

THE FLETCHER SAGA (revised 20 Sep 2023)

(The “Fletcher Saga” was a part of the very successful and popular BBC Island Blogging scheme. The following items cover the period from 2004, when we arrived in Orkney, to 2011, when the BBC stopped supporting the Island Blogging scheme, and are all that could be recovered from my own records and the archived BBC items.)

02 Feb 2004

An enormous removal van arrived on the morning of Friday 30 Jan. All our effects were swiftly and efficiently packed by 4 pm and transported into storage in York whilst we stayed in a local hotel overnight before setting forth on Sat 31 Jan. The weather forecast proved to be wildly optimistic. The promised showers and bright intervals turned out to be driving rain, sleet, and snow so we changed our plan to drive north on the A68 to Edinburgh via Jedburgh - crossing the Cheviots in that weather was something we did not wish to contemplate. Instead, we headed west for Carlisle and the A74/M74. This road proved to be quite well ploughed and salted/gritted so we reached Glasgow by dusk and stayed the night.

On Sunday the weather was improved but still bitterly cold with lots of snow lying quite deep in places; it was especially bad crossing the Cairngorms where only one lane of each dual carriageway was clear and even then, quite deep in slush. Our progress northwards continued to Thurso and a very pleasant hotel where we had a hot bath and an excellent meal before falling into bed utterly exhausted.

Today (Monday 02 Feb) we drove to Scrabster (just two miles) and at noon boarded an almost empty ferry for a smooth trip across the Pentland Firth to

Stromness - it felt strange buying two single tickets. There followed a brief drive off the ferry into Stromness and over to Kirkwall where a visit to the estate agent produced the news that the main house we were hoping to buy was not ready as the lady who lived there had yet to find alternative accommodation - this appeared to be as much as surprise to the estate agent as it was to us. However, we have more than one house in mind so tomorrow we shall be visiting the estate agents (both of them) to view at least one more house.

The island had bad weather last week - our temporary accommodation (which is excellent) was cut off for a couple of days and the island came to a virtual standstill for 48 hours. The roads are all cleared even though snow lies quite deeply in places. We are now in the process of unpacking our few possessions ready for a stay of a week or two whilst we attempt to find a house that really is for sale. Watch this space for the next exciting instalment.

27 Feb 2004

The northerly gales and snow began on Tuesday and have continued ever since. At least the Orkney Islands Council is prepared for bad weather so the gritters and ploughs have been working 24 hours a day since Tuesday. When I drove into Kirkwall on Thursday to stock up with provisions the main road was almost clear except for a few small drifts in some very exposed places alongside Scapa Flow. Even the minor road that goes past the track leading to our cottage has been ploughed clear although there is a thick layer of snow and ice. The track to the cottage has been kept clear by the owner so that he and his wife can get out to work each morning. How I have appreciated the four-wheel drive on the car.

In Kirkwall on Thursday there were no newspapers and only a limited amount of fresh bread because all the Wednesday ferries and flights were cancelled. However, I managed to get some basic provisions including bread flour and yeast so that Maureen can continue making her own bread as she did when we were in Scarborough, how this turns out with an electric oven we have yet to find out. How we miss our big deep-freezer, the tiny freezer in the cottage's refrigerator barely holds a bit of mince and some chicken. We have eaten well; Maureen performs absolute marvels in the tiny kitchen. On Friday we had suet pudding - delicious but not good for the waistline – and in the absence of “proper” basins Maureen used two coffee mugs. The post is a bit erratic because of the cancelled ferries and flights, a first-class letter posted in Scarborough on Monday evening did not reach us until lunch-time on Thursday. We knew that we might have a bit of bad weather when we moved up here during the winter, but this is ridiculous! However, we have plenty of food and the electricity supply has only dropped out a couple of times (the owners of the cottage tell us it is rare to lose the supply completely for any length of time). We have a full cylinder of gas for the portable fire, the two storage heaters charge up each night, the immersion heater supplies hot water, and the two-bar electric fire helps top up the heat during the day when necessary. The cottage is fully double-glazed, so it stays quite warm and draught-free but getting clothes dry is a problem as we have an automatic washer but no tumble drier. It would be impossible to get any washing to stay on the line even if I could stand up in the wind to get it on the line in the first place, so Maureen has dug out the old-fashioned clothes horse from the cupboard. She sets it up overnight next to the storage heaters, so we are warm and cosy even if it is a bit "fuggy" at times. We shall be very glad to get into our new home, with its two-foot-thick stone walls and oil-fired central heating, on 31 March. I hope that the snow has disappeared by then and that the ferries are running normally.

03 Mar 2004

There is not a lot to report. The weather has been marvellous - bright blue skies, only a little cloud and lots of sunshine. Pity it is still a bit on the chilly side.

The house purchase is moving ahead but the current paranoia about money laundering is slowing things down. We have had to prove to our solicitor that we acquired the money to buy our new house by selling the old house in Scarborough, not by trading in illegal substances in Scarborough. We also had to prove that we really are Bruce and Maureen Fletcher, not two criminal masterminds escaping from the North Riding of Yorkshire in order to enjoy our ill-gotten gains in the Orcadian idyll. Exactly the same sort of thing is happening to the people selling their house to us and buying a new place in Caithness.

14 Mar 2004

One thing that I had forgotten about is the Scottish currency, specifically the multitude of banknote types. There are the usual £5, £10 and £20 notes issued by the Bank of England. But there also notes of similar denomination issued by the Royal Bank of Scotland and the Clydesdale Bank; just to confuse the issue these two banks still issue £1 notes which, to my colour deficient vision, look very much like the £5 notes. I believe that there are also £50 notes in circulation but I have yet to see one.

Today I attended the Church of Scotland, Kirkwall East Church. The congregation numbered about 80 with about 15 children. The church itself is about 100 years old but much updated, very light and airy. Hymns were varied - "At the name of Jesus", "Colours of the day", "The Servant Song" but the choir (unrobed) was quite good; there is a nice two-manual pipe organ. The minister was not present because he was taking a service elsewhere. It was a special service to commemorate the tenth anniversary of Fairtrade, complete with a cake bearing 10 candles (which was carted off for consumption by the Junior Church when they left half-way through the service). There was also a sketch performed by members of the Breakfast Club (not sure what that entails) on the topic of Fairtrade and how it helps producers of bananas, tea and cocoa in developing countries. Over the last 5 or 6 Sundays I've attended services at the Episcopalian church, the cathedral, and the Kirk but the only place where anybody actually came up and greeted me was the Episcopalian church. I'll try the Kirk again next Sunday and introduce myself this time, when we get to Stronsay it's the Kirk or nothing!

Our house purchase crawls along thanks to the new money-laundering laws, but we should hear something in the next few days. Last week the owners of our new home told us that they are unable to take Rocky - their pet sheep - with them because of lack of space at their new home in Caithness. I think I mentioned

before that Rocky lives in the garden of the house next to our new home. It saves the homeowner from having to buy a lawnmower and he has taken over responsibility for looking after Rocky. But we shall feel morally bound to keep a maternal eye on him.

The weather has been very mixed - last week began with lovely bright skies and no gales but by Friday it was back to the usual cold winds, dull skies and pouring rain. Today (Sunday) began reasonably well but by the time I came out of church the rain was coming down like stair rods and the temperature had dropped back to near-freezing.

26 Mar 2004

The last week or two have brought us good weather but today has been very foggy. However, next Wednesday (31 March) we catch the 4:40 pm ferry from Kirkwall to Stronsay. The ferry service is almost back to normal following the disastrous engine failure just before Christmas. Fortunately, the previous owners are leaving quite a lot of stuff so even though our effects do not arrive until Friday lunchtime we shall be able to survive.

It does not seem like eight weeks since we first came to Orkney although there were times, such as those when we were waiting for feedback from solicitors, when it seemed 31 March seemed a lifetime away. We have become quite accustomed to life in Bachylis over the last couple of months. Several seagulls visit us most days and vie for scraps of food with the feral cats - nicknamed Gert & Daisy by Maureen - that keep the croft free from mice & rats.

Sightings of curlew and oystercatcher are commonplace, in fact the oystercatchers frequently invade the nearby field in large numbers to pursue some mysterious rite that involves plunging their bills into the turf; Maureen thinks that they have been hired/trained to aerate the turf. Our next missive will probably be produced after we have taken possession of our new home on Stronsay, Orkney.

01 Apr 2004

We left Orkney mainland at 4:35 pm yesterday (Wednesday) and arrived on Stronsay at 6:40 pm. The previous owners had arranged for someone to meet us, hand over the keys and show us where the fuse-box etc were located. They also showed us how the oil-fired boiler had to be lit by dropping a piece of lighted paper into it because the automatic ignition requires attention - which it will receive as soon as I contact the local chap who deals with this sort of things. The previous owners had kindly left us a "who does what" list of contacts; for example, the coalman calls every two weeks and delivers whatever you have telephoned and requested, the money is left in a plastic envelope in the coal shed

so you never actually meet the chap. Almost everything seems to operate on trust – a most civilised system.

Because our effects do not arrive until tomorrow (Friday) lunchtime we spent last night and will spend tonight in one of the spare bedrooms – the previous owners left ample beds, sheets, pillows etc as well as one or two items of furniture. We were quite snug & warm but we do miss our own comfy bed and duvet and cannot wait until they arrive tomorrow.

This morning (Thursday) dawned bright and clear but it was very cold and windy. It was just as well that we rose bright and early because we had 3 visitors before lunchtime. One was the lady from across the road who brought us a glass vase containing water and a bunch of daffodils from her garden and invited us to go around for dinner tonight if we had not yet arranged anything. We thanked her but decided that we would rather continue trying to sort out the house before the removal men arrive tomorrow lunchtime. Another caller was the mother of the lady who runs the local sub post office; she just popped in to welcome us to the island. Our third caller was the chap who runs a local Stronsay website, a link to which I put on my own website. He was a mine of information on local contacts – a useful adjunct to the list left by the previous owners.

After our callers had left we continued trying to unpack what few bits we had brought with us so that we could have some lunch. Everyone is so friendly and helpful but apart from one of the shopkeepers everyone that we have met so far is an English “incomer”. The previous owners had a pet ram - Rocky - who lives in the garden next door. He is still here because the previous owners have not yet found anywhere to keep him near their new house. We looked over the wall to greet him after we arrived last night and received a baleful glare - I think he realises that he has been left on his own for a bit. Rocky thinks he is a human being not a sheep and loves company, bleating pitifully whenever anyone walks near him. The previous owners assure us that he loves crisps, particularly smoky bacon, but refuses to eat cheese & onion crisps.

It is now 8:30 pm and we have just finished the unpacking and storing the last items that we brought with us in the car. Tomorrow the local removal company arrive on the lunchtime ferry and will unload our effects before returning on the last ferry at 5:30 pm. I think that by this time tomorrow night we will be just about able to make up our own bed and crawl in there.

27 Apr 2004

On Monday (19 Apr) we had Sky digital TV installed. The ‘ordinary’ TV reception is extremely poor in most parts of the island thus making Sky almost a necessity. Needless to say, we are going for the cheapest package as watching

sports and daytime films is not our idea of entertainment. The chap who fitted the Sky system came over on the early morning ferry from Kirkwall and soon had the system up and running. He had intended to return to Kirkwall on the lunchtime ferry but the weather was bad with fierce winds so all the ferries were cancelled and the poor chap did not manage to get back to Kirkwall until Tuesday lunchtime. Just one of the joys of island life.

On Friday (23 Apr) the boiler man came and repaired the oil-fired boiler that supplies our hot water and central heating. If you recollect I mentioned in my earlier sagas that I had to light the boiler by dropping a lighted piece of paper into the firebox then turning the oil feed on; it always worked but it was an anxious time waiting for the vapour to fire. The boiler man, who is based in Kirkwall on mainland Orkney, rang on Thursday to say that he was visiting Stronsay on Friday and would be with us late in the day after he had finished servicing several other boilers. 'Late in the day' turned out to be 9 pm by which time we had almost given up hope. However, he is an obliging chap who understands the special needs of the remoter islands such as Stronsay. When he visits the island - about once a year - he works for as long as it takes to get things fixed. In our case he finished work at about 1.30 am on Friday morning. As it was so late we put him up for the night in a spare room which meant moving all the 'debris' over to one side of the room so that he could get into the spare bed. This was after Maureen had managed to find where she had stored all the spare bed linen, thinking that we would not need it for some time. Next morning the boiler man was up at 8 am checking that all was well with the boiler before having some breakfast with us, catching the 9.50 am ferry to Kirkwall and attending an urgent fault in a heater at a fish farm in Durness. It appears that our boiler had not been serviced for several years so although the boiler man was very clean and tidied up after he had finished work Maureen was somewhat upset on Saturday lunchtime to find a thin film of soot and dust over everything in the kitchen. This meant washing down and cleaning all the tiles, working surfaces and kitchen units as well as washing everything in the kitchen that was not in a cupboard. Next time the boiler man comes (in 12 months' time) we shall know better and either put everything in another room and/or cover things with a dustsheet.

On Sunday (25 Apr) and today the weather was beautifully bright, sunny and quite warm although yesterday (Mon 26 Apr) was dull and damp. Maureen has just been into the garden and cut several pounds of rhubarb so we shall be having rhubarb crumble for tea. The daffodils have just about finished but on the way to church on Sunday we noticed a lot of new-born lambs dozing beside their mothers. It was such a nice day on Sunday that I managed to get into the garage

to tidy it up and Maureen has unpacked the very last box. Now all we have to do is find somewhere to put everything.

It is a good job that the garden is a reasonable size because we appear to have a lot of garden ornaments; there is just one traditional gnome but lots of other creatures such as kestrel, mice, dogs, an elephant and even two 'flower fairies'. Last week Maureen had the delightful experience of being overflowed by two swans whilst she was hanging out washing in the garden. The two birds flew over the garden so low that Maureen felt she could have reached out her hand and touched them. And a couple of weeks ago we had the spectacle of the Merry Dancers (or Northern Lights) shimmering in the sky when we looked out of our front door late one evening, they should be really spectacular in the late autumn evenings.

Rocky the pet ram continues to keep the neighbour's grass neat and tidy and saves them the expense of buying a lawnmower whilst providing a little light entertainment by bleating at all the people who pass by. All the neighbours who cut their grass always ensure that the cuttings are placed in a corner of Rocky's field thus giving him some extra nourishment. At the moment Maureen is feeding him with a daily bag of some slightly out-of-date crisps (not cheese and onion flavour because Rocky refuses to eat crisps of that flavour) that we discovered amongst our possessions. However, Rocky is definitely not going to get any of the Seabrook Crisps that I sent away for last week.

16 May 2004

We have now been here for almost seven weeks. How time flies when you are enjoying yourself. The weather has certainly improved to the extent that I've been able to cut the lawns for the last two weekends, I even managed to get a sun-tan whilst doing it last week. Rocky appreciates the grass cuttings but is very selective, he prefers dandelion leaves to pure grass. The garden appears to be full of plants and Maureen tells me that we have fuschia, peony, wallflower, tulip, daffodil as well as strawberry and rhubarb. Unfortunately, there are also a great many dandelions which appear to be well established.

Last Monday morning Maureen was alarmed to look out of the kitchen window and see a herd of cows trotting merrily past the house and down the main road into the village. Apparently, this is quite normal when they are being moved from field to field but on this occasion one of the lead cows took a wrong turning, but for a lot of shouting and stick-waving by the herdsman the whole herd would have ended up milling around in the local haulier's yard. The local haulier (who hails from Leek, Staffordshire) spends a lot of time travelling to and fro on the ferry between Kirkwall and Stronsay. He also delivers our heating oil and has the

council contract for "special collections". Every 3 months the council arranges a "special collection" for the Northern Isles of heavy items for disposal, all you have to do is phone the council in Kirkwall and tell them what you have for disposal and they arrange for it to be collected by the haulier. We took advantage of this service to get rid of two elderly mattresses and associated bedsteads. On Tuesday 18 May we are catching the early morning ferry to Kirkwall so that Maureen can visit the hairdressers, I can get a short back & sides, we can get some bulk shopping done and I can get the car serviced. Maureen is apprehensive about the crossing and fully expects to emulate Grace Darling on both the outward and return journeys.

27 May 2004

Our trip to Kirkwall last week was uneventful despite Maureen's belief that the boat was doomed to plunge into the depths every time it rocked. The outward and return journey took about 90 minutes each instead of the usual 2 hours because the boat did not call at Eday or Sanday. It seemed strange at first to see all the traffic and people in Kirkwall even though it was less than two months since we left 'civilization'. However, I remembered to keep looking in my rear-view mirror and we soon adjusted to looking both ways before crossing the road and fastening our seat belts every time we got into the car. The main purposes of the trip were to visit the hairdresser/barber, stock up with some seed potatoes, onion sets etc. and to bulk buy some frozen food. We achieved all these objectives and still had time for a leisurely lunch in the Kirkwall Hotel. An added bonus was spotting and buying some fresh strawberries that had been grown on Papa Westray – much tastier than the huge, forced strawberries that appear in some mainland shops at this time of year.

There were several monks from Papa Stronsay on the ferry to Kirkwall. On the return journey they were laden down with a variety of mysterious parcels including an extremely long curtain rail that was particularly difficult to control in the stiff breeze. I always thought that monks were quiet, thoughtful, rather lugubrious people but the Transalpine Redemptorists from Papa Stronsay seem perpetually happy and cheerful.

The chap who does various electrical and plumbing jobs that are beyond my capabilities (i.e. most of them) keeps hens on his croft and has just acquired five lambs, two to keep as pets and three for the freezer. Last week he thought that the lambs had escaped because there was no sign of them in their field. Just as he was about to commence a search of the area his wife called his attention to five lambs that were squeezing themselves out of the tiny henhouse entrance

followed by one hen. Fortunately, the lambs will soon be too big to get into the henhouse so the hens will have the place to themselves again.

We have just one wagtail who has visited us almost every day since we moved in. For almost a week now we have been delighted to see that he/she has brought a baby wagtail into the garden and has fed it while we watched through the kitchen window. There are plenty of local birds – sparrows, starlings and blackbirds - just as there were in Yorkshire but we hear curlews, oystercatchers and lapwings calling all the time. The two greylag geese near one of the two shops are now the proud parents of two goslings and emit warning hissing noises if they think that anybody is too close to their offspring. The sparrows and starlings are all very tame and appear to have no great fear of humans. When either of us goes into the garden the birds immediately take to the air but as we walk about they will land right behind us and carry on as though nothing had happened. It is not uncommon for Maureen to shake the washing line to make the birds fly off it so that she can peg out some clothes. Maureen puts out food scraps for the birds every day and they are soon gobbled up but some birds are very ungrateful and leave multiple tiny, dirty claw prints or, worse, their 'calling cards' on her clean washing.

05 June 2004

I sent the Fletcher Saga for 25 May 2004 to the usual email list but accidentally added the Orcadia-L email list address. To my amazement I received several complimentary emails from people who actually admitted reading the Fletcher Saga and liking it.

