



---

#### Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year – it's party time!

Ever since 9 April 2007 I have regularly read, and then printed out, all your comments and questions – every single one of them. I have them here, in a big fat file on the desk in front of me. They are **fascinating**, kind, generous and often very funny. Thank you.

Jill Huang (Beijing) did some excellent research into robins. Douglas Keeler (Riyadh) asked about our shared surname (maybe you're my secret brother, Douglas!). Amjad (Iran) wondered whether I had **inherited** my house (no, I had to work to earn the money to buy it – sad, but true). So many of you shared your secrets, your Beatles' stories, and wrote about men's and women's friendships.

Marianne (Slovakia) thinks I spend too much money (**dead right**, Marianne, I'm **broke!**). It was good to hear from parts of the world I know well, such as Sweden, China, Eastern Europe and Siberia, as well as from places I will never see. It was fun to hear about what's in your fridge, too.

You were kind to Lucy – sympathetic because she has such a strict Dad – especially when she got her exam results. She's having such a good time at university, and even seems to be working quite hard.

Ela (Tehran) sent a lovely story (many thanks). Anna (Latvia) told us how her boyfriend sang **Yesterday** to her – how romantic. There were poems and jokes and kind comments from 'friends' old and new – Noora (Iran), Truc Ly (Vietnam), Ana Paula (Brazil), Ania (Poland), Anita (Slovakia), Silwal Kishor (Nepal), Maria (Russia), Lucy (Sakhalin Island) ...and so many more. It is so frustrating that I don't know what you look like, except for the glamorous Adriana (Brazil) who was the Student Blogger recently. I can't reply to each of you individually or send you a personal Christmas card. I can't even say 'Goodbye' personally.

Goodbye? Yes. This is the last Stephen Keeler Column the BBC will publish. In over thirty-five years in English language teaching this has been the most enjoyable job I've ever had, and I'm very sorry it's about to end. So how about a New Year's Eve party to say 'Thank you' from me? You're all invited. Bring a friend. Bring as many as you like. But before you rush off to buy your plane ticket to Heathrow I should explain that this will be a **virtual** party.

This is how it's going to work. I have already written to about 100 friends of mine asking them all to visit this website and read your comments on the last **half dozen** columns. Then they must choose three or four readers (you) in different time zones. At midnight on New Year's Eve in those time zones, my friends will **raise a glass and drink a toast to you** by name and say 'Happy New Year' and 'Thank you' **on my behalf** for being such loyal and generous 'friends'. I guarantee that everyone who has had a comment published on any of the last six columns will have one or more of my friends – and me – toasting them at midnight (your time) on New Year's Eve. All you have to do in return is toast us at midnight your time. I'm going to be in France during the New Year holiday so you can toast me at midnight French time (one hour before British time), if you like. Lucy will be in the UK, so you can toast her, too, an hour later, if you want. You could even sing a couple of verses of **Auld Lang Syne\*** – a well-known traditional, Scottish, New Year song – if you feel like it. You'll just have to imagine me joining in (and be grateful you can't actually hear me!):

***Should auld acquaintance be forgot  
And never brought to mind?  
We'll take a cup o' kindness yet,  
For auld lang syne.***

***For auld lang syne, my dear  
For auld lang syne  
We'll take a cup o' kindness yet,  
For auld lang syne.***

It may not be the biggest New Year party in the world but it could be the longest-lasting (I shall be toasting you for almost twenty-four hours!) and one of the most sentimental. I'll miss and remember you all.

Where I come from originally, in the north-east of England, we have a New Year tradition called First Footing. On New Year's Eve groups of friends visit each other, after midnight, to bring the New Year into each other's homes. Traditionally, the first person who steps into the house after midnight should be a tall, dark-haired man (not the owner of the house). He is the 'first foot' and is given a welcoming drink, usually whisky. We carry a piece of coal into the house, to represent fuel and warmth in the New Year, and a bottle of whisky, to represent food and drink in the New Year (and to help us keep warm as we go from house-to-house). Sadly, it seems to be a dying tradition which is a shame, I think. Whatever you do and whoever you do it with be safe and enjoy yourself.

Thank you for being so kind and generous and supportive. May you all be healthy, happy and successful in 2008.

Very warmest best wishes to all of you and to your families.

Happy New Year!



(and Lucy, too, of course!)

### **Some useful words and expressions**

#### **fascinating**

very interesting

#### **inherited**

If you inherited your house you received it from someone who has died.

#### **dead right**

(slang/idiomatic) absolutely right

#### **broke**

(slang/idiomatic) having no money

#### **virtual**

not real; imagined; existing in cyberspace only

#### **half dozen**

six

#### **raise a glass and drink a toast to you**

When you drink a toast to someone you take a drink, usually (but not necessarily) wine or some other alcohol, as a symbolic gesture to show your appreciation of them or wish them success. 'To raise a glass to (someone)' can be used instead of 'to drink a toast to (someone)'.

#### **on my behalf**

for me; in place of me

---

\**For auld lang syne* by Robert Burns (Scottish poet), 1759-96