousines. The six-wheel configuration of the W31 apparently made it ideal for traversing muddy battlefields.

John had been previously unaware that the car came with its own bespoke luggage (see photo), the sort of attention to detail that makes all the difference when you are undertaking an extended tour of occupied Europe.



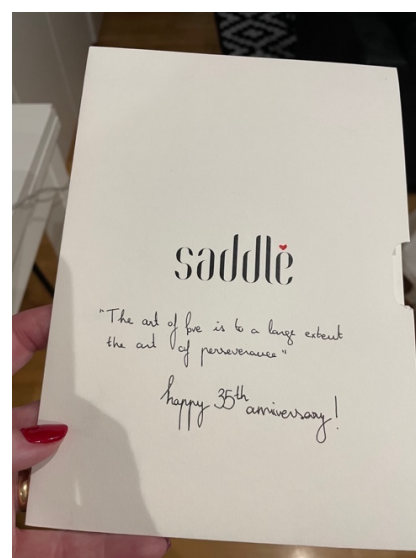
We also took the opportunity to visit the various portraits of the Spanish branch of the Habsburg dynasty. These provide an important warning of the dangers of marrying close relatives one or two generations too often. The final Spanish Habsburg monarch was Charles II of Spain, (1661 – 1700). His father (Philip IV) and great-grandfather (Philip II) had both married Austrian Habsburg nieces. His grandfather (Philip III) had also married an Austrian Habsburg, but in his case a first cousin, once removed.

Contemporaries had noted the increasing prevalence with each generation of the Habsburg chin. This was so extreme in Charles II that

he struggled to eat. He had an extensive range of other deficiencies that meant he was unable to speak until he was 4 and walk until he was 8. He was so visibly sub-standard, his subjects thought he was possessed and he was called "El Hechizado", "The Bewitched". For those wanting a souvenir of the increasing physical degeneracy of the dynasty, this is available as a postcard from the museum gift shops:



For our anniversary itself, we had dinner at the spectacular Saddle restaurant. After we admitted that it was our 35<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, they massively upgraded the quantity and quality of the wine flight, resulting in by some margin the most impressive wine flight that we have ever tasted.



Although we would not wish to give the impression that John systematically economises on the holiday budget by inviting Helen to conferences that he is attending anyway, he did repeat the trick in November, this time to Paris. For John, this came with the added excitement of being able to cycle there.



He took the overnight ferry from Newhaven which deposited him in Dieppe at 5am. His plan was to ride for a couple of hours on the amazing, traffic-free Avenue Verte from Dieppe before finding somewhere for breakfast. The Avenue Verte is a converted railway line, now teeming with wildlife. Unfortunately, nobody had warned the teeming wildlife that there might be a nutcase on a bicycle flying along it before dawn. He hit a badger in the dark. Luckily, it was only a glancing blow to the badger's back end, so both emerged from the incident unscathed.

High points<sup>1</sup> included a trip to the Paradox Museum, where you can take photographs pretending that you are hanging from a balcony or falling down a staircase.

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<sup>1</sup> Obviously the whole point of the Paradox Museum is that it is trompe l'oeil. Although it looks as if you are at a high point, you are, in fact, lying on the floor.



By coincidence rather than any careful planning, our trip was at the time of round one of the track cycling Champions League at the Vélodrome National de Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines, so that was where we spent the Saturday evening. We bought fancy tickets for the track centre so John got a good view of the bikes and Helen got champagne so we were both happy.

We also managed a visit to the huge flea market, the Marché aux Puces de Paris Saint-Ouen, where you can buy everything from second-hand clothes to some fairly astonishing antiques. A 16<sup>th</sup> century fireplace and a flying saucer grabbed our attention.



Sadly neither would fit in our luggage to bring home.

In December, Helen's mum, Mike and Iris the labradoodle joined us for her 85<sup>th</sup> birthday. We enjoyed a meal in a dog friendly restaurant, and a trip to the doggy soft play (who knew?) with Alfie and Bailey.



Helen getting her Masters degree in 2022 has prompted a swift response from both children. Anastasia has just started a Master of Education to go with her Master of Research in marine biology and Alex has started a Master of Science in Education and Psychology.

In another astonishing milestone, John turned 60 this year, for which he received a very fancy new bicycle from Helen and a bus pass from Merseytravel.

So here we are then in the last few days before Christmas, John is contemplating the dozen bottles of *Old Scrooge Christmas Ale* that have just been delivered from the Three Tuns Brewery, Helen is rushing around getting everything ready, the kids will be home soon and the dogs are asleep dreaming of the arrival of more snow.

*Merry Christmas from  
John, Helen, the kids  
and the dogs....*