We have been attending the local kirk (Church of Scotland) since we moved to the island. I offered to help out with their organ rota but the kirk is extremely fortunate in having two organists who are quite content to play for all the services between them. When I heard that the local Roman Catholic church had no “official” organist I volunteered my services although I am of the Anglo-Catholic tradition, have never attended a Roman Catholic service and have no intention of “moving over to Rome”. But it was Pentecost and it seemed right and proper to offer my meagre gift of musicianship. On Sunday 31 May I found myself playing for a Tridentine Mass in the tiny church on the Stronsay jetty. The church, which seats about 30 people, is only a few hundred yards from our house and is run by the monks from Papa Stronsay. Like many people I thought the Tridentine Mass was “illegal” after Vatican II in the early 1960s but it isn't and its use appears to be on the increase. Gregorian chant is something that I was aware of – I attended a very short evening course at Tewkesbury Abbey a few years ago – but am not really familiar with it so accompanying it was quite a challenge. The

church has a keyboard which looks a bit like the flight deck of the Starship Enterprise and can produce an amazing number of sounds, not all of which are appropriate to the Tridentine Mass or any other church service, so I have been allowed to take the keyboard back home and find out how to get the best sounds from it before next Sunday morning's service. I think that I managed to play the right thing at the right time thanks to the helpful priest who stood next to me and indicated what I should play and when I should play it. It is a good job that all the monks are so familiar with Gregorian Chant that my mistakes did not put them off too much. Anyway, they have asked me to play for them again next Sunday. I was too busy keeping up with the music to pay too much attention to the precise order of service but it seems terribly complex (and is in Latin as well!) so I shall have to start studying it.

That's one of the joys of retirement – having the time to do something completely different (in theory anyway). In this part of the world Bank Holidays do not appear to be noticed by anybody apart from the churches, the tourists, the Post Office and the doctor's surgery. Each and every Sunday one of the two shops closes for the whole day and the other only opens for a couple of hours over lunch-time (but cannot sell alcohol before 1230). However, for the remaining six days of the week both of the shops open very early and close very late.

In one of my previous Sagas I mentioned the garden ornaments that we had brought with us from Scarborough. One of these is a large and very heavy stone carving of a wild boar (emblem of Richard III) that was a gift from a friend many years ago. Maureen is a keen Ricardian and insisted on calling the boar Antonius but I prefer to call him Horace. Well, Horace has now been installed in his new location in the garden and looks quite splendid. The reason I mention Horace is that Maureen was delighted on Wednesday when she saw a wren sat on the wall, just behind Horace. The wren did not stay long but it is good to know that at least one of them is around. When I was collecting a sack of compost from one of the shops this week the proprietor was concerned that he would soon have to open a new pallet which would mean disturbing a hen that had decided to sit on a clutch of eggs right on top of the last pallet. However, I believe that most of the chicks have now hatched thus relieving the proprietor of the problem.

June 2004

Cockerel and hens in village. Cockerel calls from 5 am, but heard at all hours of the day. Seen on wall that separates Rocky's field from the road. Then Sunday 06 Jun found him with a hen pecking around in our back garden. Shooed them away. 05 Jun Saga mentioned hen on compost sack pallet, hen has been moved and now has five chicks.

Played for the RC again on 06 Jun. Member of congregation is keen on singing – has been known to travel to Kirkwall each week for rehearsals when something special is being performed (e.g. St John Passion). He is interested in starting small group to sing motets purely for pleasure and has started to measure interest on the island.

24 December 2005

Just getting ready to go to the 11:30 pm Carol Service in the kirk. This year we have the school orchestra helping out - fiddles, violas, guitars and accordions. The weather is not too bad, no snow or frost.

08 Jan 2006

On Boxing Day we were being taken by some friends for a lunchtime drink at their cottage in Lower Whitehall when we came across a lovely sight. Margareth, one of the island's nurses, was doing a passable imitation of "Heidi" by taking her goats Lara, Naomi and Frivolous for a walk along the quiet road at the far end of Whitehall village. The goats were very well behaved and obediently moved off the road and waited until we had passed before continuing their perambulation.

'The Orcadian' newspaper reports that Orkney was one of the warmest parts of the UK in December 2005, the highest maximum temperature topped 12.5 degrees C on December 10. The first few days of 2006 were bright and clear but very cold. After a pleasant, quiet Christmas, both Maureen and I succumbed to the winter cold virus. Fortunately we were well stocked with proprietary cold remedies so we took to our beds at 10 pm on New Years Eve and waited for the virus to run its course. Unfortunately the sniffles meant that I was unable to play for the 11 am service on 01 January.

The car was off the road for a week or two over the New Year as a cracked hose was causing a serious leak of transmission oil. One lunchtime I ordered some spare transmission oil from Kirkwall and the package was delivered to our door by Jim Holland, our trusty haulier, at 7 30 pm - just under eight hours from order to receipt, the usual excellent service to which we have become accustomed. I had booked the car & myself onto the 0730 ferry on Fri 06 Jan, booked Surrey (our cat) into the Kirkwall vet at 0945 to receive her annual vaccination booster and booked the car into the garage in Stromness for 1030 to get the hose replaced. I was up early on Fri 06 Jan, had breakfast, got Surrey into her luxury travelling box and got her settled in the car. When I tried to start the car to drive down to the ferry I discovered that the battery was flat! Panic telephone calls brought immediate assistance from Bob Wilcox and Viv Erdman, the car was soon started

and Surrey & I caught the 0730 ferry .As I was still recovering from my cold and therefore even more dopey than usual I was concerned that I might mix up the bookings and leave a bewildered cat at the garage and give a startled vet a Landrover Discovery for vaccination. However, all went well and Surrey is safe for another year whilst the car is running smoothly again.

In my last Saga I mentioned the visit by Santa on 17 Dec. "Orkney Today" newspaper has produced more information on the visit. The wonderful sleigh and reindeer float were prepared by Yvonne and Steve Weaver and club helpers, and it was driven by Ingram Stout. As Santa paraded down through the village the youth club children accompanied him collecting money for Macmillan Cancer Relief as they went. The club had voted to raise money for charity this year instead of for their own group. £140.75 was raised for Macmillan. After the parade everyone gathered in the Stronsay Hotel where carols were sung accompanied by Andy Brown on keyboard. Lee Caithness representing the Youth Club gave a vote of thanks to everyone who had helped towards the event with special thanks to Santa, who received presents for his hard work and to Alan and Carol Cooke of the Stronsay Hotel for providing hot dogs, crisps, sweets and juice for all the children.

02 Feb 2006

It was only after I had sent off the latest Saga on Sunday 08 January that I discovered the reason for all the police cars in Finstown on the previous Friday when I was driving to and from Stromness. It seems that on the Thursday evening a man had shot his wife then turned the shotgun on himself. Both were local people, terribly sad for all concerned but, fortunately, a most unusual event for Orkney.

In the middle of January our elderly oil-fired boiler and kitchen stove finally gave up the struggle and ceased to work. A new boiler soon arrived from Kirkwall and Jim Holland, our local haulier, manhandled the packing case into our utility room to await the arrival of a plumber to remove the old boiler and fit the new one. Fortunately the local plumber was able to find some time for us in his schedule but he is such a busy chap that he could only work at the job for the occasional day here and there. However, yesterday evening (Wed 01 Feb) the new boiler started working for its living. The house is now warm and cosy again with the exception of the kitchen which is quite cool because the new boiler has no "waste" heat like the old stove, a new radiator in the kitchen is the next priority.

Whilst the boiler was out of action we relied upon portable Calorgas stoves and the solid-fuel fire in the lounge to keep us from freezing. Of course, it was during this time that we had a cold snap and our first "white over" frost. One

evening as we were coming out of the community centre at 9:30 pm we were amazed to find it was so crisp and clear that we could see individual street lights in Kirkwall almost 12 miles away.

When we lived in Brora, Sutherland in the 1970s the Church of Scotland minister emigrated to Australia. 30 years later we got in touch on the Internet and have exchanged emails for the last year or two. One day towards the end of January we a got telephone call from his son to say that he was on the Kirkwall to Stronsay and would be arriving at about 6:30 pm. We knew he was visiting Orkney (where his father had been a minister) but did not think he would have time to visit us. We had no beds aired or made up and our oil-fired stove was still out of action. Maureen swung into action and a bed was soon made up, the electric fan-heater was switched and we were ready to receive our visitor. At 5 pm, we got a telephone call from Stronsay harbour master to say that the ferry had turned back to Kirkwall because of mechanical problems. This ferry was the one that would have stayed overnight in Stronsay and was the ferry that I would have caught at 7 am to go to Kirkwall to get the car exhaust fixed in Stromness. As this is the refit period there only two boats in use instead of the usual three so we expected the ferry timetable to be re-shuffled. However, the harbour master telephoned back later to say that the ferry company hoped to have a boat at Stronsay between 07:00 am and 07:15. Sure enough, the ferry arrived at Stronsay quay at 7 am, having left Kirkwall at 5:30 am! I got the car exhaust fixed and managed to meet the minister's son for a drink before the ferry to Stronsay left at 4 pm.

There are many pleasant distractions on Stronsay. Yesterday I saw two black lambs as I drove to the shop (my first early lambs this year) and we heard Surrey "growl" for the first time - Surrey's growl occurred as she was sat looking out of the kitchen window at two other cats squaring up for a fight and miaowing furiously at each other. As we were driving back from the kirk last Sunday we stopped the car a few yards from the house and parked so that we could watch some seals basking on the rocks that were being exposed as the tide ebbed. However, later that day and halfway through cooking Sunday lunch the Calorgas bottle feeding the cooker ran out. It was only then that I realised that I had forgotten to replenish the spare Calorgas bottle.

28 April 2006

Being interested in railway matters, I was delighted to find that the Sanday Light Railway, the most northerly passenger-carrying railway in the UK, is to re-open this year. I have added links from my website to the Sanday Light Railway website and to the Stromness webcams of Tim Barthwick.

One Saturday towards the end of March Maureen was preparing the marrowfat peas for Sunday's lunch when she dropped one of the dried peas. Surrey immediately pounced upon the errant pea and played with it for ages. Now this has become something of a routine, Surrey has to have a dried pea when Maureen is preparing them for Sunday's lunch! I've never heard of a cat having a temper tantrum but if Maureen does not give her a dried pea that is what Surrey appears to do, she meows loud and long whilst flinging herself against Maureen's legs.

Malcolm has laid our new carpet tiles in the kitchen and corridor and they look lovely, the kitchen looks & feels much warmer and cosier too. However, one day Maureen pointed out one place where the tiles appear to be "lifting". Upon investigating, I found that the tile was not lifting, Malcolm had laid the tiles too well for that. The culprit was one of Surrey's dried peas that she had managed to poke under the carpet tile. Perhaps this is Surrey's retaliation because the new carpet tiles have stopped her using an old cardboard box to "surf" around the linoleum in the kitchen.

We read in the national press that on Easter Sunday the Archbishop of York had performed four "total immersion" baptisms outside York Minster, using specially constructed baths filled with warm water. Well, Stronsay was there first! On the Saturday before Easter Sunday our minister, Jennifer, performed a total immersion baptism on Isaac Erdman, a teenager, in the sea at Mill Bay. Needless to say, the water was far from warm and both Jennifer & Isaac wore wet suits.

Malcolm & Sue have some new additions to their collection of sheep, ducks, hens, dogs & cats. They now have two Shetland ponies, Henry & Min (aficionados of the "Goon Show" will recognise the names!) and one of their dogs has given birth to seven puppies. Sue telephoned Maureen to give her the good news about the puppies whilst the birth was still in progress and Maureen could actually hear the first two puppies begin to make their first "mewing" sounds. A few days earlier Sue had seen one of their ewes on its back. Thinking it was just that the ewe had too much fleece to regain her feet unaided Sue finished putting her baking in the oven before donning her wellington boots and going to see what was wrong. Much to her surprise, she found that the ewe was giving birth so she called her husband, Malcolm, who dashed home from work just in time to help one lamb into the world. Sadly, a second lamb was stillborn and the ewe died, probably from exhaustion, the next day followed by the first lamb, which had failed to thrive, probably because the mother was unable to pass on her colostrum. Events such as these do bring home just how tenuous is our grip on life.

On a brighter note, the field behind us is slowly filling with ewes and their new-born lambs. Each ewe seems to have two or three lambs which are beginning

to gambol in the warm(ish) sunshine that has appeared over the last day or so. We have new neighbours across the road at Helmsley. Clive & Tracy with their girls Jazzy & Georgie moved in shortly before Easter. Clive has borrowed our garage with its inspection pit to do some car repairs as his own garage is full of guinea pigs, hamsters & rabbits. Whilst he was busy in the inspection pit I popped my head around the door to ask if he wanted anything. When I left I closed the door behind me and automatically shot the bolt across the door. When Clive tried to get out he found that he was locked in, fortunately he had his mobile with him so was able to get one of the girls to come over and release him.

01 June 2006

Surrey, our white-furred, green-eyed cat, has been christened "The Claremont Attack Cat" by our local GP, Dr George MacKay. He is an avid cat lover who calls in from time to time to see how we both are but I'm sure he really wants to see Surrey. Unfortunately almost every time he calls in to see us he leaves with a blood-stained handkerchief wrapped around one or other of his hands because Surrey behaves herself while George strokes her then she suddenly decides to find out what a doctor tastes like. The other day Surrey annoying Maureen by getting in her way while she was preparing a meal so Maureen "shooed" Surrey onto the floor. Surrey retaliated by taking a running jump and leaping onto the back of Maureen's leg with all four paws and, for good measure, her jaws. Fortunately Surrey chose to attack Maureen's "good" leg and there was no permanent damage but it was still quite a shock for Maureen who uttered some very unlady-like words in several languages.

Like most cats Surrey enjoys scratching and it is good for her claws so, to prevent our carpet & furniture being shredded, I made her a scratching post out of a piece of timber and some heavy-duty carpet. I should have used an even heavier duty carpet because within a month or two the carpet was totally shredded and I had to set to and produce a new scratching post. However, I would rather make a new scratching post every few months than replace a complete floor carpet or item(s) of furniture.

Early in May my car was off road for few days because the automatic transmission had started to leak oil all over the road. Clive from Helmsley swiftly diagnosed the problem, a leaking oil cooler, and Tait's of Kirkwall provided a replacement within a day or two. Clive fitted the new cooler and the car was fine until I discovered a slow puncture in one of the rear tyres. I took the car on the ferry last Tuesday and it was soon fixed by ATS in Kirkwall - and for the very reasonable sum of just under ten pounds.

The journey to Kirkwall reminded us that although the ferry is frequently used to carry sheep and cattle it also carries other animals and at times it can resemble The Ark. A week ago, it carried a trailer containing two kids (young goats) that were going to the vet to be dis-budded (de-horned) and a rabbit that was going to the vet to have an illness diagnosed and treated. The kids, Aphrodite & Bryony, belong to Margareth, one of the island's .

When I went on the ferry to Kirkwall on Tuesday I finished up taking six puppies and their travelling boxes in the back of the car. Malcolm & Sue were taking the puppies over by to meet their new owners on the quayside at Kirkwall. One of Malcolm & Sue's dogs (father of the pups) was also on the boat - he was visiting the vet so that he could have "the operation" to prevent any more puppies arriving on the scene; he was busily barking at all and sundry as if to say, "I don't want to go!" There was also a beautiful German Shepherd Dog (GSD) with his owner who has to try to dissuade people on the ferry from feeding his dog with bacon butties. The dog was quite happy on the boat, complete with his supply of surreptitious bacon butties, but only as long as he could not see the water around the boat; this did make getting on and off the ferry a bit difficult for his owner. On the return journey to Stronsay were the two dogs - the one who had had "the operation" was much more subdued, poor thing - and, in the back of my car, some tropical fish that Bob Wilcox had bought in Kirkwall.

The rabbit that travelled on the ferry last week was escorted by Viv from Ebenezer Stores who was taking her youngest son, Jude, to town to buy some new shoes. Next day, proudly wearing his new shoes, he went with his eldest sister and when she took her horses down to the beach for a swim. The horses enjoyed their swim, Jude enjoyed playing on the beach and at lunchtime Jude, his sister and the horses returned home. When Jude got in the door the first thing his mother noticed was that he was bare-footed. It transpired that Jude had taken off the shoes so he could paddle but had neglected to put them back on again - so his eldest sister was sent back to the beach to search for the missing shoes. As luck would have it the shoes had not been covered by the tide, so all was not lost.

Rosie and Nessie, the four-legged, environmentally friendly lawn mowers are on loan to Bob Tateson from Clive & Tracy (Helmsley) and have enthusiastically commenced operations in Bob's "garden". Bob is an avid hill-walker and when he erects one or other of his tents in his garden to check their waterproof and windproof capabilities, he has great difficulty in persuading the sheep that the tents are not sheep shelters.

A few weeks ago, we were awoken from our afternoon siesta by about 30 cows & calves mooing as they were turned out into the field behind us. The 50 or so sheep and their lambs which had already been in the field for a week or two

added their bleats and baas to the cacophony. Who said the countryside was always quiet and peaceful!

In May we went to a fund-raising card playing competition in the Fish Mart Café, run by Clive & Madeline. Cribbage is the only card game that I can play with any certainty of knowing what I am doing so when we found that euchre (pronounced "youker") was the card game it was a bit worrying. Fortunately, John, an expert euchre player, took pity on us and called in to give Maureen, myself and Sue from the post office an hour or so of pre-competition enlightenment. When we got to the Fish Mart Café it transpired that we were not the only ones who had never encountered euchre before. The euchre experts spent the evening coaching the beginners - not only are the rules a bit complex but the rules about who moved after each "round" of the competition gave rise to some heated discussion! Neither of us still really understands the game but we had great fun, the event raised some money and everyone enjoyed the food that Clive & Madeline had supplied.

Here is a nice follow-up to the total immersion baptism of Isaac Erdman that was reported in the last Saga. As part of his preparation for baptism Isaac was asked to complete some kind of project that made use of his talents. Isaac decided to make two wooden flower boxes complete with bulbs and plants; the building, painting and filling of the boxes represent gifts given to him by God. The boxes have been placed either side of the main door into the church where they make a nice splash of colour. And it was Isaac who won the euchre competition mentioned above - it was the first time he had ever played euchre!

Readers of earlier versions of the Fletcher Saga will remember Malcolm's hen, Matilda, which developed a liking for daytime television. Today Malcolm told me that he had found Matilda lying dead in the hen-coop a day or two ago when he went to collect the eggs. Matilda's age was unknown, so the probable cause of death is simple old age.

On 04 May Golgotha monastery appeared in a feature article in the Orcadian

15 June 2006

Margareth, one of the island's nurses, keeps goats and also has two kittens - Tiger and Oxo. Margareth took a photograph of the kittens and entered it for a competition in "Cat" magazine. She had forgotten all about it until a telephone call informed her that the photograph had won a prize of a month's supply of Felix cat food and a box of assorted kitty goodies. Margareth's continue to flourish; the flock now consists of Lara, Frivolous and Naomi with her kids Aphrodite and Bryony. Frivolous is taking her Auntie role very seriously and

often baby sits them when Mum (Naomi) and Great Aunt Lara go walk about. Margareth tells me that Frivolous is now a goatling and is growing into a real beauty. I'd never heard the term "goatling" before, so I asked Margreth to explain. It seems that goats from birth to 1 year are kids (males are billy kids), from 1 to 2 years they are goatlings (males are bucklings) and after they reach 2 years of age they become nannies or billies (or, depending which country you live in, does and bucks). Writing this Saga is proving to be quite an educational experience.

On Saturday 10 June a tractor passed the house a couple of times. Behind the tractor was a trailer packed with youngsters covered in mud, sludge (possibly slurry!) and other unmentionables. They were all singing, blowing whistles and banging a drum - it was another blackening. If you don't know what one of those is, see the description on Sigurd Towrie's excellent website. Although blackenings are supposed to be for the males we have seen several where the bride-to-be gets her very own blackening, another triumph for women's liberation (although some brides-to-be might think rather differently after the event).

