

Lairds at large: the '11 retrospect

January has come around again – and more than ever it is difficult to work out “how did we get here from there?” in terms of another year passed. The best news is of course that we are all hale and hearty and looking forward to another busy year. 2011 saw much moving around the planet by all members of the family – some longer distances than others. It is perhaps easiest to start with “the weenies”. By the way, if text is in [this format](#), it means you can click on it to link through to some internet content...



James practices looking intelligent

James is now firmly ensconced in Sydney, doing his PhD in Biomedical Engineering. Having moved to Sydney in July 2010 to take up a research internship, 2011 saw him segue into formal Doctoral research and an accompanying research scholarship. He is based in the [NICTA Implant Systems Group](#) where he is using the extraordinary implantable nerve signal recording systems developed by the group to create better models of spinal cord electrophysiology. The group is developing a revolutionary pain management that senses the body’s nerve responses to pain and automatically adjusts stimulation of electrodes implanted along the spinal cord to significantly reduce chronic pain, even if users are moving about. As noted in the [previous newsletter](#), Rod has also been working with the group, becoming a NICTA research fellow in 2011 to facilitate his mostly pro bono activities. This work has included some interesting modelling, simulation and animation of the way the implant [senses signals](#), can finely control stimulation timing to [tailor signals delivered to the spinal cord](#), and [close the loop on stimulation](#) to deliver excellent pain control even if the patient (and electrode) move around.



Estee

James has a wonderful lady friend, Estee, with whom he has now moved into a house in Canterbury, in Western Sydney. With the arrival of a piano and furniture from his Grandfather’s home (on which topic more later), and contributions from Estee’s parents, we suspect their little house is “bursting at the seams”. Estee is a conservator and multi-media expert at the Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo in Sydney, so their household is definitely technologically literate. Now all we have to do is persuade James to take all his [electronic junk](#) valuable technology away from here so we have some more space...



Katja contemplating

Katja headed back to University in 2011 after taking a gap year. She’s now finished (most of) 3rd year Visual Arts at Monash University. The campus is just a 10 minute walk down the road from her parents – which of course ensured that she has found digs across the other side of the city in Yarraville. She’s continued to work very hard to support herself, while also studying and delivering a range of exhibitions and [new works](#) through the year. One of her major new media is.... ..herself. 2011 saw an ever increasing percentage of her body surface transformed into living art; with mixed approval from some family members.

At short notice an opportunity arose for Katja to do her last semester at the University’s Prato campus near Florence. A rapid cash injection by the parents secured the opportunity and so it was that Katja found herself spending September

and October – first hating and then loving – northern Italy. She was lucky enough to spend a full week at the Venice biennale, immersed in all that it offers. She was tremendously impressed by both it (positively) and Venice’s “perfume” (negatively). So that she remained within her 90-days-in-Schengen visa budget, she went from Italy, through Vienna to stay in London with our very kind friends Jules and Jane.

We suspect the “best bit” from her perspective was however her last couple of weeks spent in Berlin. Initial plans were we believe to “stake out” Berlin with the intent of opening a funky tattoo+coffee establishment



Katja & Joe as Xmas elves



in some near but nebulous future. After her very positive experience in Venice (and some constructive advice from her very sensible boyfriend, Joe), she is however now committed to completing her arts course. Then we'll see...

In addition to building skills as a tattooist, 2011 also saw Katja developing her bike mechanic skills. These were needed after she was hit by a car going through a red light late at night – thrown quite some distance across and intersection and of course totalling her bike. We of course were rather more worried about the biological body-work, but she seems to have been extraordinarily lucky in escaping without major injury.



The new "fixie"

With the help of Dad's wallet and her cousin Robin's bike shop, she was back on trendy wheels before you could say "boo". Very important when you rely on these wheels to get to work!

Su and Rod both headed north for the Melbourne Winter, with Su taking the lead by a couple of weeks in May to join a subset of the International Quilters of Düsseldorf in a "mini-reunion" in Norway. {SU TO FILL IN}

Rod joined Su in Düsseldorf in June where we were privileged to stay with our old neighbours and friends Sabine and Herbert. We spent a lovely week catching up with many old friends; but as always there was not enough time to catch up with everyone we'd have liked to see. Nonetheless, Su caught up with the core of the current International Quilters of Düsseldorf group and did lots of "quilty" things. Rod caught up with some McKinsey colleagues – and an old pen-pal first met in Cologne 34 years ago, dropped out of contact for 20 years and reunited via Facebook. They met for drinks at the Rhine ferry in Kaiserswerth – not far from where we once lived and where Ingeborg and her significant-other now live. What a small world we live in...



Lunch at the Rheinfähre; just a bike ride from our old house



M14 is where....?

The train took us from Düsseldorf through Paris to Dijon – though not without some confusion at the Paris interchange. As you can see from the photo, the M14 platform was apparently to be found in the little crack in the corner; I guess we were supposed to run at it full tilt and hope for the best – as in the Platform 13½ for Hogwarts Express...

