Facebook Ramblings
16 to 31 December 2020

Wednesday 16 December

Since it is (almost) Christmas, let's have a Crib every morning as well as a Rambling at night.

Last year our Crib Festival had a wonderful wooden spoon nativity made by JACK, St Edmund's Junior Church, organised by Karen.

The obvious link to make is the Collect for the Sunday before Advent - Stir Up Sunday.

Stir up, we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people; that they, plenteously bringing forth the fruit of good works, may of thee be plenteously rewarded; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Today would have been Gareth's 31st birthday. All anniversaries are hard. I started the day with a Christingle by Zoom for the youngsters at Walter Evans school, and this mug seemed appropriate.

We went up to National Trust Kedleston Hall, but it was too cold and wet to walk far. I had a latte and mince pie while sat in the car in the rain - that sums up this Christmas.

Gareth loved his Shakespeare, so we sat and watched the 1979 BBC production of "Twelfth Night". It had Felicity Kendal as Viola, so that cheered me up. I have written a blog about it at http://www.northernvicar.co.uk/

Kedleston have a Beatrix Potter trail - I liked the information "Frogs don't hibernate in winter, but live in the warmer mud at the bottom of a pond." Sounds like good advice for 2020.

Thursday 17 December

Today is the day when, in a normal year, the St Edmund's Baby and Toddler Group would come to church for their Christmas service, then have a party and Santa would arrive. St Edmund's Pre-school come to church as well. Last year we enjoy "The Grumpy Innkeeper" - I was made for the part. This is the Crib they made for last year's Crib Festival.

While Toddler Group has been suspended since March, Pre-School were back at May half term, and they have done an incredible job working with the children since then. We now have School's Out in the Hall as well before and after Pre-School - so we are certainly playing our part in ensuring that parents can do the work that is required, while their children are safely looked after. A huge "thank you" to all the leaders and to Caroline in the Church Office who have dealt with the ever-changing rules through this difficult year. They have put the children first. (We haven't re-started Toddlers as two groups in the Hall at the same time are not possible).

I am sorry that Caroline is not getting her hug from Santa this morning - and I'm sorry Santa is not getting his hug from Caroline!

For many years the Christmas Panto was part of our lives. It will not surprise you to know that our daughter, having started her stage career with "Sound of Music" at Lincoln Theatre Royal at the age of 6, was one of Angela Morgan's School of Dancers who performed at the Theatre Royal in Bury St Edmunds every Christmas. If any of her friends would like me to post photos of Dr Hannah Barham-Brown, BA Hons., BSc Hons, MBBS, FRSA, I am open to bribes.

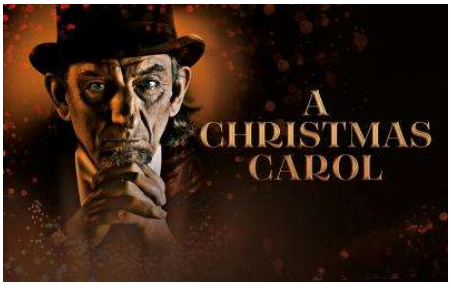
Not having any grandchildren I can take to the Panto, we still manage several Christmas Shows most years. There are some benefits to having a wife who is a wheelchair user, and the free tickets for the carer is one of them - indeed one local theatre prints "Essential Carer" on my ticket. It's good to know I'm essential. She needs me to go and buy the ice cream at the interval.

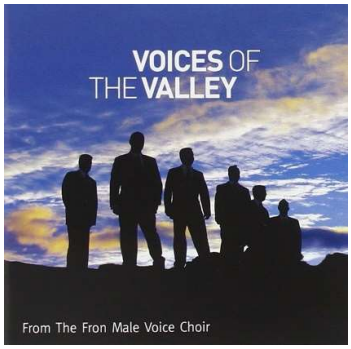
Last year we enjoyed Dickens "Christmas Carol" Derby Theatre. They took a well known story and brought it alive. We miss our local theatre and our seats on the back row - the best view in the house.