Royal National Lifeboat Institute (RNLI) is a charity that provides a 24-hour lifesaving service around the UK and Republic of Ireland, the lifeboat service in the UK receives no government funding. Orkney has three RNLI lifeboats which are based at Kirkwall, Stromness and Longhope. Stronsay used to have its own lifeboat but it was withdrawn thirty years ago, the framework of the slipway is still clearly visible at the end of Lower Whitehall. This year Sunday 11 June was the day on which Stronsay set out to raise money for the RNLI. A group of people from mainland brought a bus over on the morning ferry and the Kirkwall lifeboat spent the day on Stronsay. After a short lunchtime service on the quay lead by Rev Dr Jennifer George, the Stronsay kirk minister, everyone headed for the Community Centre where there were raffles, a tombola, etc. There was also the most enormous buffet lunch. I started to count the number of different hot and cold savoury dishes but, as I did last year, lost count somewhere in the mid-thirties. The weather was perfect with bright sun and a gentle, mild breeze. In the afternoon a crowd watched as a helicopter from Her Majesty's Coastguard, based in Shetland, put on a display of winching crewmen from the Kirkwall lifeboat and back onto it again as the lifeboat sailed at 10 knots in and around Mill Bay. Bill Miller, secretary of the Stronsay RNLI committee, estimates that the day will have cleared over £1,600 for RNLI funds, not a bad effort for an island with a total population of less than 400.

The environmentally friendly, four-legged lawnmowers, Rosie & Nessie, have now ceased their spring blitz in Bob Tateson's garden and have resumed operations at their home base of Helmsley. It is amazing how quickly crops and plants (and weeds!) grow during these long summer days especially when the sun

puts in an appearance and the temperature rises by just a few degrees. It will soon be the summer solstice or longest day, June 21, when the sun will "officially" rise at 3:59 am BST and "officially" set at 10:29 pm BST; to an observer on Stronsay the sun will appear to just dip below the horizon and then re-appear within a very short space of time.

01 July 2006

Just after I had sent the Saga for 15 June I went to the doctor's surgery to collect a prescription. On my way I saw smoke pouring from one of the wooden poles which carry the electricity supply to Rothiesholm. I asked Katrina, the doctor's receptionist, to inform the electricity board etc. The power soon went off and stayed off for about four hours until the repair team came over on the evening ferry with all the necessary equipment and spares to replace the damaged pole.

In the Saga for 01 June 2006, I mentioned the scratching post used by our white cat, Surrey. Thanks to Tracy, from Helmsley, Surrey now has another, grander, scratching post which is more akin to a cat's "play station"; Surrey uses her old scratching post for "proper" scratching but spends part of the evening in her "play station". You may remember that Surrey has a passion for playing with dried peas. Well, the other day Maureen came into the kitchen and thought that we had an invasion of large, red beetles until she realised that Surrey had found some red kidney beans soaking in a basin and had decided that red kidney beans were much better playthings than plain old, dried peas.

The sheep in the field behind our house were herded away to be shorn in mid-June. When they were returned to the field, they looked very clean but very slim and appeared SO disconsolate. And the ewes and lambs who were trying to find one another after the shearing created a clamour of bleats and baas. At the end of June the sheep and lambs were moved and replaced by cows and calves who moved in to cacophony of mooing as young calves and older cows tried to keep up with the main body of cattle. Fortunately for us the cattle don't seem to wake up quite as early or as noisily as the sheep & lambs.

We often have to shout out of the kitchen window to scare away the seagulls that are intent on stealing scraps that are intended for the smaller birds. Maureen was doing this the other day when she noticed that all the cattle were purposefully strolling towards our garden wall. Perhaps Maureen has the "gift" of calling cattle?

On Monday 19 June the members of the regular Monday evening "singing class", tutored by Michael Lee at the Community Centre, unilaterally decided to play truant and attend a concert given by eight outstanding young performers from the Royal Scottish Academy Strings - the RSAMD's Alba and Cardo quartets. The concert, part of the St Magnus Festival, was held in the Stronsay

kirk at 8 pm. It included Mendelssohn's Octet and attracted a large, appreciative audience. The musicians had spent the day at the Stronsay school helping and encouraging budding young musicians. The schoolchildren, some of whom had only had two or three lessons, were thrilled to be able to play their instruments with the two quartets in the final piece of the evening.

Malcolm's sheepdog Skye went into labour at 4 am on 20 June and produced seven puppies, five with normal collie markings, one white with two black spots over its eyes and one white with a single black spot on top of head. The puppies father, Rex, has had "the snip" and will not be fathering any more litters. More animal-related news - Jack and Dale, the ponies who grazed Bob Tateson's garden last year, took a trip to mainland in June and won numerous awards at a gymkhana.

The island had a big wedding in June when the daughter of a local farmer "tied the knot". This involved a blackening, a dance to which the whole island was invited, the wedding itself and a barbecue on the day after the wedding. Guests came from all parts of Britain and from abroad; a group from Central Scotland even travelled up in their own luxury coach.

Tue 27 Jun was a beautiful day - bright sunshine, clear blue skies and hardly any breeze at all so we were delighted when Father Nicholas from Golgotha Monastery on Papa Stronsay called in to invite us to a barbecue on Papa Stronsay that evening. It was rather short notice as we received the invitation at 4 pm and the first boat to Papa Stronsay left at 6 pm. However, it was a good thing as it gave Maureen no time to panic about the trip and we both turned up at the quayside at 6 pm. We got on the small boat thanks in no small measure to a helping hand from Bob Wilcox who was waiting on the quay for the arrival of the ferry from Kirkwall. The monk's small boat only takes about 7 people so it took several trips to bring everyone across although several people came over in their own small boats; in all there must have been 40 or 50 people as well as several youngsters. When Maureen and I disembarked on Papa Stronsay we found some monks putting the finishing touches to an absolutely enormous bonfire. The bonfire was lit at around 7:30 pm and was soon sending flames and smoke shooting into the clear blue sky - what a blaze! Shortly after this one of the priests donned his ceremonial robes and held a short service for Our Lady of Perpetual Succour. The monks soon had the barbecue going and commenced cooking sausages and beefburgers (including vegetarian sausages & burgers). The aroma of barbecued beef made us very hungry, and everyone was soon devouring the delicious food which included fresh bread rolls, tomato, potato salad, grapes, plums and a wide variety of cheese - including the monk's own home-produced cheese. Finally the monks produced a huge sponge cake topped with at least an

inch of thick, whipped cream - it was quite irresistible and absolutely delicious. The monks started ferrying us back to Stronsay at around 10 pm. Sue, the island's postmistress & her mother, Mary, came back to our house for drinks after the barbecue. They were astonished when they saw Surrey perform her latest party trick - retrieving a dried pea and placing it at the feet of the person who threw the pea; she will do this not once but several times until she tires of "performing".

The Northern Isles Sports were held on the sports field at Stronsay Junior High School yesterday (Friday 30 June). We had forgotten all about it until around 9:30 am when Maureen noticed that all 3 ferries (Varagen, Earl Thorfinn and Earl Sigurd) were in sight and heading for the island. The ferries docked, one by one, at Stronsay quayside bringing competitors from Westray, Sanday and Eday. It is a pity that the weather was not as good as it has been all week. The ferries returned in the early evening to take the competitors back to their own island and the results of the various competitions are, courtesy of Bob Tateson and Stronsay Junior High School.

02 August 2006

On Sunday 02 July the mid-morning ferry brought people from Sanday and Eday to Stronsay. A United Service for the Eday & Stronsay congregations was held in Stronsay Kirk at 12:15 and at 3 pm the Sanday Fiddle Club gave a concert in Stronsay Kirk. Mike Newman led members of the Sanday Fiddle Club who played pieces by Bach, Sir Peter Maxwell Davis (Master of the Queen's Music and a resident of Sanday), Gustav Holst, one of Mike's own compositions, and finished with a piece based on a composition by The Beatles. The kirk has been quite busy with concerts this year. On the evening of Friday 14 July there was a Summer Clarinet Recital, a fundraiser (donations, no admission charge) for Stronsay Playground, arranged by Julia from Clifton. The well-attended concert was given by Sue Bishop & Ian Noonan. Sue is a clarinet teacher at St Paul's Cathedral School, London and Ian is a clarinet & bass clarinet player with the Salomon Orchestra, London's leading non-professional symphony orchestra. They form the clarinet sections of I Maestri, a unique organisation that helps talented young conductors hone their skills, and Waterloo Winds.

Stronsay Gala was held on Saturday 08 July. Although the weather was somewhat cool the rain held off. The entertainments included the pipe band and the South Ronaldsay ploughboys with their miniature ploughs & the ploughgirls dressed as horses. The pet show was very popular and comprised dogs, cats, ducks, hens and ferrets. There were just two floats this year - a kitchen scene and a Wild West scene (Jack, the Shetland pony, and a miniature Conestoga wagon). The Clydesdales from Fernside were there along with several horses and ponies.

Unfortunately, when we came to leave we found that the car's battery was flat and we had to rely on two "good Samaritans" with a camper van and a set of jump leads who helped get the car started.

Peggy Bain, a visitor from West Virginia, USA paid Stronsay a visit on Tuesday 11 July. Apparently, this is Peggy's eighth visit to Orkney and her first visit to Stronsay. Peggy had sent me an email announcing her intention to visit Stronsay and expressing a wish to meet the author of the "Fletcher Saga" - fame at last! Peggy arrived on the Tuesday evening ferry stayed at the Stronsay Hotel for two nights and departed on the Thursday morning ferry. Christina and her daughter Linda, two old friends from Kent, England arrived for a short visit on the same Tuesday evening ferry as Peggy. So, on Wednesday afternoon the kitchen was quite full when Peggy called in to see us.

We had quite a few hot, sunny days in July, but August has seen a return to dull, cool and damp weather. I played the organ for a wedding on Sat 22 July when the weather was foggy, but this did not deter the large congregation from enjoying the wedding ceremony, held in the kirk, and the dance, held in the Community Centre. People often remark on the fact that dances on Stronsay do not start until 9:30 pm, this is to allow local farmers to make the most of the long daylight hours to complete their summer-time tasks such as silage cutting, ploughing, rolling, drilling etc

We cannot help but shake our heads when we read in the the national press and hear on the radio that folk "down south" are concerned because petrol and diesel fuel may soon cost one pound per litre. We've been paying over a pound a litre in Orkney for at least a year!

19 August 2006

Drama on Stronsay! One Sunday just after lunch we heard a most unusual sound - unusual for Stronsay, that is. A fire-engine with blue lights flashing and two-tone horn blaring swept down past our house and into Whitehall Village. Apparently there was a grass fire behind the Stronsay Hotel and it was getting dangerously close to a wooden building that is used by the monks from Papa Stronsay so someone called out our volunteer firemen. The fire was soon brought under control and Stronsay returned to its usual peaceful state.

Malcolm and Sue (at Ha'Breck on Rothiesholm) have had to install an electric fence to stop the ponies Henry & Min from pushing against the fence & making the fence-posts lean at alarming angles. After one or two shocks the ponies have learned to keep a respectful distance from the fence. The dogs soon discovered that they could still jump over the fence without getting an electric shock but Brack, the bitch who recently had seven puppies, did get a shock when

she jumped over the fence without realising that after giving birth her "undercarriage" hung quite a bit lower than it did in the past. Now all the dogs, being intelligent, have discovered that the bottom wire on the fence is not electrified so they simply squeeze under it instead of trying to jump over it. Brack also received a kick from one of the ponies when it objected to her sniffing around its rear hooves, despite being constantly told to "come away" by Malcolm and by Sue. No serious damage

was done but Brack now makes long detours in order to keep well clear of the ponies hooves. Brack's puppies have now been found good homes but Malcolm & Sue decided to keep Solo, the pure white pup with black markings on his paws and the top of his skull.. With the departure of the people from Helmsley, Rosie & Nessie have been adopted by Ha'Breck and appear to have integrated with the other sheep and the ponies, ducks, dogs and cats.

It has been very warm this month so we've been sleeping with the windows open. Several times Maureen has been woken up in the middle of the night by the sound of the seals "singing", fortunately she decided against disturbing my dreams and asking me if I could hear them too. She feels quite privileged to be able to hear the sound in the dead silence of the Stronsay night, it is quite eerie but most comforting and Maureen always falls back to sleep as she listens to their sound.

Dr Jon Buchan, the relief GP on Stronsay, is an excellent violinist.

Just before finishing his latest stint of duty he & his partner came to our house with his violin and some sheet music. I spent a pleasant hour accompanying him on the keyboard as we played some of Corelli's work. Although I've heard Corelli before I'd never played any of his music and found it to be a most enjoyable experience.

This month the Sanday Light Railway the most northerly passenger-carrying railway in the UK, was officially opened by a resident of Sanday, none other than Sir Peter Maxwell Davies (Master of the Queen's Music); they don't do things by half on Sanday!

We shall be "cat-sitting" again for Jack & Simone in September. Alas, poor Growl Myrtle is no longer with us but this year we shall have the pleasure of the company of "Timber"; another cat like Surrey i.e. a house cat that does not go outdoors. Jack & Simone's request came to us in the form of a poem:

They call me Timber, "T" for short
I'm a female tabby cat.
I emigrated from Argyll,
And I didn't think much of that.
I share my home with sisters three,

Of which two can delight,
But number three, a bully, she
So loves to pick a fight.
Growl Myrtle I still miss a lot
(and Jake is gone now too);
I heard the stories of the time
She came to say with you.
I must get to the point I think,
But first I should explain:
I'm not as young as once I was:
I don't like wind and rain,
So I venture out quite rarely now -
I'm ambushed oft out there
by that one sneaky sister cat
Who's like a polar bear!
So when my darling humans say
They're off to France once more,
I do assume with heavy heart
They'll put me "out the door"
And who knows what the perils are
Which lie ahead for me,
Unless I can prevail on you
To have a "guest" called T.
I emigrated from Argyll,
Swapped trees for sea and sand,
So if you can't do B&B
for me, I'll really understand.
(Simone Board©)

16 September 2006

We've had some good weather recently so I've been busy digging the weeds out of the garden and Maureen has been busy in the greenhouse. One day it was so quiet that Maureen heard seals "singing" on the beach behind the house and at the same time she heard the Angelus bell from the monastery which is almost a mile away. Maureen is finding it increasingly difficult to bend or kneel to do any weeding so we decided to have some "raised beds" constructed and I ordered some concrete blocks and cement from Jimmy Allan, one of the main builders on Stronsay. The goods have arrived and Malcolm, our handyman, together with his brother, George, have set out and laid the concrete foundations to Maureen's exact

specifications. All we need now is better weather so that the work can proceed and be finished before the bad winter weather sets in.

Last year we looked after Growl Myrtle whilst Jack & Simone were on their holidays. Poor Growl Myrtle is, alas, no more so this year we are cat-sitting another of Jack & Simone's cats - Timber, a 15-year-old "chunky" female tabby who has taken over Maureen's workroom (usually known as her "pig pen"). Maureen has found that she is making errors in her cross-stitch because Timber insists on squeezing alongside her in the armchair or, worse still, jumps up onto her cross-stitch chart thus causing her to lose track of where she has got to.

Just before Timber arrived Maureen was sat quietly sewing in her pigpen one evening when something made her look over at her old-fashioned Singer sewing machine on the other side of the room. The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end when she saw that the sewing machine's handwheel was slowly rotating all by itself. Fortunately it was not a poltergeist but Surrey who had discovered that the foot-treadle of the sewing machine made an excellent seesaw. I just hope it has not had any serious ill-effects on the mechanical bits of the sewing machine. Surrey is now two years old and has become quite "grown up" (for most of the time) in that she is much quieter and calmer - and our visitors, including the island's cat-loving GP, no longer leave with bloodstained bandages wrapped around their scratched hands.

Our neighbour, Bob Tateson, still has not bought a lawn-mower so Jack (the Shetland pony) & his friend, Dale (another, larger pony) have spent the last 3- or 4-weeks grazing Bob's grass down to manageable proportions before winter arrives.

About 9 months ago Maureen was in Ebenezer Stores doing her shopping when the shopkeeper invited her to see a new Great Dane puppy. The dog's name was Primus (apparently named after a pop group) and he was so tiny that Maureen could easily hold him in her arms and cuddle him. Shortly after this Primus and his owner moved down to Cornwall and we thought no more about him until a few days ago when Maureen saw something flash past the window of her pigpen; it was Primus, whose owner was visiting Stronsay for a holiday. We both went outside to see Primus and discovered that the little puppy that Maureen had cuddled has become a huge, loveable monster of a dog whose head comes up to my waist (I'm 6ft 3ins tall).

Every year Orkney holds a Science Festival but as most of the events are on mainland, I am not able to attend them. However, this year I was able to attend one of the Science Festival events - the "H2Orkney conference" - because it was held in the Stronsay community centre. The core message of the conference was that we should change from a hydrocarbon-based economy to a hydrogen-based

economy. It was far from boring and the speakers - who came from as far as Iceland - were very enthusiastic. Several members of the Orkney Amateur Radio Club live on Stronsay so the Club set up a radio station (callsign GB1H) in the Stronsay community centre. The electricity for the amateur radio station came from a fuel cell powered by hydrogen; it was only the second such radio station in the world to be powered by hydrogen. In just over 30 hours of operating time the radio station made over 1,800 contacts from 66 different countries including one from New Zealand (over 10,968 miles)

At the end of August Stronsay received another of its regular visits from the tourist boat, MV "Hebridean Princess". I mention this because it is the same ship that was used by the Queen for her 80th birthday tour of the Western Isles a few weeks ago.

26 October 2006

This edition of the Saga is somewhat late in being published and a bit sparse in content because my computer has been playing up and I have had to re-install Windows. That did not take long but it did take quite some time to install all the XP Service Packs and updates along with all the other common applications. I have reinstalled the "saved version" of my email address list so I hope that this reaches everyone who wishes to see it.

Today (26 Oct) is very windy (gale F8 to severe gale F9) with torrential rain. All the ferries are cancelled but the forecast says that tomorrow should be more "normal". Malcolm was due to come here today and finish off building Maureen's raised beds in the back yard. Malcolm's wife Sue rang just now to say he would postpone his visit until tomorrow because the hens have yet to appear from the hen-house, the dogs are refusing to leave the house, the ponies (Hen & Min) are looking very sorry for themselves, and the sheep are nowhere to be seen.

15 November 2006

As I said in my last (short) Saga, high winds forced the cancellation of ferries between Stronsay & Kirkwall on Thursday 26 Oct. According to The Orcadian the wind recorded at Kirkwall airport on Thursday evening averaged 55mph with gusts over 70mph and on the same day Orkney was the wettest place in Britain when just over three inches of rain fell. After a night of strong winds and heavy rain I looked out of the bedroom window and was astonished to see a huge bale of hay resting on the flat roof of the lean-to garage across the road from us. It was not the wind that had put the hay bale on the roof; the wind had loosened the roof and the bale had been placed there deliberately to prevent the wind from removing the roof completely.

The same high winds caused big problems with flooding on mainland Orkney - the electrical equipment in the water treatment plant at Kirbister was under several feet of water causing fears of a shortage of fresh water. However, the Scottish Water staff worked long hours and got the system up and running again. More high winds and heavy rain caused the cancellation of Stronsay/Kirkwall ferries again on Tuesday 31 Oct. This forced Michael Lee, tutor of our Monday evening singing class, to dash up to the airfield to catch the morning Loganair flight to Kirkwall so that he could be ready to go out to Sanday for their singing class on Wednesday. The high winds also caused some damage to the new garage roof of another house in Whitehall village. When these weather conditions occur everyone just "battens down the hatches" and waits for the wind to die down before going outside in daylight to see what damage has been caused.

After the high winds and heavy rain, we had a period of calmer weather. One afternoon Maureen called to me "look out of the window". I did as she asked and saw a herd of young cattle trotting past the house and completely blocking the road. However, the traffic is very light and anybody who was using the road would have been quite happy to wait until the cattle had passed; time is not all that important unless you are going for one of the ferries which run to a very strict timetable.