Dijon had much to offer in terms of art and in particular ceramics; and of course wonderful food. Though it was here that we began to realise that France's wonderful food might not be all that survivable for Su, given her broad spectrum of food intolerances. While we both had toted significant volumes of should-be-tolerable comestibles with us for Su, it became increasingly clear that these might not be enough without replenishment. And the French seem to insist that no French people have food intolerances or allergies – and so finding things that Su could actually eat without problem, became a major challenge for the trip. This was particularly so as the trip had been planned around a series of delightful Châteaux with lovely restaurants, set in the countryside (and with a pool so Su could get a dip...). So the basic story was; Rod loved the food, Su suffered...



Su displays the comestibles near Chagny



Rod demonstrates how to wait for undies to dry

We picked up our German tank in Dijon and headed south. (Actually it was a BMW X3 diesel – which turned out to be amazingly economical both fuel-wise and in rental costs). Our Château-hopping took us through a series of really beautiful gardens and towns as we moved through Beane, Chagny and west to Nevers. From there it was south through the Auvergne and the Dordogne, where we met up with Jane and Jules in Rocamadour. We trundled together further south over Montauban to a little Château in a tiny town called Camon – near Mirepoix and Carcassone. There we joined a whole gaggle of good friends for a week of cycling. (Well, Rod cycled, Su enjoyed the local environs...). Those who did cycle headed



The "bikie gang" (minus Helen who was taking the photo...)

out fairly early to be back in time for a late yummy breakfast. The afternoons featured excursions of one sort or another. Early in the week after a particularly hot and hard ride, the group decided to climb Montségur – with the reward of magnificent views but at the expense of just about blowing a gasket in the air conditioning department...



Trying to cool down at Montségur



Les Jardins d'Eyrignac

A final weekend found us in Paris with the delightful Jane and Andrew who flew in especially from Toronto – visiting some stunning (both in terms of taste and cost) Michelin star restaurants. Su's experience at Les Ambassadeurs was terrible – but the next night at Joël Robuchon offered everyone a wonderful night. We agreed that, while wonderful, future trips will be shorter and will likely feature places where we can self-cater. We returned with a sumptuous array of imagery from the many gardens and beautiful countryside, with samples [here](#) and [here](#). We still have to assimilate all the material gathered in France in 2010, so 2012 projects will include making a book specifically about our garden experiences, and perhaps also something more general on the countryside.



Waiting for the valet to return our non-existent car at Atelier Robuchon

Of course all this was just an interlude on **Su's** very busy year. {Su to fill in / expand}

Apart from capturing the imagery from our travels, **Rod** also brought his photographic skills to a range of other tasks, including Open Garden Australia sites, family events and the odd wedding. There was also a brief trip to Aspen with the usual gang to enjoy some unusually good snow. (Seems 2012 may however be the climate pay-back with a bit of a snow-drought right now). It provided the opportunity to enjoy the company of dear friends the Dewings and the Browns over subsequent weeks. Much better than Skype! Miscellaneous projects have included a [neat timer](#) for our coffee grinder for our now plumbed-in super-duper coffee machine, the belated completion of [the book](#) from our 2010 Austrian travels (along with some whizz [alpine imagery](#)) and, rather quaintly, in rebuilding my 6-year-old computer after a complete breakdown, the creation of the world's fastest desktop computer at generating between 50 million and 5 billion digits of pi - at least of the publication date of this [blog entry](#). (How useful I hear you gasp)



Madam Brown indicates her bindings need adjustment

Rod's professional activities were varied, with continuing work for old clients and considerable pro bono work. Topics ranged from thinking about how to mobilise Victoria's carbon capture and storage initiative for the coal industry, strategy support for James' NICTA group (as previously noted) and strategic advice on the merger of Victoria's two largest disability organisations, through to considerable work in the higher education sector. In addition to helping restructure technology services for Deakin University, much time has been spent working with the University of Melbourne School of Engineering. Taking up a role on an industry advisory Board created the opportunity to dig around a bit to understand the School's performance in terms of delivering to industry students that were employable. It turned out graduate employment outcomes have hitherto not been a priority for the institution – and it showed in the very low numbers finding full time employment relative to the national average. Not good for an institution marketing itself as Australia's best. As a result of some jumping up and down, the University has now made the achievement of best graduate outcomes a #1 priority and is putting some money into the issue as well... A pleasing impact in that at least a new journey is begun; but delivering students the education they need to be employable is still a future challenge. Amazingly, one of the Deputy Deans of Education, when asked "would anything change if graduate outcomes were a priority?" answered "Well yes, just about everything...". Sigh. For my trouble you can now call me Ass Prof, an honorary title no doubt reminding me of my academic constituency; asses. (To be fair, they mean well and many are bright enough, but the term "sheltered workshop" does come readily to mind).

More can be found at our [joint](#), [Su](#), [Rod](#), [Snaps](#) and [F&F](#)¹ sites – when we update them!

¹ Note: you can click on similarly formatted text to take you to the related web site