Over at Lichfield Garrick we enjoyed the madness that was "Away in a Danger". Four actors with a wonderful plot with two Russian spies coming to see the Cathedral - they were spies from Minsk (think about it). They also met three road menders from Leyton who were Elvis impersonators (We three Kings of Orient tar). The detective was Inspector Beth le Hem - and so it went on.

We also headed to New Vic Theatre in Stoke for a concert by Voices of the Valley - The Fron Male Voice Choir. Julie's quiet and reserved cousin Roger Williams and his son Keith are members, and we had a great evening. They have a concert on youtube on Saturday at 7.30 pm - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qg74YmEVA0k. I highly recommend it and will not repeat what Michael Flanders and Donald Swann said about the Welsh and their singing.

Love and prayers to all in the dramatic arts - we miss you.





Friday 18 December

Last year's Crib Festival had this wonderful offering from our friends at Portway Infant School. Lots of lovely stars - a very clever idea. I wonder how much glitter covered the classroom floor by the time they had finished?

Our teachers and school staff have been incredible over the last year. The barrage of paperwork and instructions, so many of them made on Saturday or Sunday evenings, the expectations of parents and children, the fear of staff as they are in contact with all those coughing children (and that's just in a normal year), etc. etc.

I don't do much in schools these days. Sit through governors' meetings, occasionally reminding people that there are more important things in life than pages of data. I wander in and take assembly - or get videoed these days - wind the kids up, then leave it to the staff to calm them down. I try and strengthen links between schools and their communities - and I pray.

Thank you all of you - and thanks to the children for making it worthwhile. Have a lovely holiday - you deserve it.

Yesterday I mentioned "A Christmas Carol" at Derby Theatre. Harry has reminded me that this year "A Christmas Carol" is being produced by The Old Vic and Foodcycle is being supported by them. The show is on at 1 and 7 every day from now until Christmas Eve (not

on Sunday). You can buy a ticket and watch the show at home - https://www.oldvictheatre.com/.../old.../a-christmas-carol-5

FoodCycle the charity Harry works for, is the Charity Partner for the show. The theatre writes: "Every Christmas we encourage our audiences to donate to a charity whose missions align with the themes of A Christmas Carol. This year, despite not being able to fundraise in person, we continue in our commitment and are delighted to announce FoodCycle as our Charity Partner for 2020. We are also delighted to share that writer Jack Thorne, together with his wife Rachel, has generously pledged to match all A Christmas Carol FoodCycle donations received from the public up to £250,000. We hope this will inspire people to support."

Thank you Old Vic and their audiences for supporting FoodCycle in its work to feed people in Britain in 2020. I would also like to thank Unicef for their work to feed people in Britain in 2020 - as I have said several times recently, at the moment I am ashamed to be British.

Saturday 19 December

These knitted nativity sets have been part of my life for years. Julie's Auntie Rhona knitted us a set when the kids were very little. I remember that she made several baby Jesus - "he's bound to get lost." Our little darlings would ensure that Mary regularly had twins (interesting theology). The figures lived in various different places in the different houses we lived in, and often found themselves being thrown down the stairs or use in a game of catch.

At the last couple of Crib Festivals they have been in different places in church. 2018 was the year the organ was being restored, and I have been reminded how many piles of paper/leaflets/magazines etc we had at the back of churches before Covid meant we had to tidy up!

Tomorrow we have two 10 am services (with limited numbers) and the JACK children are Nativitying on Zoom at 10. There is material to use at home and a sermon-with-pictures on the website. We have a Zoom service at 11.30 (details on www.stedsandstmatts.co.uk - video on the website later) and in the afternoon I'm doing a Nativity/Christingle with some of the other families.

Knitted Nativity Figures - time for your big moment.

Shall we have some good news? John Taylor & Co. bell foundry in Loughborough has received a £3.45m lottery grant for urgent repairs to the building and equipment, and a training and education programme.