Stronsay's Remembrance Day service at the War Memorial on Sunday 12 Nov was not very well attended, as it was a bitterly cold day. However, it was at least dry and there was very little wind. It is also possible that some islanders who would have attended were stranded on mainland Orkney when the Saturday evening ferry was cancelled because of bad weather.

I took Surrey over to Kirkwall for her annual vaccinations and for her to be neutered on Tuesday 14 Nov. We were worried about getting to Kirkwall and, more importantly, getting back because some ferries had been cancelled on the previous Saturday and Monday. The Hamnavoe, running between Stromness & Scrabster, was cancelled on Tuesday morning but the Stronsay ferry ran as usual. Surrey travelled on the ferry in her large cat transporter (trade name "Cat Voyageur"), which was safely secured on the back seat of the car. When I collected her from the vets just before the ferry left for Stronsay she was still groggy after the anaesthetic. A couple of hours later she was back home again, the first thing she did when we opened her cat box was to make a beeline for her litter tray. Then within minutes she was happily jumping on and off chairs, albeit a little more carefully than usual. How resilient cats are! To operate on Surrey the vet had to shave a small square of fur; Surrey has taken to licking the fur around the incision but, fortunately, not the wound itself which is less than an inch long. When Surrey is licking her fur like this it looks for all the world as though she is

emulating those men who are bald on top but have long, straggly bits of hair at the side which they vainly try to comb over the bald bit and conceal it. As I was collecting Surrey the vet said they had discovered that Surrey had gingivitis and remarked that it was unusual in such a young cat. The vet also said, very tactfully, that Surrey should not be allowed to get any heavier than she is now, so we are placing her on a "diet" involving special biscuits.

One morning earlier this month Maureen put out the usual scraps on the bird table (a large, brightly coloured plastic construction that was originally a child's toy in the shape of a multi-storey garage). When she looked out again from the kitchen window there were the usual starlings and sparrows feeding from the table but there were also two rather strange-looking birds. After donning her glasses Maureen saw that the two newcomers were quite small chickens, one red, one black. When she went out to shoo them away, they seemed quite unafraid and simply trotted along in front of her feet, clucking and muttering away to themselves. We eventually discovered that the chickens belonged to Beth, the eldest daughter of Mike & Viv from Ebenezer Stores, and that the chickens were not young ones but mature adult chickens that had not grown to their proper size for some reason or other. We were a bit worried when we saw the chickens in Bob's garden next door as he has a cat (called Socks) but the chickens returned to our bird table next day for their morning meal.

I've had a problem with a blocked nose for some time now. Our doctor had written to the ENT specialist in Aberdeen but said that an appointment might take some time. However, after a nasty bout of infection which made me partially deaf he phoned up the ENT department and sent a fax. As a result, I now have an appointment with the ENT specialist when he visits Kirkwall on 30 Nov. I've already made a booking on the plane to fly to/from Kirkwall as the Thursday ferry calls at Eday and takes four hours for the round trip whereas the plane takes about ten minutes each way. Maureen will be extremely pleased if the specialist cures my deafness because she has been permanently deaf in one ear for over a year, and we have had some quite surreal conversations in recent weeks when one of us has misunderstood what the other was saying or asking.

17 Dec 2006

As our summer nights are very short so our winter nights are very long. At this time of year it is dark just after 3 pm and does not really become light until after 9 am. The Maeshowe webcam is now back online at <http://www.maeshowe.co.uk> ready for the Solstice this week; it remains on-line until 05 Feb 2007. Let's hope the weather this year is a lot better than it was last year. Especially when Highland Park Distillery (<http://www.highlandpark.co.uk>)

have now sponsored the webcam and thus allowed the purchase of a new computer and other hardware which will greatly enhance the reliability of the site.

During these dark evenings Maureen has been continuing her sewing, mostly cross-stitch and blackwork. Our cat, Surrey, usually watches for a while then gets bored and wanders off. The other week Maureen had finished a piece of blackwork so, for a change, started to knit a new hat for herself. To Maureen's amazement, Surrey jumped down from her seat on the window ledge, picked up a spare knitting needle that had fallen onto the floor, strolled across the room with the needle carefully held in her mouth then jumped up onto Maureen's knee and for all the world it seemed that she wanted either to help Maureen to knit or she wanted Maureen to knit her a hat.

At the end of November, the leaking flat roof on the big room at the back of the house decided to shed a piece of ceiling plasterboard onto the carpet. One of the builders on the island has tried to fix things up temporarily until next spring when the flat roof comes off and a new, better roof is put on. However, one part of the roof is so bad that, even after the builder's best effort at a temporary fix, water is still getting in and we are having to empty the buckets after every rainfall. We had hoped that the new roof would have happened much earlier so that we could have the big room for some Christmas entertaining, but it was not to be.

I went over to Kirkwall at the end of November to see the ENT specialist from Aberdeen. I took the Loganair flight rather than use the ferry as it makes such a difference in travelling time - 8 minutes each way to fly as opposed to 2 hours each way on the boat. Some strong cross winds made the flight "interesting" and we made the return trip in record time thanks to a strong tailwind. I'm glad I saw the specialist though, new medication has unblocked my nose and now I can fully appreciate the taste & smell Maureen's delicious cooking - just in time for Christmas.

Malcolm, our multi-talented handyman, has not been well lately but he has managed to complete Maureen's raised beds in the back garden. The three beds, constructed from cement blocks on a concrete foundation, have been left empty for several weeks so that the mortar & cement can "cure" but now they are ready. All I have to do is transfer umpteen barrow-loads of material from the compost heap and fill the beds ready for planting in the Spring.

Dr George MacKay, our genial island GP, now has a kitten to keep him company. The kitten's name is Jaffa but I believe that she is soon to be renamed Katie (after George's grand-daughter). Jaffa/Katie has already discovered the great joy of re-arranging several dried flower arrangements.

We have read in the national newspapers that some town and cities have cancelled the official switch-on of their Christmas lights because of public safety fears. Stronsay had no such inhibitions and we had the official "switch on" of the Stronsay Christmas Tree lights at 7:30 pm on Sat 02 Dec. The weather was just about perfect - a dry, clear night with a good moon, virtually no wind and a mild (6C/43F) temperature. After the "switch on" ceremony everyone moved back into the Community Centre for some community carol-singing lead by the Stronsay Singers, who consist of those folk attending the regular Monday evening class in singing. I didn't inflict my voice on the assembled company but helped by accompanying the carols on a small, portable keyboard. The social evening continued with items by the school-children and by other island inhabitants.

The island's two shops are now absolutely crammed with Christmas-related goodies but, fortunately, there is NO "canned" music therefore their customers are not forced to listen to interminable repeats of Christmas songs and carols. The other week we were shopping in Ebenezer when we noticed a toy unicorn which was almost the size of a small Shetland pony. Maureen remarked "I wonder where they found the virgin!" The shopkeeper was quite perplexed by this remark until Maureen told her of the legend was that a unicorn can only be captured by a virgin. Last time we were in the shop we noticed that the unicorn had gone from the shelf, so somewhere on Stronsay a little girl is going to have a very, very special present on Christmas Day.

One of our neighbours first moved to Stronsay from England nearly 20 years ago. He recently paid a short return visit to England to visit his family and the family of his wife. He also intended to purchase a large, powerful motorbike, having retained a love of motorbikes since spending many years as a despatch rider in London before moving to Stronsay. Apparently the most difficult part of his "Easy Rider" drive northwards from England was not saddle-soreness nor the unaccustomed heavy traffic but the process of actually getting onto his new motorbike for the first time whilst wearing his brand-new, very stiff waterproof clothing. He made the journey northwards without further incident and soon showed up on our doorstep in his "Dennis Hopper meets Marlon Brando" outfit to show us his new pride and joy (which we have nick-named the Yellow Peril).

29 Dec 2006

Our minister, Jennifer, is the minister of Stronsay and of Eday. Her Sunday routine is to take the 11 am service in Stronsay kirk and then, weather permitting take the 2 pm service in the kirk on Eday. This means leaving Stronsay at 1 pm in John Stevenson's fishing boat, together with Albert & Raymond from Stronsay kirk, and getting back to Stronsay just after 4 pm. On Christmas Eve 2006 Jennifer

took 2 pm Christmas Eve service on Eday but this time she, Albert & Raymond were accompanied by me, Viv from the shop and her two sons Jude (5) & Amos (9). It was very calm, no wind or rain and almost clear skies. As we neared Eday, always a less-than-calm area of water even for the big ferries, Jude remarked that it was "a bit wobbly" and it was but, fortunately, not for very long. The return journey was in a flat calm sea with the new moon shining in a quite clear sky and by the time we got back to Stronsay at 5 pm it was dark. However, John knows these waters like the back of his hand, having been at sea hereabouts since childhood. This was my first visit to Eday, and I found that the kirk was surprisingly large with closely spaced pews and a large gallery at the back of the kirk. Illumination was provided by gas lamps and the much-appreciated heat came from several gas-powered heaters. There is a harmonium just in front of the altar table, but the instrument is of uncertain vintage and almost unplayable, especially as a small Christmas tree was balanced on top of it and threatened to tumble off as I pedalled the harmonium. I was quite glad that I'd brought my electronic keyboard and a handful of batteries. The church will probably seat upwards of 200 people (including the gallery) but the Christmas Eve attendance was around 30 who sang all the well-known carols with gusto and feeling. The service sheet was quite an interesting concept - a new take on the Nativity Play involving children as innkeepers, angels, wise men, shepherds, Joseph & Mary (with some doubling of parts) whilst members of the congregation being given numbered parcels at the start of the service. As the service progressed Jennifer asked that parcel number X be unwrapped, and its contents displayed and/or described. If you want more details of the service, please email me - "ricardian" at "btinternet.com" - and I'll provide them. After the service we remained in our seats and were served with delicious home-made mince pies, home-made cake & copious quantities of hot tea; this was not as easy as it sounds because Eday kirk has no electricity and no running water.

Jennifer had found some new words to the tune of "Jingle Bells" and we used them at the 11 am service on Christmas Day - it went down very well and was sung with great gusto. I was sent a new carol for children - "The Bad-Tempered Camel" - with words & music by a music teacher & church organist from the Yorkshire Wolds. I forwarded this to the wife of a friend in Tadley, near Reading, who used the words as a poem during their pre-Christmas services and reports that the item was well-received.

John, the father of Sue, our postmistress, died just before Christmas. He was a charming old gentleman, around 90 years of age, and had been unwell for a while. The funeral was on 29 December and I attended the Requiem Mass (all in Latin) in the tiny RC chapel on the Stronsay quay whilst Maureen went over

and sat with John's widow, Mary, and Eileen, a family friend. The chapel was packed to capacity with John's family & friends together with many Stronsay inhabitants; not everyone there was of the Roman faith, several folk from the kirk were there including Jennifer, the minister, but we all wished to pay our respects. There was a lot of incense, bells, and genuflections galore; the Transalpine Redemptorists really do things in style. It was a wonderful sight to see the coffin being carried down the pier preceded by a monk bearing an elaborately decorated cross on a six-foot-tall pole and accompanied by Fr Clement (who officiated at the Mass) along with several other monks, cloaks and cottas flapping in the very strong wind. I did not go over to the burial on Papa Stronsay in the Santa Maria, the monk's large boat normally used to ferry heavy building materials over to the monastery, as the weather was quite bad and worsening; I was a bit worried about getting back afterwards!

In the week before Christmas, I saw a heron in the harbour, quite close to the road through Whitehall Village which fronts the harbour. Apparently, it has been in the area for several days. More wildlife sightings over Christmas included seals, clearly visible from the road, basking on the rocks at low water in Mill Bay close to the Ayre of Myres; and in the freshwater area of the Ayre of Myres were two fully-grown cygnets who were in the process of losing their cygnet colouring and acquiring the beautiful pure white of an adult swan.

Timber, the cat of Jack & Simone, has had some dental problems but a visit to the vet in Kirkwall to remove some bad teeth and a follow-up course of antibiotics has soon restored her to good health. Only the other week Jack & Simone told us that Timber is hale & hearty and that she has now fallen in love with a recently purchased feather duster.

Gonzo, one of Malcolm & Sue's cats, died on Christmas Eve and was buried on Christmas Day. The cat was no great age, in fact his mother still lives at Ha' Breck. However, Malcolm & Sue have had a new kitten, Tigger II, for several weeks now. Malcolm is quite convinced that the kitten has its very own, built-in pogo stick as it is continually bouncing around the kitchen and living room at Ha' Breck, regardless of what lies in its path. Malcolm has (jokingly!) threatened to superglue the cat the ceiling. When Tigger II is not bouncing it is either scaling the heights of the back of the settee, using its tiny claws like crampons, or chewing off the end of the tail belonging to Rex, one of Malcolm's collie dogs. Just before Christmas Malcolm & Sue received the good news that in June 2007, they will become grandparents for the second time.

This will be the last Fletcher Saga for 2006. Thank you for taking the time to read my ramblings and thankyou to those who have sent me some very nice emails. I wish all the readers of the Saga a very Happy and Prosperous New Year.

19 January 2007

In the excitement of relating the events surrounding the Christmas Eve service on Eday I neglected to mention the Christmas Eve service in Stronsay's kirk. This attracted a large congregation whose singing was led by an orchestra made up of local Stronsay youngsters, all ably lead by Janice Maxwell, with me on the organ helping out.

We had the first snow of winter on Wed 10 Jan. The distant hills of mainland were white over for a day or so. The next day I had planned to take the car to Kirkwall for its annual MOT test. As Orkney Ferries are now running their "refit" timetable the ferry from Stronsay to Kirkwall also calls at Eday and Sanday and the journey takes over 2.5 hours, an hour longer than normal. However, the weather was so bad that the ferry was two hours late in leaving Stronsay and the harbour master informed us that there was a 50:50 chance that the ferry might not be able to return later in the day. The ferry did not return that day so I was quite glad that I had decided to postpone my trip to Kirkwall until Thursday 18 Jan. This time the trip was uneventful, the sun shone from an almost cloudless sky, there was hardly any wind and the sea was quite calm. Which is more than can be said for the rest of the UK on that day, 10 people were reported killed in accidents caused by the appalling weather. The phone rang on the day that I was originally supposed to go to Kirkwall for the car's MOT. Maureen answered the call and had to rack her brain wondering what the caller, Audrey Ferris, was talking about until Maureen realised that it was a charming young lady, with a lilting Orcadian accent, phoning on behalf of Orkney Ferries about the revised ferry sailings.

Our cat, Surrey, continues to provide hours of entertainment. As a morning treat, she gets a dish of water to which Maureen adds a tiny drop of milk. This usually creates some bubbles on the surface of the water/milk mixture. When Maureen puts the dish down for Surrey to drink Surrey inspects the dish with great suspicion; if there are any bubbles on the surface of the milk she backs off, lies down, and waits for all the bubbles to burst before drinking the milk. Sometimes this takes quite a while so she becomes impatient and pops all the bubbles with a mighty swipe from her paw. Surrey is quite handy with her paws, and it was only Maureen's sharp eyes that prevented Surrey from "killing" a pavlova that was de-frosting on the kitchen worksurface. It is bad enough when Surrey sprays a bit of milk around but a whole, cream-filled pavlova would make a fine mess.

Another of Stronsay's well-known characters, Willie Cooper, died this month at the grand age of 82. The kirk was absolutely packed for his funeral and

most folk went up to the cemetery afterwards despite the freezing rain and strong wind.

I had just finished editing this edition of the Saga when the power failed thus causing us to search out the torches, candles and matches. Only the other week we had been congratulating ourselves on having avoided power cuts for several months. Fortunately the power was only off for an hour or so.

26 February 2007

I've just realised it's almost the end of February and I have not yet issued an edition of the Saga.

Dr Mackay's cat, Katie, is a house cat. She has been allowed outdoors on several occasions but soon scuttled back in when she discovered that the garden wasn't centrally heated. And now that Katie has discovered that the bathroom floor has underfloor heating, Dr Mackay knows where to find her whenever she goes missing; he is sure to find Katie either lying or sitting on the bathroom floor with a beatific smile on her face.

Maureen & I usually sit in the kitchen with a drink and listen to the "Book at bedtime" on BBC Radio 4 at 10:45 pm before we retire to bed. The latest story ("Salmon fishing in the Yemen") was introduced by some Middle Eastern music which gradually faded into Scottish bagpipe music. Our cat, Surrey, completely ignored the Middle Eastern music but as soon as the bagpipes began to play Surrey's ears shot up, her eyes widened and she leapt onto the table, looking around and trying to find the source of the sound. We've not noticed her paying attention to any other music on the radio, so we presume this apparent passion for the pipes is in her Scottish (albeit Orcadian) blood.

Last week Maureen was in the utility room loading the washing machine when she was alarmed to find one of my pyjama jackets apparently moving around the floor. It transpired that Surrey, who always investigates the washing before it goes into the machine, had got her head stuck up the sleeve of the pyjama jacket and was bumbling around, unable to see where she was going.

I had an exciting morning on Saturday. When I went to use the car, I found that one of the tyres on the car was flat, the valve core had sprung out and couldn't be found. The spare has never been removed from the back door since I bought the car 3.5 years ago and I did not have a jack or a wheel brace. I borrowed a jack & wheel brace from Bob Wilcox then discovered that Landrover Discovery wheel nuts are larger than the usual sort. I borrowed a wheel brace from Carol at the hotel (they've got a Discovery too) and eventually got the spare wheel all ready to get on with things. I jacked up the car, removed the faulty wheel then discovered that I could not get the spare wheel on because I had not jacked the

car up high enough. I couldn't jack it any higher because the screw jack was at the limit of its travel and I couldn't get the original wheel on, even temporarily, because I couldn't compress it enough. So, I had to put some wooden packing under the rear differential, lower the car onto the packing, put some wooden packing under the screw jack, raise the car again and then heave the spare wheel into place. Fortunately, it wasn't raining and the strong winds seem to have died down but it was very cold. I'll take the faulty wheel to Maurice at Olivebank, get him to fit a new valve and ask him to swap the wheels over - I don't think I could go through that again. My muscles are still aching from all the unaccustomed effort.

19 March 2007

At the end of February a swan flew into the overhead electricity line and blacked out the village for 5 hours until a repair team from Kirkwall came over on evening ferry, they arrived at 7 pm and the power was back on again at 9 pm.

We had some very strong winds and heavy rain on Sun 18 Mar. The power was off from very early morning until just before mid-day. Here is a photograph of MV Hamnavoe (8,600 tons) sailing on Sun 18 Mar, and here's a photo of MV Hamnavoe in more peaceful waters. Today's weather (Monday 19 Mar) is a bit better but it is still very cold. Fortunately, we have not had the snow that was forecast.

The attendance at the Monday evening singing class last week was down from its usual 9 or 10 to an all-male session of 4 plus Michael, our tutor. We were all recovering from colds & sniffles, so it was not so much "singing" as "synchronised coughing".

Malcolm's cat Jaffa is now fully recovered from his illness and the dogs are all in good health as we can hear when we telephone Malcolm or Sue - all six dogs break into a frenzy of barking whenever the phone rings.

There's been an exchange of correspondence via the Orcadian email list on the topic of "You are an Orcadian if..."

- * You park your car facing into the wind to prevent door damage when you get out.

- * You take it as a personal insult if you have to show a card when writing a cheque.

- * You refuse to acknowledge the existence of a Shetland version of Strip the Willow.

- * Ferry journeys should be spent reading a book or sitting on a comfy seat rather than freezing outside.