According to the BBC "The Loughborough site has cast more than 25,000 bells that are hung in more than 100 countries, including the largest church bell in Britain, Great Paul, which hangs in St Paul's Cathedral. Its work has even entered popular culture - the bells from St Thomas's Church, on Fifth Avenue, New York, heard on The Pogues' and Kirsty McColl's Christmas anthem Fairytale of New York, were cast at the foundry." The news story is at https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/amp/uk-england-leicestershire-55355374

I called in on the off-chance in August 2012. When I mentioned I was Vicar of St Mary, Ponteland, and we had a ring of bells they had cast for the Millennium, I was greeted like a VIP and given a guided tour. Absolutely fascinating.

As a new peal we got quite a lot of visiting ringers, and there were times when, living next to the church, the bells were a bit much. But I will never forget the joy of the peals for Midnight Mass and Christmas morning, and a few days later at midnight as they rang the old year out. Nor will I forget the muffled peals they rang for the boys' funerals. You can read about the Ponteland bells at http://www.pontelandstmary.co.uk/music/st-marys-bells.html. I thought I saw they have two new bells since my time - and a google has found a picture of one of them. It is dedicated to the "joy of ringing" from my lovely Tower Captains, Julie and Stephen Bell (yes, really).

It is a shame that neither of my current towers have bells that can be rung - but that's not something to worry about this Christmas! I will include "Ding, dong" as one of the Christmas morning carols, and give thanks for ringers and bell founders (and the HLF, or whatever it is called at the moment).

Sunday 20 December

You didn't get a Christmas Crib this morning as work got in the way. Two safe services, and lovely to have singing at both of them (social distanced and obeying all the regulations). Our morning Zoom must be the only one from any church in Diocese of Derby or The Church of England which ended with a Compton Cinema Organ - thanks David Redfern. It will be on the church website www.stedsandstmatts.co.uk later today. After lunch we had 20 for a Zoom Nativity/Christingle - all good fun. Northern Reader has now eaten all the sweets.

Yesterday we walked down to Broadway Baptist Church, Derby and admired their Christmas display. Well done!

Monday 21 December

Let's have two cribs this morning that have a Spanish look. Spain perhaps, or South America - who knows? A reminder that God is not an Englishman, Mary is not an Anglo-Saxon beauty, and Jesus didn't have blonde hair and blue eyes. It is a shame that 2,000 years later our country doesn't seemed to have learned that lesson.

Pray for all those negotiating today, trying to bridge the gaps between nations. Trying to get under the rhetoric (the hatred) to maintain trade, to allow people, goods and ideas to travel. Pray for those stuck in queues, desperate to be home for Christmas, and those whose job it is to sort out the mess others have made.

I am not much of a world traveller. I have only ever left these shores about a dozen times in the 58 years of my life. It is perfectly possible to be a world citizen, a European, British and English all rolled into one.

Elizabeth Jack wrote The right hand one is ours. We bought it in San Diego - close to the Mexican border.

Today is a day with difficult memories. This is the day in 2004 when a lady died. I don't know her name, I don't know the circumstances of her death, I never met her family. Yet her family made the decision that their daughter should be an organ donor.

Our Gareth had been ill since May. No previous health problems, but his heart had been damaged - Dilated Cardiomyopathy meant that it could not do the pumping it needed to do. An on-call GP realised the problem, a heart scan at West Suffolk confirmed it, and he was blue-lighted to Guy's. Julie and I could not travel with him in the ambulance as they needed a doctor with him. By the time we got to London he was in intensive care and they were fighting to keep him alive. They succeeded, but it was several weeks before he was well enough to come home. By then he had been transferred to the care of Great Ormond Street, and in August he went onto the active transplant list. It was a long summer, a very long autumn, and we were now almost at Christmas with no sign of the transplant he needed.