- * You understand that 'cla thee hole' can be an affectionate tribute to your wit.
- * 'Reed cans' contain McEwan's Export.
- * Scotland is not the mainland.
- * You understand the merit of choosing your words carefully, then not saying them just to be on the safe side.
- * You know there is no difference between a 'ruckle o stones' and 'archaeological evidence of ritual practice'.
- * You eat Kettle Chips because the way they hurt your gums reminds you of Orkney Crisps.
- * You find trees fascinating and stare at them in amazement.
- * You feel faintly uncomfortable when there are no kye in ear-shot.
- * 30 second pauses during a conversation are normal.
- * You can hold a conversation for well over an hour consisting only of the words and phrases: "aye", "u-uh", "weel", "beuy", "this is it", "grand day fir it", and 30 second pauses.
- * Whisky is Grouse or HP.
- * You know exactly what "3rd cousin, once removed, on my mother's side" means, and exactly to whom it refers.
- * You are reduced to an incoherent spitting rage by Gaelic language TV.

19 April 2007

It's hard to believe that we've been here on Stronsay for over 3 years. The daffodils & jonquils in our garden were at their best over Easter and even now they are still looking quite good along with the primulas. The weather improved on the Thursday after Easter and I started putting a few plants (strawberries, primulas, alyssum etc) in Maureen's new raised beds.

Maureen & I went over to Kirkwall for the day on the Tuesday after Easter Monday. We took the Loganair flight which takes 10 minutes each way instead of the ferry boat which takes nearly 2 hours each way. This was Maureen's first off-island jaunt for two years but, because the day was very wet & very windy and both flights were quite "bumpy", Maureen says it will probably be another two years before she ventures off the island again.

An archaeologist visited Stronsay this month and, with the help of some Stronsay residents, conducted a field walk on some newly ploughed fields. As a result of the findings a further visit involving several archaeological students is planned for this summer. Although there are several cairns marked on the Ordnance Survey maps of Stronsay there has never been a thorough investigation

into Stronsay's archaeological remains so it will be interesting to see what discoveries are made.

Surrey, our green-eyed, pure white cat has put on so much weight since having "the operation" a few months ago that we have put her on a diet. Maureen has cut back on the amount of food Surrey is receiving (to the great disgust of Surrey) but Surrey has begun a campaign of attrition and constantly mews and winds herself around Maureen's ankles to wear her down and get more food.

Our elderly electric lawnmower finally expired at the end of last year. I've replaced it with a new petrol-engine mower which has allowed me to cut the grass in half the time that it took with the old mower. Fortunately, the grass is not growing very quickly, thanks to all the cold, wet weather we've been having, so I've only had to cut the grass twice this year.

Michael & Sheila, our new neighbours across the road at Helmsley, have been discovering one of the joys of living in remote rural areas - drainage and sewer maintenance. The system at Helmsley has been in use for many years and Michael has been spending the last day or two digging out and replacing a broken pipe where it leads into the sea. Not the ideal job for a cold, wet & windy day and certainly not a task for anyone with a weak stomach or sensitive nostrils.

Orkney Islands Council's Community Education department has decided to stop refunding the travel & accommodation costs of Michael Lee, our tutor for the Stronsay Singing Class which meets on Mondays at 7:30 pm during school term time. The class has been running for over two years and it hopes that either Stronsay Community Council or the Stronsay Development Trust will fund Michael's travelling expenses while we've offered to provide accommodation for Michael at Claremont instead of the Stronsay Hotel. This has presented Maureen with an interesting catering dilemma as Michael is a vegetarian; Maureen has been scouring her cookery books for interesting recipes that involve cheese, rice, pasta, or eggs but don't involve meat or fish.

Whilst on the topic of food, we had some friends round for a meal the other week. One of the items on the menu was tinned new potatoes as it's not always possible to get decent new potatoes locally. Maureen had opened the tin and read the instructions which mentioned that the potatoes must not be heated in a microwave oven. She heated the spuds in a pan and then just before serving them, without thinking, popped them into the microwave oven to warm them up. A few moments later several of the potatoes exploded with great vigour making quite a mess in the microwave oven, startling Maureen, and making the cat flee into the spare room.

In January of this year, I had begun to take my keyboard to Eday each Sunday afternoon in John Stevenson's fishing boat with Jennifer (the minister of

Eday & Stronsay), Albert & Raymond so that the congregation could have some "live" music for their service. I was pleasantly surprised that my stomach behaved itself even in the rough bits of water just off the coast of Eday but I had to concede defeat and stop going over to Eday because I was unable to stand in the wheelhouse of John Stevenson's fishing boat (my head bounced off the roof at every movement of the boat) and sitting in the wheelhouse for the 40 minute trip made my back and legs very stiff & sore.

When I saw the ear nose & throat specialist in Kirkwall just before Easter, he said the hearing in my right ear had deteriorated. He then asked if I would like a hearing aid. To have this said to me after I'd had to give up going on the little boat to Eday made me feel quite old & decrepit. However, when I spoke to our island GP, he cheered me up no end by suggesting that a hearing aid may not be necessary after I've had some minor surgery on my nose.

13 May 2007

The Stronsay evening classes in singing will resume on Monday 28 May under the tutelage of Michael Lee. It appears that most of the costs of the previous 3 years of evening classes have been met from a grant which has now dried up so we were in danger of losing the evening class altogether. However, Brian Crowe persuaded Stronsay Community Council to pay for Michael's ferry fees and we're providing accommodation for him.

I've discovered an interesting blog (<http://oldmanofhoy.blogspot.com>) by Morris Pottinger, a chap who was brought up on Whitehall Farm in the 1930s. It's well worth reading and contains a wealth of information about everyday life on Stronsay in the 1930s (such as farm cats getting a free squirt of milk from a kindly milkmaid!)

A few weeks ago, the Sail Training Vessel "Swan" visited Stronsay for the day (<http://www.theswan.shetland.co.uk>). Stronsay school organised trips for the pupils during the day and in the evening several people took the opportunity of a sail round the harbour. Isaac Erdman and his father from Ebenezer took the opportunity of a short two-day trip around Orkney and Shetland. Isaac liked it so much that he is hoping to go with the Ocean Youth Trust and sail around Ireland in July. However, in order to do this, he has to raise 500 pounds so Ebenezer Stores are holding a "Sail Sale" on 31 May to help raise some money for Isaac.

Spring has arrived although it poured with rain on Bank Holiday Sunday. The cattle with their calves and the sheep with their lambs are now out in the fields around Stronsay. Maureen's raised beds have been filled with soil and planted out with a variety of plants. I've put some small trays of primulas on the exterior windowsill of the kitchen, and they look nice & cheerful. A recent heavy

rainfall showed up the leaks in the elderly guttering outside the bathroom, so Malcolm has installed new guttering. We are still having problems with a drain on the other side of the house. It keeps getting blocked and as there is no rodding eye Malcolm has had to cut an "access point" in the plastic piping. Why on earth did someone install a 60 foot long 4-inch drain that leads into a soakaway and neglect to include a rodding eye anywhere along the length of the drain?

Ian Cooper, one of Stronsay's volunteer firefighters, paid Claremont an official visit together with the Community Fire Prevention Officer from Kirkwall. They went round the house and gave us a very comprehensive, free fire safety check together with lots of good advice - and we got some free smoke alarms too. The Fire Prevention Officer fitted the smoke alarms for us but had to use a long pole to press the alarm and its fixing pad onto the ceiling because although he was a fireman he was forbidden (by Health & Safety regulations) from standing on a step-ladder. During the visit Maureen mentioned a report in the local paper about one of the mainland fire brigades rescuing a cat that had got itself stuck up a tree, it appears that the fire brigade cannot not attend these incidents unless they are asked to do so by the SSPCA (Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals).

When we came back from church the other Sunday, we could not find Surrey anywhere. We checked her usual hiding places, but she was nowhere to be found. We were beginning to panic until Maureen spied Surrey in a new hidey hole.





We were amazed that she got up there and down again without knocking down any of the other things on the shelf. On the following Sunday it was a bit breezy when we went into church at 11 am but it wasn't too bad by Orkney standards. However, by the time we came out of church it had developed into a F7 gale. Maureen decided not to wait for me and headed for the car only to be caught by the wind and blown straight towards the wall of the church. Viv Erdman tried to grab hold of Maureen, but Viv probably weighs less than Maureen. Fortunately, Ian, the fireman who had carried out our fire safety check, is a church elder so he was on hand, so he leaped out of his car and came to Maureen's rescue. Maureen has now achieved her two main ambitions; a ride in a helicopter (when she was taken to Aberdeen Infirmary), and being rescued by a fireman. The wind kept up all afternoon and was so bad that the ferry, loaded with passengers and cars to go over to mainland, had to abandon the attempt as the wind had made it impossible to leave Stronsay harbour in safety and all the passengers and cars had to get off again and return on Monday morning.

We went up to Stronsay school to vote in the recent elections, so we contributed towards the 62 percent turnout in the Northern Isles. After voting had finished at 10 pm a pilot launch took Stronsay's ballot boxes along with those from Sanday and Shapinsay to Kirkwall for computerised counting in the Picky Centre.

It appears that the Sunday Mirror (a tabloid newspaper that I do not read) has caused an uproar by claiming - quite falsely - that more than 1,000 tonnes of oil had been removed from wreck of the Royal Oak in Scapa Flow, transported to a refinery in the north of Scotland and as a result a large cheque had been sent to

the MoD. The truth is that any oil removed from the Royal Oak is sent to Talisman at the Flotta Oil Terminal who do not charge for the disposal of the oil, they accept it without charge and Orkney Harbours and the MoD do not charge anything for their work, which runs into many thousands of pounds. Where do these reporters get their stories from?

14 June 2007

First of all, I must mention the Stronsay Regatta and Gala Day which will be opened at 1 pm on Saturday 23 June 2007 by our MP, Alistair Carmichael. The events will include a procession of floats, a pet show (we've decided not to enter Surrey, too traumatic for her), a firefighting demonstration, a trampoline, a Stronsay craft tent, face painting, raffles and, of course, a beer tent. If you're in Orkney and want to come, there's a boat on Saturday morning from Kirkwall to Stronsay calling at Eday and Sanday and a return boat on Saturday evening. However, if you want to stay on and you still have some energy left then there's a dance in the Stronsay Community Centre at 9 pm when Don Peace from Sampson's Lane will be providing the music with some help from his musical friends.

Our neighbour Bob Tateson still resolutely refuses to purchase a lawn mower so this year he borrowed two ponies for a couple of weeks to crop the grass down to a reasonable length. Our white cat, Surrey, sat on the kitchen windowsill keeping a very careful eye on the new "neighbours", a duty that she seemed to share with Bob's own cat, Socks. Feline fans should have a look at <http://www.kat-cam.com>. We are quite determined that Surrey is NOT going to have her very own webcam.

Bob Tateson is the chairman of the Stronsay Footprints, a group founded only a few weeks ago. It consists of local people who are interested in the history and the geography of Stronsay and Papa Stronsay. The group is open to all ages and aims to discover more about Stronsay's history, its geography and its genealogy.

Readers who follow the events at Golgotha Monastery will be interested to hear that the monks on Papa Stronsay have begun their very own blog at <http://papastronsay.blogspot.com>

Sadly, Sanday's evening class on singing has ceased because there is no funding for Michael Lee, the tutor, to travel to and from the island. However, Stronsay is more fortunate and the new session of evening classes in singing has begun despite the funding shortage. Stronsay Community Council is funding Michael's travel to/from Stronsay and we're providing Michael with bed & board at Claremont. Maureen has found that cooking vegetarian food for Michael is a

challenge but a challenge that she is finding very interesting; we have discovered that vegetarian food does not necessarily mean a nut cutlet and some rice.

In my last Saga I mentioned Isaac Erdman's "Sail sale" on 31 May. We went along to this all-day event and found the Erdman's living room absolutely packed with goodies for sale. The event was a success in that it raised over 350 pounds which, when added to miscellaneous donations etc, means that Isaac has now raised the 500 pounds he needs for his Ocean Youth Trust trip around Ireland in July.

27 July 2007

This edition of the Saga is a bit late because on Wednesday afternoon I returned from Aberdeen Royal Infirmary after having some minor elective surgery on my nose. I had to arrive in hospital on Sunday 22 July which meant leaving Stronsay on Saturday afternoon, staying overnight in Kirkwall, catching the Sunday afternoon flight to Aberdeen then getting a taxi from the airport to the hospital. The treatment in the hospital was, as usual, quite superb. I was allowed to have "high tea" on Sunday even though my operation was scheduled for the following day. The only small problem was the non-arrival of the taxi ordered by the charge nurse to get me from the hospital to the airport at 7:15 am on Wednesday. Since I got back to Stronsay I seem to have spent most of my time either sleeping or feeling tired.

The annual Stronsay Gala was held on 23 June and this year it was opened by Alastair Carmichael, the Liberal Democrat MP for Orkney and Shetland. The weather was fine and reasonably warm but there were no floats this year. The Stronsay Fire Brigade (all volunteers) put on an impressive display of their fire-fighting capabilities and a pipe band from mainland provided musical entertainment throughout the day. We entered Surrey (our white-furred, green-eyed cat) in the Pet Competition. It was her first trip away from Claremont (apart from her annual trip to the vet) so we were a bit apprehensive when we put Surrey in her cat box and took her up to the field. However, Surrey took it all in her stride and was much admired and photographed; she did not flinch when people took flash photographs, nor did she blink when the pipe band struck up just a few feet from her cat box. However, imagine Maureen's delight when she got back from buying some marigold plants and discovered that the judge - a vet from Kirkwall - had awarded Surrey the first prize. I decided to do my bit for "men's lib" and entered the Gala's "men's baking" competition; my "snow cake" was awarded second prize whilst Colin (the only other entrant in the category) took the first prize. Surrey's rosette and mine are now proudly displayed in the kitchen at Claremont.

The BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra were in Orkney for the St Magnus Festival and on Tuesday 26 Jun a string quintet from the orchestra spent the day at Stronsay Junior High School then gave a concert in Stronsay's kirk. Thanks to the kirk's excellent acoustics all present heard and enjoyed music by Dvorak and Borodin together with an arrangement of "Jealousy" and a modern, jazz-like piece including sections of improvisation by all the players. The first piece of the evening was a short piece in which the quintet was joined by the school's musicians. Driving back to Claremont after the concert I drove through torrential rain and saw a truly spectacular rainbow over Papa Stronsay.

July began with the Royal National Lifeboat Institute (RNLI) day on Sun 01 Jul. The RNLI depends wholly on voluntary contributions and enjoys extremely good support throughout the United Kingdom, particularly so in Orkney. Stronsay has not had its own lifeboat since 1973 but Orkney is well-served by the lifeboats at Kirkwall, Stromness and Longhope. The Kirkwall lifeboat (Margaret Foster) visited Stronsay on the RNLI day and, after a short pierhead service lead by Reg Kent from the kirk, the lifeboat was open for inspection all afternoon. Later in the day several people were fortunate enough to experience a short, high-speed trip in the lifeboat. Although the weather was windy & wet with fog later in the afternoon & evening I took some pictures on the day here's the album.. Stronsay's community centre was the venue for the usual magnificent lunchtime buffet (with a choice of at least 30 main dishes) as well as a variety of fund-raising stalls. The latest figures I have heard are that after deducting the minimal expenses incurred Stronsay managed to raise about £2,500 on the day. For more information on the RNLI see [this page](#).

A wedding was held in the kirk on 07 July. Sadly, the weather did not behave itself and it poured with rain nearly all day. However, this did not seem to dampen the spirits of the happy couple or their guests.

Two ferry strikes were due to take place during July, but they have been "suspended" whilst talks take place. A work-to-rule continues. Speaking of ferries there is an item on Orkney Island Council website that will be of interest to all Orcadians especially those living on the North or the South Isles. Items discussed include the new ferries, possible fixed links between islands and a new location for the Stronsay terminal. The full article with links to several important documents each aimed at a different island (Stronsay, Sanday, Westray etc) is [here](#).

28 August 2007

Regular readers of the Fletcher Saga may remember that the previous owners of Claremont had a pet sheep, Rocky, who kept the grass in Bob Tateson's

garden neat & tidy. Earlier this month we had a letter from the previous owners of Claremont giving us the sad news that Rocky had died in his sleep in July at the grand old age of eight.



The crews of the ferries serving the Northern Isles have been working to rule for several weeks. Talks between the ferry company and the unions have failed to resolve the dispute over pay, so the crews have voted to take strike action. So far, the only effect of this is that there will be no sailings at all to the Outer North Isles on Wednesday, August 29, Thursday, August 30 and Friday, August 31. Fortunately Orkney Islands Council has arranged for Loganair to put on extra flights for those three days in order to carry freight (about 500 kg or 1100 lbs) for local shops in the Northern Isles; these extra flights will also be able to take one or two people who have to fly to/from Kirkwall for medical appointments. I am sure we can all cope with short strikes like this but if the strikes are more frequent and/or for longer durations then it will pose quite a problem.

We are so accustomed to the comparative lack of crime up here that it was all the more shocking to read of some recent vandalism in the form of graffiti at Skara Brae. However, on a brighter note there have been new discoveries during archaeological excavations on the Ness o' Brodgar in Stenness.

Over the last week or two I've been suffering from intermittent back pain and was resigned to just taking more painkillers. However, Stronsay is fortunate in that Dr George McKay, the island's genial GP, is an enthusiastic practitioner of acupuncture and after one or two treatments at Dr McKay's regular Thursday afternoon acupuncture clinics my back pain is much improved. This has meant that I no longer had any excuse for not cutting the grass in our large back garden

so the other week I got out the new petrol-driven mower and set to work trimming the lawns. After a while I had the distinct and somewhat eerie feeling that I was being watched even though I knew that Maureen was in the kitchen and that nobody else was around. It was only when I turned around that I realised that an inquisitive cow from the herd grazing in the field that backs onto our house appeared to be taking a very keen interest in my grass-cutting activities, even the quite loud noise of the mower caused not a flicker of the cow's eyelid. The cow watched me for several minutes then it appeared to lose interest in grass-cutting and went in search of its own supply of grass. Since that small incident we've noticed that anything up to half a dozen cows will gather along the wall and peer over to see if anything interesting is taking place.

On the way from Claremont to Olivebank, one of the two shops on Stronsay, we pass a field that always contains a pedigree bull with his "harem" of two or three cows and some tiny calves. The other day it was amusing to see the bull standing proudly in the middle of his field whilst being admired by a herd of non-pedigree cows who were crowded, shoulder to shoulder, along the wall dividing the bull's field from theirs.

This morning (Tuesday) Maureen had set to and attacked a large pile of ironing. After ironing the last item, she decided that before putting the iron and ironing board away she would run the hot iron over some of her needlework (blackwork & cross stitch) after applying a squirt of starch from an aerosol can. Maureen was quite perplexed by the apparent ineffectiveness of the starch until she realised that she had just ironed all her needlework after carefully spraying it with an aerosol can of air freshener.

Last week I had occasion to fly over to Kirkwall for the day. It was a lovely, bright, clear day and as we flew over the tiny island of Linga Holm, a Scottish Wild Life Trust sanctuary, I could see numerous grey seals coming ashore for breeding.