Yesterday he had gone into West Suffolk Hospital as they were worried about blood results, then blue-lighted down to Great Ormond Street in the evening as they had a heart for transplant. A family (not the one I started this post with, but a different one) had made the decision their loved one would be a donor. Gareth was prepared for the operation, but then we were told the heart was not good enough and they had decided not to use it. So near and yet so far.

This morning the team had spent a lot of time with him, tweaked his drugs, made the decision we could go home for Christmas, but told us we'd have to come back to London on Boxing Day because his heart was now so weak he might need mechanical support. We were driven home, tired and fed up. I remember I was in bed by 8, Gareth finally settled down, Harry and Hannah got off too, and Julie came up about 11.30 pm. I'll continue the story tomorrow.

Despite everything, this year is a great deal better. There's a new Christmas Video on the church website and on youtube - https://youtu.be/IrTEUVX55wk. Enjoy!

Tuesday 22 December

Let's have some cribs in bells (or at least) things that look like bells. I wrote a Facebook Rambling earlier in the week celebrating that the HLF had made a large grant payment to ensure the future of the Loughborough Bell Foundry, now the only one left in Britain.

I only ever tried ringing on a couple of occasions, and decided I hadn't got the skill-set required. On occasions I have joined the ringers at the beginning or end of a peal, but I was never the sort of Vicar who would send a barrel of beer up into the Ringing Chamber (sorry). Many years ago, the Suffolk Ringers came to one of my churches for a ringing spree that ended with Evensong. We used a bell ringing hymn which included the line "Our bells while changing." Sadly there was a typo.

"Young man", said a very annoyed ringer, "our bells do not clang".

If you didn't read yesterday's Rambling, I suggest you do before you read this one.

The phone rang at 1 am on Wednesday 22 December 2004. It was Nadine the Transplant Coordinator at Great Ormond Street. "Peter, we have a heart for Gareth. We know this one is OK. We need him here as quickly as possible. There is an ambulance parked outside your front door."

At that point I realised what the blue flashing light through the curtains was. Gareth, Julie and I got from our beds to the ambulance in 7 minutes. Out of Bury St Edmunds, along the A14, onto the M11. I will never forget that view as you come down from Harlow, cross the M25 and see London spread ahead of you. "I don't know where Great Ormond Street is" said the driver, "so there's another vehicle coming to guide us in." We saw blue lights coming up the other carriageway, then slowed until it came back and overtook us. Then we sped up again. We drove in convoy down the Bow Road into central London, blues and twos, through the red traffic lights, wrong side of the road. Aldgate, Bank, Holborn Viaduct, and to the hospital. We went up to Ladybird Ward, and were sent straight down to Theatre. Home to Theatre in less than two hours. Julie and I went back up to Ladybird Ward, where we had been just twelve hours earlier. One of the nurses made us tea and toast. They put us in a cubicle and we tried to sleep. Nadine or one of the team would pop in regularly, and finally Martin the surgeon came in to tell us it was complete. He was pleased with how it had gone.

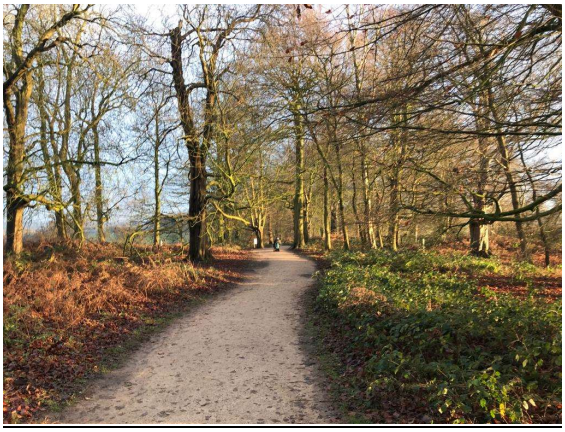
Later in the morning we were allowed to see Gareth, and late afternoon he started to come round from the anaesthetic. "Have I had my transplant?" he asked. "Look at your chest" I said.