02 October 2007

Jimmy Allan (Stronsay's answer to Bob the Builder) and his merry men have begun to replace our leaking flat roof. Jimmy is a busy man with a reputation for high quality work, so we are indeed fortunate that we have managed to secure his services and get the roof repaired (replaced actually!) before the winter sets in. Maureen is quite delighted as she can now look forwards to turning the room into a "medieval hall" when the work is completed. Hence her eagerness to supply the workers with tea and meals so they don't have to break and go home for lunch thus wasting valuable work time. Jimmy must have some very influential friends in the weather department as the sun has shone from an almost cloudless sky ever

since he started work on Wednesday (26 Sep), and this after several weeks of almost non-stop rain. The old roof was quickly stripped off, extra joists inserted, and a layer of plywood laid on the joists. A layer of 2-inch-thick plastic foam insulation in a mesh of 2x2 timber was laid on the plywood and another layer of plywood added. Before this top layer of plywood was added it was treated to allow the final coating of fibreglass to adhere more easily. By the evening of Monday 01 Oct, the new roof was almost complete. The next part of the renovation will involve replacing a large window with a sliding patio door and the old wooden door will be replaced by a doubled-glazed door. After that the walls and ceiling will be dry-lined with plasterboard, the electrics "modernised" and carpet tiles laid. Maureen's "Medieval Hall" will then be ready for occupation.

According to the newspaper "Orkney Today" a field walking project that took place on Stronsay earlier this year has helped increase knowledge of Stronsay's archaeology. Some flint arrowheads that were found may date from a period that is over 5,000 years earlier than any of the archaeology known presently in Orkney.

The other day we were driving back to the house when we saw a family of seals on the beach at the Ayre of Myres, so we stopped to admire them. These seals were not at all upset by cars stopping to admire them and obligingly waddled up and down the sandy beach whilst one lounged half-in and half-out of the water, on previous occasions when we had stopped there to watch any seals who had landed on the beach they had scampered into the sea and disappeared almost before the car stopped.

There are two interesting websites operated by residents of the tiny island of Graemsay which lies between Stromness and the island of Hoy. There's Sian's site and there's Mick's site. Sian's site describes her arrival on Graemsay a few years ago and her escapades since then. Mick's site has lots of slide shows of activities on Graemsay, if you go to the "ship plotter" menu option on Mick's site you can see details of all the vessels in and around Orkney plotted on a map.

The MV Hamnavoe is the Northlink ferry which runs across the Pentland Firth between Scrabster and Stromness. She's 360 feet long, weighs 8,600 tons and can carry 600 passengers plus many cars & heavy lorries.

06 November 2007

The renovation of Maureen's "medieval" hall is proceeding at a steady pace. The roof has been replaced and is now completely watertight. Jobs still to be done include replacing the existing windows & door with double-glazed items, lining the walls with plasterboard, putting up some wallpaper, applying a bit of paint and, finally, laying some carpet tiles.

Stronsay kirk's Harvest Thanksgiving took place on the morning of the last Sunday in October. In the evening a concert was held in the Community Centre to raise money for the installation of new, disabled-friendly toilets in the kirk. The concert was to have been the day before but there were two funerals on Saturday and the concert was postponed out of respect for and with the approval of the families involved. The concert played to a packed, enthusiastic audience and it was good to see so many talented, keen youngsters on the stage; the Stronsay School Choir and Gaynor's Youth Band were particularly well received.

This month got off to a bad start. About a week ago I had put in an order to Highland Fuels for a delivery of heating oil, but I'd miscalculated and we ran out of oil last Thursday. Fortunately, we have a couple of portable butane gas heaters and electric fan heaters, so we did not freeze, and the immersion heater kept us supplied with hot water. I telephoned Highland Fuels on Monday morning and they said they hoped to get the tanker out on the Tuesday ferry, always assuming there was space on the ferry. Therefore, I was very relieved when I went to pick up Michael Lee (tutor to our Monday evening singing group) at the pier and saw the Highland Fuels tanker drive off the Monday evening ferry. The oil delivery took place during the evening and in atrocious weather conditions (strong winds & driving rain) so when Michael & I got back from the singing class the oil tank was full to the brim. I confidently pressed the "reset" button on the oil-fired boiler but an air lock had occurred in the oil delivery pipe and no amount of twiddling with reset buttons would get the boiler restarted. After a while I gave up and we spent a fifth night without central heating. Today (Tuesday) I came downstairs and, after dropping Michael Lee off to catch the morning ferry, I got out my tool kit, took the front panel off the boiler and after careful perusal of the handbook (why do manufacturers print their manuals in such tiny print?) managed to cure the airlock problem. I sighed with relief when the boiler fired up and started to deliver hot water to the central heating system.

Whilst I was out at the singing class Maureen was on the phone to her friend, Chris, in Bexley Heath whilst Surrey (our friendly cat) was lounging on the ironing board. Chris is a lady who is notorious for her extremely loud sneezes (even louder than mine!) so when she sneezed during her chat with Maureen Surrey heard it from across the room, shot bolt upright and fell off the ironing board. Not bad going for a sneeze in Bexley Heath to make a cat fall off an ironing board in Orkney.

Dr George MacKay, Stronsay's genial GP, is having a few weeks off so the island has a locum GP. He, his wife & their 2-year-old daughter went to the Harvest Home in the Community Centre on Saturday evening unaware that it was a "ticket only" event. However, Stronsay rose to the occasion and an extra table

was squeezed in so the locum & his family could join in the event. By all accounts they thoroughly enjoyed themselves and were quite amazed that the other youngsters there got his daughter up on the dance floor for some gentle country dancing. Who knows, they might even decide to come here when Dr MacKay retires in a couple of years' time.

A reminder that the Maeshowe webcam will be active from 25th Nov 2007 to 5th Feb 2008. And don't forget that there are one or two webcams on Orkney which operate all year round - see VisitOrkney and Tim Barthorpe's website

01 December 2007

The hairdresser flew over to Stronsay for her regular, monthly visit in early November. The poor girl was still recovering after spending several days in bed because of a rather nasty tummy bug and had brought everything that she needed except for her rollers. At first it looked as though Maureen's planned perm was not going to be possible, but we managed to borrow some from the island's registrar who, as luck would have it, just happened to be in need of a bit of help from me to sort out a small problem with her computer.

A few weeks ago, we endured 80-mph winds. All schools & colleges were closed for the day, there was no public transport on the mainland whilst all ferries and even the regular Loganair flights to the Northern Isles were cancelled for the day. The Churchill Barriers on mainland remained closed until the afternoon. Here on Stronsay we just battened everything down and stayed indoors. The electricity went off at mid-day because both sides of the ring circuit feeding the North Isles developed faults. Some parts of island got power back during the evening but Whitehall village (about 70 homes, including ours!) had no power until mid-morning next day engineers came over from mainland on the early morning ferry to fix the problem. A very apologetic chap from Scottish Hydro Electric phoned at teatime, just as the wind was at its worst, to tell us power would be off until the following day. It was only a few days earlier that I'd replenished our supply of butane gas bottles that we use for the cooker and the emergency portable heaters, and, like all islanders, we always have plenty of candles, matches, torches and spare batteries. We also have a small radio that can be powered by clockwork if the batteries run down but I've found that it's hard work winding the handle to give just a few minutes listening time.

Malcolm, our regular handyman, has some "call ducks"; these are very small ducks, originally known as Coy ducks or decoy ducks from the Dutch word *de kooi* meaning 'trap'. After the 80-mph winds Malcolm found that one of his call ducks was missing. The missing duck was eventually discovered happily swimming on a pond half a mile away but so far it has eluded all efforts to return

it to Malcolm's place. The other call ducks are probably quite happy about the absence as the missing duck appeared to be a self-appointed "foreman of ducks" and was always making lots of noise, since it's gone missing the other ducks are much quieter. Malcolm lost most of the tarred roofing on one of his outhouses forcing him to make a quick water-tight replacement for winter before "proper" replacement takes place next spring. Another result of the high winds was that Paul, another handyman who also keeps hens, has found that his hens resolutely refuse to leave their hen-house despite Paul tempting them to leave by placing tasty scraps just outside the hen-house.

Remembrance Sunday was bitterly cold and windy with heavy showers, so we didn't go to the 11 am service at the war memorial but went straight to the kirk, observed the 2-minute silence there and waited until everyone came back for the service which started at 11.20 am.

Work on Maureen's "medieval hall" is progressing nicely. The roof is watertight, and the internal plaster boarding is almost complete. Jobs remaining include fitting replacement doors and windows (scheduled for December), papering and painting of the walls & ceiling followed by laying of carpet tiles. We had hoped to have it finished by Christmas, but this seems increasingly unlikely.

Surrey, our pure white cat, has lost a bit of weight (thank goodness!) so I was not unduly concerned about being reprimanded for over-feeding Surrey when I took her to the vet in Kirkwall for her inoculations last month. The vet reported that Surrey has a bit of gingivitis and gave us some toothpaste (fish flavoured) which we are supposed to apply to Surrey's gums. Quite how we are supposed to do this without sustaining serious, life-threatening injury was not explained.

We saw a heron in Whitehall harbour the other week, quite an impressive creature that did not seem bothered by the intense cold. Maureen was delighted to see a very smart looking robin in our garden on two separate occasions.

Orkney Ferries crews are still on a "work to rule" which makes visits to mainland a tricky business when ferries are cancelled or re-timed at short notice. It can also make the regular Monday trips by Michael Lee, the tutor for the evening class in singing, take well over two hours instead of the usual 90 minutes or so. Discussions between the union and Orkney Ferries are still taking place but an end to the dispute seems as far away as ever.

The Very Rev Dr Robert (Bob) Gillies, newly appointed Bishop of Aberdeen & Orkney, paid a flying visit to Stronsay last week. He arrived on the morning flight and left on the afternoon flight. He spent some time with Rev David Bowen, a schoolteacher & Anglican NSM who retired up here with his wife, Ruth, (another schoolteacher) earlier this year. The bishop had lunch with

David, Ruth & our minister, Jennifer, before adjourning to the church hall for an hour in the afternoon so that any of the island's inhabitants who wanted could meet him and chat before he caught the afternoon flight back to mainland. He's a very pleasant chap, not all stuffy or stand-offish. When our minister, Rev Dr Jennifer George, showed him around the kirk, he expressed amazement at its size and architecture, which he described as "monastic". Before I forget, Jennifer held a special birthday party (to which all were invited) at the Fish Mart Cafe in Whitehall village to celebrate her 40th birthday on Wed 14 Nov.

Several weeks ago, I was notified that I had an appointment at Balfour hospital (Kirkwall) on 29 November at 10 am. Normally I would have asked for the appointment to be moved towards lunchtime, as it isn't possible to get into Kirkwall before 10 am. However, the car was due for its annual maintenance check, so I travelled to Kirkwall the day before my hospital appointment, left the car with the garage then stayed the night in Kirkwall before going to Balfour hospital for my 10 am appointment. The ENT specialist was very helpful when I said that I'd like to take him up on his previous offer of a hearing aid for my right ear. The audiologist made a plastic mould of my ear and said I'd get a letter in January when my new hearing aid will be ready. That will mean another trip to Kirkwall and, as the ferries will then be on their refit timetable, I think I'll take the plane; a 10-minute flight is much better than a 2.5-hour boat trip.

We have heard reports on the radio and read in the newspapers that "petrol has reached one pound per litre". This made us smile wryly, as petrol on Stronsay has been at least one pound per litre for some considerable time. Last month the Orcadian newspaper reported that the average price of a litre of unleaded petrol in Orkney was £1.15 with diesel at £1.18. Last month, after our latest delivery of heating oil, I checked the price and was shocked to find that the cost of heating oil had gone from 22 pence per litre to 44 pence per litre since we arrived here in April 2004.

17 December 2007

This will be the last Fletcher Saga for 2007. Maureen and I (not forgetting Surrey, our white cat) hope that all of our readers have a pleasant Christmas and a very happy and healthy New Year. I'd also like to thank the patient readers who have sent emails and/or comments on my ramblings. Any feedback, be it brickbats or bouquets, is always very welcome.

The 11 am service at Stronsay's kirk on 15 December was rather different. The congregation was invited to follow the children between the kirk to the church hall as they re-enacted the story of the Nativity, complete with costumes

and very realistic "props". I didn't see all of the performance as I was busy preparing for each hymn, but Maureen tells me that the costumes were very good indeed and that there was a rather splendid camel. The "guiding star", affixed to the top of a very long pole, entered the kirk via the main door and was passed, hand to hand, through the congregation and followed by the shepherds and the magi. As the offertory was taken at the same time people had the tricky task of passing on the "star" whilst simultaneously getting their collection money out of their pocket, handbag, or wallet. The shepherd's "fire" was simple (a red electric light bulb under some foliage) but very realistic; one young shepherd had to resort to a bit of improvisation when he went to stamp out the "fire" before setting out to follow the star because there was a slight lack of synchronisation between his actions and the person responsible for turning off the red bulb.

The air ambulance for the Northern Isles used to be provided by Loganair's fixed-wing aircraft from Kirkwall, the same aircraft and crews that provide the regular daily ferry service. However, the air ambulance for the last year or two has been a helicopter which has to travel up from Inverness. This, it was claimed, is a more effective and efficient use of resources. There have been concerns that the service is not as good as it used to be so a petition was drawn up and signed by most households in the Inner and Outer Isles. It was handed to the new chairman of the Scottish Ambulance Service early Dec who has promised to pay a visit to Orkney in the New Year to discuss the concerns.

We were delighted that an agreement was been reached in December on the pay award for the crews of Orkney Ferries. It would have been dreadful to have the refit timetable commencing in January whilst still being subject to the uncertainties caused by the work to rule.

I took the car into Kirkwall for servicing a couple of weeks ago and, having some spare time, went into the Kirkwall Library's excellent and comprehensive archive to look up our house in the valuation rolls. Claremont was built by Peter Lennie in 1914 as a "shop and house" becoming a "shop, house and bakehouse" in 1926. The name Claremont did not appear in the rolls until 1931 when it was owned by Peter Reid in 1925-39 and his widow, Robina, in 1939-46. In 1946 it became a "house and garden" owned by Mrs Elizabeth H Swanney and in 1957 has a garage that was run as a separate entity by "Sydney Swanney, motor engineer". Unfortunately, the valuation rolls are no longer useful after 1990 because they only show commercial property. When we were talking to Jimmy Allan, the builder, about the history of Claremont and the recent history of Stronsay Jimmy told us that a few years after WW2 he was a youngster living in the south of Stronsay; for him a visit to Whitehall village, only 4 or 5 miles away,

was a rare event undertaken once or twice a year at most, and the journey was made in a horse and cart. How times change.

The new doors and windows for Maureen's "medieval" hall arrived a couple of weeks ago and Jimmy Allan is in the middle of fitting them. The wallpaper has arrived, but we won't be able to have a Grand Christmas Opening as the wallpaper still to be hung and painted when Jimmy has finished work on the doors and windows. And we still must order the paint and a new carpet.

We were quite concerned when the phone rang at 10:30 pm on 10 Dec. Phone calls at that time of day tend to convey bad news and the call was from Sue, Stronsay's postmistress, who lives with her mother. We were relieved to find that the phone call was not bad news but merely Sue letting us know that the Merry Dancers (Aurora Borealis) were clearly visible over Sanday. We went outside to view the display, which was easily visible in a crystal-clear, moonless sky. However, we didn't think that it was quite as dramatic as some previous displays that we've seen.

Tim Barthorpe who lives in Stromness has a "cat cam" on his website but I am quite sure that Surrey, our white cat, will not be getting her very own webcam from Santa Claus this year. Although Surrey has an extensive collection of toys, she has spent the last week or two ignoring them all and has spent most of her time playing with a old, scrunched-up piece of aluminium cooking foil. Now that Surrey has lost a bit of weight Maureen has noticed that Surrey's legs are somewhat "wrinkled" - perhaps we'll have to nickname her Nora after the character in "Last of the Summer Wine".

Best wishes to everyone from all of us at Claremont on Stronsay.

16 January 2008

Here's the first Fletcher Saga of 2008 - I hope that you've all recovered from the Christmas and Hogmanay celebrations.

Just before Christmas we were invited over to a friend's house for some informal carol singing. Apart from some "community" carol singing we heard some songs from Amelia on keyboard then on the guitar with Josephine on the recorder and Tilly on violin; all three girls are under 12 and were a delight to hear. Later Lisa, the mother of Ameila & Josephine, joined the three girls for a couple of songs.

Eileen, an intrepid friend of Sue (Stronsay's postmistress) and her mother, Mary, came north for a short break over Christmas. Her flight from London was delayed but she eventually arrived in Kirkwall on the Sunday before Christmas. Unfortunately, there are no planes to Stronsay on Sunday, but Sue managed to arrange for a member of the Kirkwall flying club to take Eileen from Kirkwall to

Stronsay in a tiny, single-engine aeroplane. Eileen took it all in her stride and arrived safely but, alas, her luggage was still in Gatwick (or was it Heathrow?) and it did not arrive until just after Christmas.

There was a good display of the Merry Dancers just before Christmas, there are some photographs on The Orcadian newspaper's website. The Maeshowe webcam for 20 Dec 2007 is available on YouTube.

The Christmas Eve service went well thanks to some help from the school orchestra and their friends. This year Jennifer (our minister) managed to keep the duration to just about 45 minutes as there were comments that the 2006 Christmas Eve service was a bit too long. The weather at 11:30 pm on Christmas Eve was perfect, a clear sky and a bright, full moon. In fact, the moon was so bright that the candles in jam jars that were arranged on top of the wall around the kirk did not really show up as well as they should.

I miscalculated the heating oil (again!) and we ran out of oil on Jan 02. Because of the awkward re-fit schedule for ferries the tanker did not come over from Kirkwall until Jan 11. Fortunately, we have portable gas heaters and electric fan heaters so we did not suffer in the very cold weather we had during this period. Surrey loves the gas heaters and stretches out in front of them, luxuriating in the radiant heat; when the heating oil arrived, and the gas heaters were turned off Surrey spent ages trying to work out where the gas heater's "on" button was located. In the first week of January, we had some very strong SE winds meant that early morning ferry on Sat 05 Jan was unable to berth in Stronsay and had to return to Kirkwall. A ferry did reach Stronsay just before lunchtime, but it was fully loaded with an enormous mobile crane and ancillary vehicles which were used to perform maintenance on the wind turbines on Rothiesholm. On the same day the evening ferry was cancelled and the Northlink ferries between Aberdeen, Orkney & Shetland were disrupted when adverse sea and wind conditions meant that boats were stuck in harbour at Lerwick and at Aberdeen. However, the Hamnavoe continued to ply between Scrabster & Stromness.

I went over to Kirkwall this week to get the car's annual compulsory safety check (MOT certificate) and to get my new hearing aid. The car passed its MOT, and my new hearing aid is fantastic, it's tiny (a digital Siemens Chroma VC) and so light that I hardly know that I'm wearing it. Maureen is especially delighted with the hearing aid as our conversations no longer consist of her speaking and me saying "pardon?" to every other sentence.

09 March 2008

I've just realised that it is already March, the days are lengthening, and I did not issue a "Fletcher Saga" in February. The old saying "time flies" is so true

- it seems hardly credible that on 31 March we will have been in this house for four years.

In the last week of January, I was replacing some light bulbs in the kitchen's under cupboard fittings when I managed to pull a muscle in my back. This meant I had to spend several days creeping around doing a passable impression of a geriatric Quasimodo although I did manage to help with serving the drinks when Maureen put on a Burns Night supper for a few friends; this event had to be held a few days after the "proper" date because the RNLI had their own Burns Night celebration on 25 Jan.

February began with a bout of bad weather; on 1st Feb all schools & day care centres in Orkney cancelled, ferries & flights disrupted because of bad weather - severe gale F9 and storm F10. Next day about half an inch of snow fell on Stronsay but quite a bit more fell on mainland and disrupted the flights into and out of Kirkwall. The snow disappeared overnight, much to the chagrin of the youngsters who were looking forwards to some tobogganing.

In late January I was notified that I had an appointment for an MRI scan in the ARI (Aberdeen Royal Infirmary) on Wed 13 Feb. It seems that I need the scan because I've gone deaf in just one ear rather than both ears at once, the scan will show whether anything untoward is going on in and around my deaf ear. Thus it was that on Tuesday 12 Feb I took the afternoon ferry to Kirkwall and booked into the Kirkwall Hotel for two nights. On Wednesday I was up early and had my early breakfast of cereal, tea & toast before heading for the airport so that I could catch the early morning flight to Aberdeen. We took off on time and in gloriously sunny weather, so I was hoping to see a bit more of northern Scotland from the air. However, although the whole of Orkney and the Pentland Firth was completely cloud-free there was a line of cloud that began at the coastline of Caithness and continued almost all the way to Aberdeen. It was bitterly cold in Aberdeen (about minus 2C) but the sky was cloudless. I got a taxi to the ARI (another £12 to claim back from NHS Orkney!) and had the scan, the results of which will be passed to the specialist in a week or so. The scan was quite easy if a bit noisy, having read a bit about it on the web I expected it to be much more claustrophobic. I got back to Aberdeen airport in plenty of time to catch the afternoon flight back to Kirkwall, but a dense fog descended about an hour or so before the flight was due to take off and it was soon obvious that there were not going to be any more flights that day. Eventually, after some confusion, the passengers due to fly to Kirkwall were told that their flight was cancelled and re-scheduled for 9:20 am next day. There were no rooms to be had anywhere in Aberdeen so I decided to go back to ARI to see if I could beg a bed for the night. After a short delay a charming young lady introduced herself as the support nurse

for Orkney & Shetland and soon arranged for me and two other Orkney folk who were stranded to stay the night at the ARI. It was about 10 pm when she escorted me to my overnight accommodation and, thanks to the wonderful nursing staff of ward 29, I was soon sitting down with some hot tea & delicious, buttered toast in a single-bed ward. Next morning, I was given breakfast before setting out for Aberdeen airport. Fortunately, there were no further delays and I arrived in Kirkwall just before lunch. I called into the Kirkwall Hotel to collect my things and pay for the two-night stay, what a pity that I didn't get the breakfast that I was so looking forwards to. However, I still had time to do a bit of shopping before catching the afternoon ferry back to Stronsay.

Maureen's medieval hall is almost complete. The walls have been plaster boarded, papered & painted; the light fittings have been installed; and all that remains is to select a suitable carpet and get it fitted. On the recommendation of a friend, we're going to put down coir matting in the small entrance hall because anyone coming in through the back door inevitably brings in dirt and damp on their footwear.

Naomi Woodward and a small team of archaeologists from Orkney College have been digging at Linkshouse on Stronsay for the last week or so. This dig was a follow-up to the Stronsay Archaeological Survey in April 2007 when some very interesting finds were made. The field walking that was undertaken then produced significant results in almost a quarter of the fields that were walked and enabled funding to be obtained for this year's dig. Last Saturday the dig had an "open day" so, after dropping the hairdresser off at the airfield after her monthly trip to Stronsay, I made my way to Linkshouse Farm where quite a few local folk were already getting the "grand tour". I should have known better and taken my wellington boots - the mud was inches deep! However, Naomi gave an interesting description of what they were looking for and showed us some of their finds which included quite a lot of flint. Just to find a few significant items involved washing, sieving and then inspecting dozens if not hundreds of wheelbarrow loads of thick, black mud that had to be brought almost quarter of a mile over a very water-logged field to the barn in which the diggers had made their headquarters. Some soil samples will be sent to Stirling University for analysis. I took some photographs then, having seen the black clouds rapidly approaching, I thanked Naomi set off for home before the heavens opened.

Some readers may remember Timber, the cat who spent a couple of weeks with us in 2006 whilst his owners (Jack & Simone) were away on holiday. We had a phone call from Jack a couple of weeks ago asking if we could look after Timber at very short notice whilst Jack & Simone travelled down to the North of England where Simone's mother was not very well. Of course, we agreed and

Timber arrived the following day, complete with her own enormous litter tray and ample supplies of food, cat litter, etc. Timber was the perfect (purrfect?) house guest and happily dwelt in Maureen's pig-pen with the occasional foray into the corridor and, once or twice, upstairs into the bedrooms. We kept Timber and Surrey apart because Timber is "of riper years" and we didn't think it fair on Surrey who is accustomed to being the Top Cat at Claremont. A couple of weeks later, Jack phoned to say that they were back home, and that Simone's mother had travelled north with them and would be living with them. So it was that when Jack & Simone collected Timber they brought Simone's mother, a charming lady, along to meet us and take tea with us. Even though we'd only had Timber for a couple of weeks it was quite emotional when we said "cheerio" as she was carried back to Jack's car.

Some friends of ours on Stronsay acquired a dog - "Shep", a sheepdog - from Westray last summer. He's calmed down a lot from his bouncy puppy days (thank goodness) but still manages to get himself into many a scrape. When his owners came downstairs the other morning, they could find no trace of Shep. They called him and searched in all his usual hiding places, but he was nowhere to be found. One of the owners had to visit the bathroom but found that the bathroom door was bolted shut. As her husband was still in the kitchen it could only be the dog who had gone into the bathroom (typical nosey dog!), somehow managed to push the door closed behind him and then, scrabbling at the door handle with his paws to get out, managed to slide the bolt across thus securely locking himself in. His owner, probably having watched too many police films on TV, decided to break the door down and put his shoulder against it. Unfortunately, instead of the flimsy bolt bursting open as he intended, the whole door split, vertically, into two pieces to reveal the dog, who had remained perfectly silent when he was being called, curled up and trying to hide behind the toilet bowl whilst looking decidedly guilty.

16 April 2008

Stronsay's evening class in singing (aka the Stronsay Singers) started its Spring session on Monday. Although Stronsay only has 400 inhabitants there are enough enrolled students to give our tutor, Michael Lee, a four-part (SATB) choir to conduct & to teach. We are very fortunate in having the tuition of Michael because the extra grant money from the local education authority ran out last year thus Michael is only paid for the tuition on Monday evening whilst his ferry journey from Kirkwall to Stronsay on Monday and his return to Kirkwall on Tuesday morning are in his own time. Thanks to the efforts of Brian Crowe (one of our two tenors) Michael's fare on the ferry is paid jointly by Stronsay

Community Council and by Orkney Islands Council whilst we (Maureen & me) provide his meal & accommodation on Monday night. I think I am correct in saying that our evening class on Stronsay is now the only evening class in the Northern Isles that receives tuition from a mainland tutor.

In last month's Saga I mentioned that we had been looking after Timber, a rather elderly but quite active cat, whilst Jack & Simone fetched Simone's elderly mother from the North of England. Sadly, Simone's mother died a few weeks after arriving in Stronsay so once again we have Timber as a guest whilst Jack & Simone travel down to Yorkshire for the funeral. Timber is no trouble, but we are keeping Surrey and Timber well apart just in case there is any animosity.

The cattle will soon be out in the fields again after their winter stay indoors and the calving. The lambing on Stronsay is almost complete and the field at the back of our house now contains quite a few sheep with their lambs. The view from our kitchen window has been enhanced because Bob Tateson has borrowed a couple of ponies to keep the grass in his "garden" under control; the antics of the ponies as they amble around chomping the grass whilst the birds (mostly starlings) follow the ponies around, sometimes getting what seems to be perilously close to the pony's hooves and teeth. Our own garden has been rather neglected for the last year or so, but we have plenty of daffodils and primulas which are just about at their peak right now.

The carpet for Maureen's "medieval hall" was ordered from Wolstenholmes in Kirkwall on Thu 03 April. On Sat 12 April Wolstenholmes phoned to say that the carpet had arrived and would be delivered to the Kirkwall depot of Jim Holland, the Stronsay haulier, on Mon 14 April. Sure enough, Jim Holland delivered the carpet to our house on Monday evening; no mean feat as the carpet is 5 metres wide and 5.5 metres long and is very heavy. However, by Friday Malcolm & Paul had the carpet laid and firmly fixed down. I've put one or two artifacts onto the walls, put up curtain rails and hung the curtains over the windows and the door but Maureen was rather taken aback when she discovered just how much "stuff" she had stored away ready to display; I suggested that she should adopt the system used by museums and display just a small selection of the total stock and rotate the selection every few months.

We went to the Stronsay Hotel on Sunday evening, our first visit for quite some time. We went partly because Maureen wanted to celebrate the completion of another phase in her "medieval hall" project and partly because Maureen had almost run out of cigarettes and the shop was shut. Allan & Carol (landlord & landlady) were on their own so we had a good chat about a variety of topics and ended up going home with one of Allan's books that Allan was sure would be of interest to Maureen.

10 June 2008

First an apology for being so late in producing this edition of the Fletcher Saga. It should have been ready in May but we, like everyone else in Orkney, were too busy making the most of the good weather. We simply enjoyed the warm sunshine, but the farmers have been very busy ploughing, harrowing, drilling and rolling their fields whilst one or two light showers have helped the seed to germinate. The lambing and calving are now over so the arable fields are filled with sheep and with cattle. And on the fifth of June I became eligible for my state pension.

A few weeks ago, Stronsay's genial GP, Dr George McKay, held an open meeting to announce that he had proposed to NHS (National Health Service) Orkney that Stronsay and the nearby island of Eday be combined into a single practice when Eday's own GP retires this summer. This would mean Dr McKay travelling by a small charter boat to Eday on two afternoons each week and holding a surgery for an hour or two before returning on the scheduled ferry. I think the idea is to give the idea a trial run for a few months before assessing the results. Dr McKay is due to retire at the end of 2009, so he is keen to see the practice left in a condition that is viable and able to attract a new GP.

Do any of the readers of this Saga know of a qualified GP who would like to move to a small, single-handed practice of about 500 patients? I am sure there must be at least one GP working in an inner city who would love to move to a more relaxed atmosphere, even if it was only for a few years.

One of Dr McKay's two nurses is Margareth; you may remember me mentioning her, her kittens and her goats in the Saga for 15 June 2006. Margareth has a *Monstera Delicosa* or Swiss Cheese Plant and, after extensive enquiries from Lands' End to John O'Groats, she appears to have the only flowering and fruiting cheese plant in Britain. Apparently, this is a very rare event because it needs special nutrients and growing conditions. Moreover, it takes a year to ripen! Margareth's daughter is a nurse at Balfour Hospital in Kirkwall and only comes home occasionally so the Swiss Cheese Plant is in her (unheated) bedroom. The plant seems to thrive on virtual neglect and gets an occasional splash of Stronsay tap water plus a few drops of "Baby Bio" once a year or when Margareth remembers to do it! The plant has been decapitated and the top along with its aerial roots repotted when it gets too straggly. Margareth is obviously a very green-fingered lady as she also has a *Sansevieria Golden Hahnii* or Mother-in-law's Tongue which is in bud. Margareth would love to hear from anyone who has any similar plant(s) in bud or in flower. There are photographs of the plants at the end of this Saga.

Last Sunday (8 June) was "Lifeboat Sunday", a day when the annual fund-raising event for the RNLI (Royal National Lifeboat Institute) is held on Stronsay. Kirkwall's lifeboat came over for the day and was open for anyone to look around and inspect the wide range of equipment that is carried on board. The RNLI's supporters (both on- and off-island) put on their usual magnificent buffet lunch at the Community Centre where the main room was ringed with tables bearing a myriad of dishes, both hot and cold, and a mouth-watering selection of desserts. Either before or after your meal you could also participate in raffles or several tombola-like games; you could even get your hair cut as a qualified hairdresser was providing haircuts for ladies & for gentleman at five pounds a time.

Good news on the archaeology front. An archaeology team of eight, led by Naomi Woodward, is coming to Stronsay in the Autumn to continue with their excavations for four weeks. The SDT (Stronsay Development Trust) are running a raffle called "Dig Deep for the Archaeology Team!" to help to raise funds for the archaeologists accommodation. If anyone wishes to make a donation they may do so through the SDT Secretary who is "Julia Crocker, Clifton, Stronsay, Orkney, KW17 2AR"; Julia will issue a GiftAid form if applicable.







15 July 2008

According to Bill Miller, RNLI committee secretary on Stronsay, the Lifeboat Sunday events on Stronsay last month raised over £2,500.

Regular readers of my ramblings will remember that I got my first hearing aid earlier this year. Batteries for the hearing aid are available from Dr George McKay's surgery so when my first pack of batteries was finished, I called to collect a new pack from Katrina, Dr McKay's very friendly and highly efficient practice manager. I popped the new pack of batteries into my shirt pocket and forgot all about them until Maureen came in a couple of days later and handed me the rather tattered remains of the pack of batteries; they had gone, with my shirt, through a complete hot wash cycle and spent quite some time in the tumble drier. Amazingly the batteries still work so I didn't have to go cap in hand and confess to Dr McKay what I'd done.

Karen English from Tennessee, USA is an avid read of the Fletcher Saga and had emailed us to say she was spending a couple of weeks in Orkney and would like to visit Stronsay. So it was that I collected Karen off the morning ferry on 18 June and drove her up to Claremont where Karen, Maureen and I had early morning tea. Fortunately, the weather was fine and not too windy so I took Karen on the Grand Tour of Stronsay beginning at the viewpoint on St John's Hill. This proved rather tricky because we found that the grass had not been cut for some time and I had to use my size 13 wellington boots to trample a path through the

wet grass for Karen to follow. Next on the agenda was the St Catherine's Bay where our approach via the steep track leading down to the beach from the telephone exchange caused a great stir amongst the myriad of resident rabbits who emerged from cover to flee to the safety of the nearest burrow. Next, we drove on southwards and just before Stronsay's very own Fire Station turned right towards Rothiesholm (pronounced "rouse 'em") to see the variety of birds in the small lochs on the way to the road-end at Millfield Moss. Retracing our tracks to the Fire Station we headed for the seal hide and bird hide at Holland Farm, calling in at Olivebank Stores to collect our newspaper. We spent so much time chatting to people in the farmyard at Holland Farm that we didn't really have time to go down to the beach to watch the seals and ended up travelling the back to Claremont via the Old Mill at Lower Millfield. We didn't want to be late getting back to Claremont because Maureen had spent the morning preparing a meal of North Ronaldsay lamb. After the meal we sat chatting but couldn't really relax because we were all heading for Moncur Memorial Church at 4 pm where the Oxford Singers were putting on a concert. The Oxford Singers numbered about 25 in all and were conducted by Stephen Wilkinson, they were part of the St Magnus Festival and their visit to Stronsay (on the same ferry that had brought Karen) was really a rehearsal for their concerts on mainland a few days later. The concert was very enjoyable especially in the glorious acoustics of Stronsay's kirk and we heard pieces by Byrd, Buxtehude, Purcell, and JS Bach. After the concert there was just time to have a cup of tea with Karen before delivering back to the quay so she could travel back to Kirkwall.

Maureen's *Medieval Hall* is now officially a *Baronial Hall* as she has so much stuff from different periods of history. I think it's going to be like one of these museums or art galleries where only a fraction of its stock is on display and the remainder is "in store".

Margreth's "Mother-In-Law's Tongue" is still flowering.



But now Margareth has sent me a photograph of a mystery plant. It lives on the windowsill of her daughter's bedroom along with the cheese plant, aspidistra, and staghorn fern. The leaves are wide and furry, the length of each stem is about 10" and it has several yellow-ish "paint brushes" sprouting from it. Does anyone have any idea what it is?



Margareth is not only a healthcare professional with green fingers, she also likes sea fishing and, judging from this photograph, she is quite good at it!



The monks of Papa Stronsay invited us to their annual bonfire and barbeque in honour of St. John the Baptist. However, we didn't go because I was still getting over a slightly queasy stomach and Maureen's Meniere's Syndrome makes travelling by sea quite an ordeal. Apparently, there was a good turnout on the day despite the rather wet and windy weather which caused the barbeque to be held in one of the huge buildings on Papa Stronsay. There are photographs of the bonfire on the monastery's blog

One of our neighbours who lives just 2 doors away is Julia Crocker (Secretary of the Stronsay Development Trust). Julia has converted the garage of Clifton, her house in Whitehall village, into a very smart arts and crafts shop which was officially opened on 28 June. The shop has some books relevant to Orkney and to Stronsay but it is Julia's intention that the shop will concentrate on art and craft produced on Stronsay by Stronsay residents; the shop does have its very own website but it isn't quite finished yet!

18 August 2008

We've been having really good weather these last few weeks. Maureen has cleared out her greenhouse; it's really the old coal shed but with the original leaky roof replaced by clear, corrugated plastic one. I've converted the old outside lavatory, which is in good condition, into a "potting shed". After whitewashing the interior walls and roof it now seems much less gloomy. In there I've put some

lettuce plants we were given, they seem to be thriving, and I've put a few cauliflower seeds and radish seeds into small pots, and they seem to be growing OK. One day in July it was so hot that it melted the tarred road outside the Fire Station. We're not used to these temperatures!

Mike & Sheila's ducks have raised a brood, but one duckling has been brought up by one of their hens and refuses to go anywhere near the duck pond despite the best efforts of Mike & Sheila to encourage it. If the duckling strays too far from its "mother" hen the hen just clucks and the duckling scurries back.

Although we're basking in sunshine, we've an eye on the winter so we bought a couple of portable electric lanterns to cope with any power cuts. They are the "wind up" type which will also run from a 12-volt car battery. They should prove very handy, and experimentation has shown that about a minute of "winding" will provide around 30 minutes of light.

I went over to Kirkwall on the Friday before the County Show and the weather was fine and warm. Of course, on the following day it poured down in the afternoon. It was my first visit to mainland for some weeks and I was surprised to find that Orkney Ferries have moved into the 21st century and the ferry fares can now be paid on board by credit or debit card instead of the old system of either cash or cheque. Whilst in Kirkwall I visited the "new" Tesco store (previously owned by various groups including Presto, Safeway/Morrisons and Somerfield) and noticed that it's still mostly the same staff who've been there through all the changes of ownership. There was some controversy when Tesco announced that they were going to buy the store from Somerfield and even more controversy when Tesco announced that they wanted to build an extension to the store. The store was closed for several weeks when Tesco took over which, apparently, caused quite a bit of congestion in both the Co-op and Lidl stores.

It's our custom to listen to the "Book at Bedtime" on BBC Radio 4. However, at the beginning of each episode the announcers have developed the annoying habit of telling listeners what's going to happen next instead of just giving a resume of what's happened in previous episodes. Yet another reason for me to shout at the wireless.

It's the Orkney International Science festival next month. All of the events are on mainland but on Thu 11 Sep and Fri 12 Sep there is a special event on Stronsay which centres on the 200-year-old mystery of "Stronsay Beast". I've booked our tickets, if you're interested in the event, I've posted the details on the Stronsay Development Trust website

Margareth has yet another "mystery" plant! In the photographs below, just at the back of the mother-in-laws-tongue, is a pot containing four huge (Spanish onion size) bulbs. Out of each bulb grows about a 3ft long "snake" which then

branches and produce little white dandelion-like clocks. It does not have leaves and the flowers are tiny, about the size of a garden pea (a pea in the pod not the pod). Margareth inherited this plant 4 years ago and says that she has done nothing with it except neglect it, it gets water from the capillary action of the bench it sits on and lives in an old 8" plastic glue pot. What is it?





20 October 2008

We've just (Sat 18 Oct) got back from the doctor's surgery after having our annual anti-influenza injections. So far, we've had no adverse reactions, but we often wonder whether these injections have any real effect - would we catch 'flu if we didn't have them?