He remained in an air-tight cubicle for several days and there were several hairy moments. Moments where alarms get pressed and doctors run. We got through them. Then a week or so on Ladybird Ward, then another week or so with us in the parent accommodation just across

the road. We travelled back to Bury, slightly slower than we had driven to the hospital, after about 3 weeks.

That was 2004. 2005 was not easy, quite a lot of rejection episodes and hospital stays. But life settled down, and (most of the time) life was good. Gareth died in 2013. We had all hoped the new heart would have lasted for longer than that, but it was not to be. Yet we are eternally grateful to donor and her family, and to the GOSH team. Our NHS is wonderful. We must fight for it.

Today we had a 5 mile walk round Kedleston. Needed a bit of peace. It was a beautiful afternoon.



Wednesday 23 December

It is a wet, grey day - lovely weather for ducks. So here is a duck nativity. I looked up "ducks in bible" on google to see what I could find. Apparently "ducks" are not mentioned, but Leviticus 11.13-18 gives a list of "unclean birds", birds you cannot eat. It includes "water-hen" (New Revised Standard Version), which is translated "swan" in the King James Bible. I have even found a discussion page as to whether a Jew can eat duck a la orange!

I also found a nativity where all the characters are the same shape as the ducks. On this day when so many are shopping, let this be a lesson to us all. To quote Roseanne Barr (a sentence I have never written before) "Half the world's starving, the other half is trying to lose weight".

There is nothing better than spending a wet afternoon on the sofa watching a black and white film. When that film is "Casablanca", it is a good afternoon.

We are so old that televisions were a rarity when we went to Selwyn. Several colleges had film societies, and "Casablanca" was a staple. I remember one occasion, at Magdalene I think it was, when the projector broke - and the audience kept the dialogue going while they fixed it. You would also watch the film through a cloud of cigarette smoke.

They used to have a 9 pm showing, so we would walk back to College about midnight. Young and in love. Slightly older now, no longer able to walk back through Cambridge, but still in love.

I should think of some profound way to end this Ramble, but I'm tired. Let's just go with

> "Ilsa, I'm no good at being noble, but it doesn't take much to see that the problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world. Someday you'll understand that."

Christmas Eve, Thursday 24 December

For the first time since we were in Great Ormond Street in 2004, Christmas Eve is a quiet day. I would love to have packed churches all afternoon, and today is such a beautiful day it would be even more of a pleasure than normal (i.e. not so cold or dark). But it is not to be - and seeing the Covid statistics, I have no doubt we made the right decision to cancel. Do have a look at our Christmas video - https://youtu.be/IrTEUVX55wk

A small, short, no-singing service at 11.30 pm at St Edmund's - two small, short, no-congregational-singing services at 10 am tomorrow. Zoom at 11.30 am - and I would be happiest to see people on Zoom - link at www.stedsandstmatts.co.uk.

Today's cribs seem to fit. Two on a dark windowsill, with a lit candle between them. "The light shines in the darkness" - there are lots of pictures of lighthouses tomorrow. The news gives the impression that we live in a country of fear, hatred, xenophobia, corruption and incompetence. Then you read of members of the Polish community offering beds to stranded lorry drivers, of the Sikh community delivering meals, of the continuing work of the Salvation Army - and you know the light is still shining in the darkness.

When the displays for the Crib Festival were up, I found I had a spare ox, manger, Joseph and

Mary left over. Mary needed to sit on something - and the altar cross base was ideal. I didn't think of the symbolism until later. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3.16).

Christmas Day, Friday 25 December

The real "glad tidings of great joy". Happy Christmas.

Short, socially-distanced services in both churches at 10 am. Slightly longer service on Zoom at 11.30 am. If you can't make 11.30 (and I'm sorry it clashes with "Singin' in the rain" on BBC2) you can watch the video at any time - the link is on the church website www.stedsandstmatts.co.uk. Watch our lovely Christmas video too.