A couple of weeks ago we went up to Olivebank, one of our two shops, and did a bit of shopping. We also collected the newspapers for ourselves and for Sue, our postmistress. I wonder why it is that all the extra bits that go in the Saturday

edition of the Daily Telegraph don't usually arrive until Monday - there are no newspapers from mainland on Sunday, they arrive on Monday. It's no fault of Maurice & Sheila who run the shop, they are at the mercy of Loganair who carry newspapers out from Kirkwall; and they in turn are reliant on the early-morning newspaper flight up from Inverness or Aberdeen. The effect of this is that on Monday there is a weighty pile of newspapers to cart home, and we don't get the Telegraph's radio & TV guide in time to see what's on on Sunday; we must rely on the BBC Radio 4 website. But I digress. On our way back from Olivebank to the other shop on Stronsay, Ebenezer Stores, I parked outside the post office whilst Maureen took the newspapers in to Sue, the postmistress. However, when I tried to drive off to Ebenezer Stores the gear stick (it's an automatic) felt very sloppy and didn't seem to be attached to anything nor did the car engage gear. Fortunately, the car was outside the Post Office and therefore, quite literally, just across the road from Claremont so I left it where it was and phoned Mark, the island's car mechanic who works from Olivebank garage. Next day Mark came along and diagnosed the problem straightaway – the cable between the gear lever and the transmission had snapped right at the end. Mark managed to get the car back to the garage at Olivebank, phoned the local Land Rover agent in Kirkwall and then phoned me with the news that a new cable and the extra bits to fit it would cost me well over £178 pounds; I should have known that it would have been an expensive item after paying over 100 pounds for a new oil cooler (a two-foot length of copper pipe with heat-dispersing fins soldered onto it) 2 or 3 years ago. The car is now well over 12 years old and spending that much on a simple repair would be uneconomical so Mark said he would try to fix the old cable; and, being an honest chap, said that he couldn't guarantee that he would be successful nor that the repair would be long-lasting. An hour later Mark phoned with the good news that he had managed to re-attach the cable but, because the cable was now a couple of inches shorter, I would only be able to select “park”, “reverse” or “drive”. As those are the only selections that I ever use this was quite acceptable to me and I heaved a sigh of relief. The car has been fine ever since, or at least it had been until the windscreen wipers packed up a week ago! When the car received its annual MOT inspection in January 2008 the mechanic on mainland warned me that the next MOT would involve some major (and expensive!) repair work so when the next MOT inspection becomes due in January 2009 the car will become an “island car”; this means I won't have to put it in for an MOT inspection but I will only be able to use the car on Stronsay. As I only ever go to mainland 3 or 4 times a year this is no great hardship.

Sue, who has been Stronsay's postmistress for the last five years or so, has now retired. Lisa, who lives just down the road and has worked as relief

postmistress from time to time, has taken over from Sue. And our neighbour Bob Tateson, a teacher at Stronsay Junior High School, retired at half-term so Bob's house, owned by the Education Authority, is now empty awaiting the arrival of Bob's replacement.

Whilst browsing the Internet for photographs of Stronsay I found a wonderful website, it contains a huge quantity of photographs of the UK including Orkney – there's the usual Vat of Kirbuster photograph but there's a photograph which actually shows our house, its centre right, second house from the right. I even found a photograph of the Derbyshire village (Hayfield) where I was brought up

Malcolm, our reliable handyman, moved to a new house last year. He chose the new house because it was attached to a large but rather decrepit outbuilding. He has made the outbuilding weather-proof, made it accessible from within the house and upgraded the electrics; now the decrepit outbuilding is a large, well-equipped workshop. The outbuilding housed several feral cats which Malcolm was amazed to find happily co-existing with the family of blackbirds that have their nest in the rafters inside the building; apparently the birds and the cats share a common entrance to the outbuilding via an old steel drive shaft which runs through a large hole in the wall. Malcolm has seen a cat watching a blackbird walk into the barn along the old drive shaft, inches from her nose. However, although the cats and blackbirds manage to tolerate each other the cats soon dispose of any mice or rats that dare to show their nose in the building.

Vicky the hairdresser paid her monthly visit to Stronsay a couple of weeks ago. As she was doing Maureen's hair Vicky remarked that her cat had developed a habit of jumping onto her bedside table and drinking from the glass of water that was left on it overnight. The noise of the cat lapping the water woke Vicky up in the middle of the night so she thought of a clever ploy to foil the cat – she only filled the glass to the half-way mark so that the cat couldn't reach it. However, the cat was equal to the challenge and found out that it could dip its paw into the half-full glass of water and then slurp the water from its wet paw thus making even more noise than just lapping from a full glass of water. This reminded me that our white cat, Surrey, has become very lazy just lately; when a fresh bowl of water is placed on the floor for her she lies down and waits for the ripples to cease before carefully dipping her paw into the water and then licking the water from her paw - all this still lying on the floor, how lazy can a cat get?

In last month's blog I mentioned the Stronsay Beast - I should have mentioned Dr Yvonne Simpson's website which has lots of information on the history of the Stronsay Beast. There's also a handy guest book if you want to pass on your ideas of what you think the Beast might have been.

02 December 2008

I started this blog last month (November) but kept on putting off publishing it. Now it is December, so I thought I'd best put it on the web before the New Year was upon us.

Margareth thought that readers of this Saga might like to see how the captive fruits of her *Monstera Deliciosa* are progressing. The flowers appeared on April the 1st 2008 and according to Botanical Knowledge the fruit takes twelve months to ripen. The fruits are filling out nicely and are well on the way to ripening. They are still living in her daughter's bedroom and being thoroughly neglected - Margareth says "no change there! Margareth and her husband, Al, have now put their house on the market and wonder if the house will sell before the due event. Maybe a kindly prospective purchaser would take it on! Margareth's daughter has bought a flat and it doesn't look as though there will be room for the plant to be accommodated there!



Margareth, her husband, Al, and her unusual plant family send season's greetings and a healthy and prosperous 2009 to you all.

Together with a handful of hardy souls Maureen and I attended the annual service at the Stronsay War Memorial at mid-day on Sun 9 Nov. It was a bitterly cold day which felt even colder because of the strong wind and the exposed location of the War Memorial. Our minister, Jennifer, made the service a very short one and we all shivered as we stood in silence to remember all those who had given their lives for our freedom.

For some time now Maureen has been complaining that the kitchen seemed to be very dark, and she needed to use the under-cupboard lights in order to see what she was doing when preparing meals. As the existing 6-foot fluorescent tubes had been in use for 2 or 3 years I decided to replace them with a couple of new tubes from Ebenezer Stores. What a difference it made. Now we need dark glasses whenever we go into the kitchen!

In my last blog I mentioned that the car's windscreen wipers had stopped working. After receiving a lot of help and advice from a friend on the island I discovered that one of the bearings had seized up; no doubt Stronsay's salt-laden wind had contributed to this problem. However, after the application of a bit of non-too-gentle persuasion and copious amounts of lubrication the wipers are now functional once more. Now all I must do is replace a worn-out wiper blade. The car's annual road-worthiness test becomes due in January 2009, but I think our trusty Discovery will become an "island car"; this will mean that it no longer needs annual road-worthiness tests but is prohibited from being driven anywhere except on Stronsay's roads.

We had a delivery of heating oil last month and were delighted to find that the price has now dropped back to 46.75 pence per litre; much better than the 64.8 pence per litre we paid in July. And when I took Surrey over to Kirkwall for her annual vaccination last week, I found that I could buy petrol at just under a pound per gallon.

Recently I discovered the Kirkwall on-line library database which has been very handy when Maureen wants to find out whether the library has more books by an author she enjoyed reading. The library staff are extremely helpful in responding to requests for a particular book to be put on the mobile library when it visits Stronsay, on last month's visit Maureen was delighted to receive the very latest Bernard Cornwell book "Azincourt". I forgot to add the NHS Orkney website vacancy notices for our GP and practice nurse. Maybe you know of someone who might be interested. Closing date is Friday 18 December.

4 February 2010

2010 already. It hardly seems possible that on the 31st of January, 2010 it was six years since we moved from Yorkshire to Orkney. I am kept fairly busy with editing The Limpet (Stronsay's monthly newsletter), acting as organist at Stronsay's kirk and attending the Michael Lee's weekly evening classes in "singing techniques". People also seem to think that I'm knowledgeable on computer matters and seek my advice but I know my limitations and pass on any tricky problems to someone more skilled than myself (thanks, Malcolm). However, the important thing is that there's no great stress involved, and we've quickly realised that nothing is so important that it can't be left for another day.

Margareth, one of Stronsay's community nurses, has sent me photographs of yet another mystery plant - I think her house is part of the Twilight Zone! It is growing in a mixed pot of foliage plants (umbrella plant and peace lilies) in a south-facing porch. Margareth thinks that it is a variegated member of the Dracaena family and according to the books she has consulted it is a foliage plant. However, the flower spike is 10? long and appeared very suddenly. Any ideas?

1 March 2010

Margareth Richards, one of Stronsay's nurses, appeared on BBC Radio Scotland's gardening programme to enquire about her mystery plant (see my previous blog). Listen to her on the BBC website at page

www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00r3zcx

Margareth's bit starts at 6 mins 34 seconds into the programme and ends at 10 mins 55 seconds. It's available to listen to until Saturday 06 Feb but it may not be available to those outside the UK.

Christmas only seems to have been a couple of weeks ago but next month it will be Easter.

The big news on Stronsay is that our minister, Rev Dr Jennifer George, has become engaged to Robin Graham from Eday. The wedding is on Sat 17 April in Stronsay's kirk.

19 April 2010

On Thursday 15 April all flights were cancelled because of the volcanic ash problem and since then there have been no flights into or out of Kirkwall. At the time of writing (Monday 19 April) it seems that flights may start again tomorrow but those to/from Shetland are still cancelled. The only minor inconvenience to Maureen and myself has been the lack of newspapers but Stronsay Junior High School had problems because the school teachers who usually commute daily between Kirkwall and Stronsay had to stay at home; the

situation was not as bad as it could have been because the school could call upon the services of Dave & Ruth Bowen who moved up to Stronsay a couple of years ago after taking early retirement from school teaching. The flight cancellations affected the wedding of our minister, Jennifer George, to Robin Graham on Saturday. Orkney Ferries amended their timetable for Saturday 17th April so that folk from Eday could attend the wedding and get back to Eday on the same day but the cancellation of all flights into and out of Kirkwall meant that quite a few folk from Robin's folk were unable to attend the wedding; Jennifer's people were fortunate enough to arrive from California, USA just before the flight cancellations began. However, getting over to the USA for a planned wedding blessing may prove rather tricky. Here's a fashion note, kindly supplied by Ruth Bowen - Jennifer wore a champagne silk dress with a jewelled lace coat and train which were replaced by a lace bolero for the evening dance; the menfolk wore thistle buttonholes and pale purple ties.



Jennifer signs the register as Robin looks on.



Jennifer and Robin in Stronsay kirk.

We're still waiting for the appointment of a permanent GP to replace Dr George McKay who retired last year. We have had a series of locums since George left but interviews of candidates to fill the post were held at the end of March and we're just waiting to be told the results.

MV Samira (1,700 tons) arrived in Stronsay harbour on Easter Sunday and spent a couple of days unloading umpteen huge (600kg or 1,320 lbs) bags of fertiliser for the local farmers. For the next few days there was a continual procession of tractors and trailers carrying the bags from the quayside out to the farms. We're accustomed to Stronsay's roads being virtually empty for most of the time, so the "heavy traffic" took a bit of getting used to.

The Orkney Summer Travel Brochure 2010 is now available online.

Steven Heddle has created a new website which contains lots of information about Orkney, it's well worth a visit.

22 July 2010

How time seems to just zip past. It certainly doesn't seem like 3 months since my last blog. All the county shows will be taking place next month, when they are over it will be almost winter and yet another year will have passed! During the summer we had the usual RNLI buffet lunch which raised over £1,800 but the Stronsay Regatta had to be abandoned after two attempts; the first was cancelled because there was insufficient wind and the next effort two weeks later had to be cancelled because of high winds. Pity poor Viv Erdman from Ebenezer Stores who had prepared large amounts of mince & tatties for the competitors in both events!

Sue Fairbrother (who was Stronsay's postmistress until a couple of years ago) took her camper van over to Kirkwall last month so that the garage could fit a new spare part and thus enable her van to pass its annual MOT test. Imagine the mechanic's surprise when he lifted the bonnet and discovered that a blackbird had built its nest on top of the battery - and there were eggs in the nest! However, the mechanic was able to leave the nest & eggs undisturbed as he fitted the new part on Sue's van before issuing a new MOT certificate. Sue drove very carefully indeed until she arrived back home later that day. Despite the long journey involving two ferry crossings the blackbird returned to the nest once the van was parked up outside Sue's cottage. In due course the eggs hatched, at least one of the blackbird's brood survived and Sue was able to remove the nest and associated debris from her van. Several people have remarked that similar bird's nests have caused vehicles to catch fire; perhaps Sue was just lucky.

We have an old potting shed at the bottom of the garden. One day I forgot to close the door and when I went down to the shed a few days later I found that

a pair of swallows had built a nest in the rafters of the potting shed. I've left the door open and haven't been back leaving the birds un-disturbed. We see the birds darting in and out so presumably they have youngsters to feed.

As a part of the Powerdown project Stronsay now has a large communal greenhouse (it's really a very large polytunnel) with 10 plots. The greenhouse is right next to the kirk and there are already some plants sprouting whilst work is still ongoing on paths and raised beds. Everyone is looking forward to a successful autumn-winter growing season. It seems that being out of the wind makes an amazing difference but most apparent is the speed at which things are germinating. Now all the plots are taken in the greenhouse and there is also a waiting list:

The price of both heating oil and petrol are as high as they have been since we moved here six years ago. Last month I topped up our tank of heating oil and was charged 55.5 pence per litre. I shall have to consider changing over to electric storage heaters if the price keeps going up like this. I filled up the car last month and found that petrol was 137 pence per litre. Shortly afterwards that the car's exhaust system finally gave up the ghost and I had to decide whether it was worth replacing the whole exhaust (which had already been repaired umpteen times by Andy, our very efficient mechanic) or buying an old "island" car. I finally decided to get the exhaust replaced as the rest of the car is in reasonable working order although bits such as the radio and electrically-operated windows do occasionally stop working.

4 January 2011

Happy New Year!

Wow! Six months since I last posted a blog - how time flies. One of my main jobs has been creating an online version of the Stronsay Limpet.

Stronsay now has a full-time GP! Dr Roger Neville-Smith took over as principal GP for the Stronsay Surgery on Monday 9th August.

It was the County Show on Sat 14 Aug and 60 people from Stronsay travelled on the early morning ferry to Kirkwall. All the ferry timetables had been changed just for the day so that island folk could get to the County Show and get back on the same day. However, two holiday makers were unaware of the changed timetable and missed the morning ferry. Fortunately the new "fast boat" was available for charter and the holiday makers managed to get to Kirkwall in time to catch their flight home.

On Sunday 15 August the monks of Papa Stronsay invited all the inhabitants of Stronsay to a barbeque. At 6:30pm the monks' large boat took about 50 of us over to the monastery where we were treated to a marvellous barbeque

and an enormous bonfire. The monks' small boat ferried folk back to Stronsay in small groups, I returned at about 10:30pm but it was after midnight when the small boat made its last trip from Papa Stronsay. The monks report that "Google Street View" has now reached Stronsay, the photographs should be on-line sometime next year.

Next door to Claremont is Stronsay's old Police House which OIC were offering for sale at £75,000, closing date for offers was Friday, 17 September. It's a two storey, two-bedroomed house which still contains the original police cells but needs a fair bit of work to make it a comfortable place in which to live. I've no idea whether it has been sold and I've not seen anybody near the place.

7 February 2011

Windy Stronsay

Last Thursday night (3 Feb) the evening ferry was cancelled because of forecasted high winds. It was certainly a breezy evening and night, gusts of 100 mph on Stronsay and 122 mph recorded on mainland Orkney. The "official" Met Office windspeed at Kirkwall airport was a mere 78 mph. There was some minor damage to fencing on Stronsay and a few houses were without electricity for several hours until the Scottish Hydro engineers came over on the lunch time ferry to fix the problem. One newcomer to the island said he and his wife slept in the lounge as the bedroom (mostly built from wood) was flexing and groaning quite alarmingly; what eventually persuaded them to move into the lounge was watching the panes of glass in the bedroom window bowing inwards. Another lady said she spent the night sitting up in bed listening to the roofing timbers groaning under the relentless pressure of the winds. Several folk mentioned that they felt their houses "shaking" under the onslaught of 100 mph winds. However, there was little or no structural damage as most houses on Stronsay are 100+ years old and built to withstand the worst of Orcadian weather. The wind did wake me up at about 3am but I soon went back to sleep.

23 May 2011

I've been a member of the "Friends of Cathedral Music" for several years, this wonderful group exists to raise funds and award grants (over £1.85 million since 1956) to sustain the tradition of music in cathedrals. I've never been able to attend any of the FCMs regular "gatherings" but this year the FCMs Northern Gathering started in Aberdeen and finished up in Kirkwall, so I was able to attend the Kirkwall events. On Wednesday afternoon 40 of us were given a tour of St Magnus cathedral in Kirkwall followed by a demonstration of the organ by Dr George McPhee, organist at Paisley Abbey for the last 48 years; his daughter is a

GP in South Ronaldsay, hence his Orcadian connection. Later that day we attended a civic reception hosted by James Stockan, deputy convenor of OIC, before going to the St Magnus Centre to hear a concert by the Mayfield Singers. On Thursday I opted out of the coach tour of Orkney but rejoined everyone for a marvellous and inspiring Choral Evensong in Kirkwall cathedral after which we adjourned to dinner at the Kirkwall Hotel before making our way back to the cathedral to hear Complaine sung by the Orkney Schola. A very enjoyable couple of days listening to good music and enjoying good companionship; I discovered that I'm the most northerly member of Friends of Cathedral Music and I think I've persuaded more than one person to come back to Orkney for a holiday next year.

As readers probably already know I'm the organist at Stronsay's kirk. This year we formed a small choir which sang a couple of items on Easter Sunday. We had begun having practices in the church hall on Wednesdays, but the kirk ran out of heating oil. It was so bitterly cold in the church hall that the following week the choir gathered at our house where Maureen's "baronial hall" was put to good use. Thankfully the kirk was soon re-stocked with heating oil and rehearsals continued in the church hall.

We had to smile when the national press was bemoaning the price of petrol which had reached £1.35 a litre - it's been that price on Stronsay for the last 12 months. Petrol here is now £1.58 a litre. Highland Fuels delivered 600 litres of heating oil to our house the other week and I await the bill with some trepidation, the last delivery was 70p a litre!

Summer is on its way, the daffodils and primulas are just about finished, the cattle are back in the fields after their winter sojourn indoors and the "nursery" next to Sampsons Lane has been very busy with lambing - there seem to be quite a few twins & triplets this year.

The May 2011 edition of the Limpet, Stronsay's monthly newsletter, is now available online at www.stronsaylimpet.co.uk.

It is now more than seven years since we moved to Stronsay after I retired from the Civil Service. We had intended to spend our retirement in Scarborough (North Yorkshire) but we soon decided we wanted somewhere quieter and more peaceful. Having spent a couple of holidays in Stromness in the late 1970s (when I was working in Brora, Sutherland) we used the internet to investigate the housing situation in Orkney and took the plunge; we arranged to rent a cottage in Orphir (Orkney mainland), sold our house, put all our effects into storage in York and on 31 January 2004 headed northwards. Shortly after arriving in Orkney we found a suitable property and on 28 March 2004 we moved into Claremont.

25 May 2011

John Holloway, Stronsay's ornithologist, will be on Radio Orkney at 7:30am (local time) tomorrow morning (Thursday) talking about a rare visitor to Stronsay. It's a slender-billed curlew. John tells me that the species is considered to be extinct by some authorities and there is a major 'push' on at present to find the breeding grounds in Northern Russia - if they do still exist!