Boxing Day, Saturday 26 December

The Feast of Stephen. The day Good King Wenceslas did some work. I attach the lovely 1973 stamps, and I just wonder why we celebrate a king who only fed one peasant. With his wealth, power and authority, surely he could have done more than that. Perhaps he could even have made his society more just. Silly me for even suggesting it.

Today we remember Gareth - he died seven years ago on Boxing Day. Like generations of choristers this was one of his favourite carols. After all, you don't often get to say "sod" in church.

Sunday 27 December

In a normal year there would have been one service today. In this abnormal year we had three. One in each church and one on Zoom. You can watch the Zoom one on the front page of the church website - thanks Matt.

Earlier this month I arranged that David, one of our St Edmund's organists, would record three pieces of Christmas music for these services - our thanks to Karen for filming him. Today we ended with a Christmas medley.

Winter Wonderland, White Christmas, Jingle Bells, and I saw Mommy kissing Santa Claus. I bet there was no other church which ended its public worship this year with "I saw Mommy kissing Santa Claus".

I read that the song is by British songwriter Tommie Connor and first recorded by Jimmy Boyd in 1952. Wikipedia tells me that "Boyd's record was condemned by the Roman Catholic Church in Boston when it was released on the grounds that it mixed kissing with Christmas."

In a year when there hasn't been as much kissing as normal, perhaps the Catholics were right - but that would be an ecumenical matter!

If you'd like to listen to David's recording (and don't want to watch the rest of the Zoom service (!)), have a look at https://www.stedsandstmatts.co.uk/2020-july-to-december... and scroll to the bottom of the page.

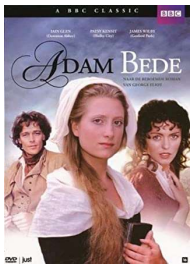
Monday 28 December

Let's have a day to read some of railway Christmas presents and watch some of the railway DVDs. I treated myself to a few more DVDs from the wonderful Panamint Cinema. Beautiful Scottish scenery - I need another trip on the West Highland Line to Mallaig.

But my favourite DVD is "Weave me a Rainbow", a selection of films about Scottish textile industries. I have learned all about Templeton's Carpet Factory in Glasgow, the making of linoleum at Nairn & Co in Kirkcaldy and, best of all, the making of Harris Tweed.

I have not been to Harris and Lewis in the Outer Hebrides, only to Barra and Eriskay down in the south. I start reading about the islands and find there is a Hebridean Way, a 156 mile walk from south to north. I hope that 2021 will be the Orkney holiday which we didn't have in 2020, and I can do the 55 mile St Magnus Way. Perhaps 2022 can be the Hebridean Way - which would not be a bad way to celebrate my 60th birthday.

My wife has been a little rude about the excitement level of my DVDs. She has purchased a DVD of "Adam Bede" as she is doing a University of York course on George Eliot next term. Somehow she has managed to find one in English with subtitles in Dutch. It stars Susannah Harker, who I can watch in any language.



Tuesday 29 December

Selwyn the Cat, named after a Bishop, came to the Vicarage four years ago today. I was not convinced that getting a cat was a good idea. I was wrong.

The death was announced today of Bishop John Waine. He was Bishop of Stafford (1975-78), of St Edmundsbury & Ipswich (1978-86), and of Chelmsford (1986-96). He then retired back to Bury. I first met him when he came to do a confirmation in Cockfield in 1997. It was the first big service I had ever organised, it was one of the first Common Worship Confirmations in the Diocese (and the first +John had ever done) and Julie was his Chaplain for the evening. He was kind enough to send us a thank you note a few days later. Our paths crossed quite regularly when I moved to St Edmundsbury Cathedral, and he was always charming. He has just turned 90. May he rest in peace and rise in glory.

Today is the 850th anniversary of the murder of Thomas Becket. Many years ago I was at the Precentors' Conference in Canterbury. Precentors are the Canons in charge of music and liturgy in Cathedrals, so take 40 odd precentors to a Cathedral and they will pull out all the stops to ensure the worship is wonderful. We had an evening candlelight tour of the Cathedral, accompanied by the gentlemen of the choir - I will never forget standing in a dark cathedral, next to Becket's place of martyrdom, listening to the singing of Psalm 54

Save me, O God, for thy Name’s sake * and avenge me in thy strength.
Hear my prayer, O God * and hearken unto the words of my mouth.
For strangers are risen up against me * and tyrants, which have not God before their eyes, seek after my soul.
Behold, God is my helper * the Lord is with them that uphold my soul.

Not a bad psalm for tonight as the pandemic rages around us.

Wednesday 30 December

Today is the anniversary of the death of Josephine Butler - she died in 1906 at the age of 78.

She was born on 13 April 1828. Her father John Grey was a strong advocate of social reform and a campaigner against the slave trade. Her cousin was Earl Grey the Prime Minister. She married George Butler in 1852. Together they had four children but in 1863, their six year old daughter died. In an attempt to cope with her grief, Butler threw herself into charity work, particularly related to the rights of women.

Amongst the issues on which she campaigned was child prostitution. She was part of a group which forced parliament to raise the age of consent from 13 to 16. In 1869 she began her campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts. These had been introduced in the 1860s in an attempt to reduce venereal disease in the armed forces. Police were permitted to arrest women living in seaports and military towns who they believed were prostitutes and force them to be examined for venereal disease. Butler toured the country making speeches condemning the acts. Many people were shocked that a woman would speak in public about sexual matters. But in 1883 the acts were suspended and repealed three years later.

She also took a great interest in women's education – we have her campaigning to thank for Newnham College in Cambridge, and she is now remembered in Josephine Butler College at Durham.

She is buried in the churchyard at Kirknewton, almost as far north in Northumberland as it is possible to go. There is a lovely memorial window by Helen Whittaker, and lots of beautiful things in this church. Well worth the drive. I last visited on 30 May 2013, and my blog is at http://www.northernvicar.co.uk/2013/05/31/kirknewton-st-gregory-the-great/

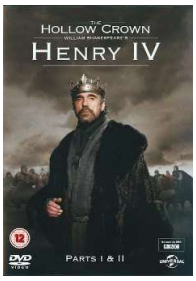
Thursday 31 December

I started 2020 with a 7 mile walk into Derby via Darley Park and home via the University. Who would have thought that a latte at Muffin Break would be an unattainable treat as the year comes to a close. On day 2 we went to Hannah's house and sanded floors. Who would have thought that this would be the look of 2020.

Day 366 started with a funeral, then some emails as we try and work out what "Tier 4 Stay at Home" means - you would think it would be obvious. Then we settled down to watch Henry IV part II. We have The Hollow Crown, the series the BBC produced in 2012. You can read my blogs about Richard II and Henry IV on northernvicar.co.uk - our plan is to watch all of Mr Shakespeare's output over the next few months.

They are superb productions, full of life and energy. They were produced as part of the BBC's commitment to the Olympic celebrations of 2012. I could get depressed and wonder how we got from the joy and excitement of welcoming the world in 2012 - when even miserable non-sporty me got into the Olympic Spirit - to our isolated little island of 2020. What a failure of both government and of opposition, to say nothing of press, industry leaders, church, etc, etc.

But being depressed is not going to help anyone. So let's spend the evening with my beautiful wife, sleepy cat, and plenty of food from the wonderful Croots Farm Shop & Cafe. I will love, support and pray for those for whom this will be another long night of work, for those who are waiting by the phone for news, and for those who are fighting for their lives. Please, dear readers, stay at home.

Let me quote from the Archbishop of York in the play - Act 1, scene 3 - "Past and to come, seem best; things present worst."

Though looking in the mirror "I know thee not, old man" might be a more appropriate quote! Happy New Year.