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Association of Open University Graduates

Europe

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Hello and welcome to another Newsletter for members in Europe. Thank you for all your contacts and I hope that the Newsletters are keeping you going AOUG wise, in between receiving the Association's official publication, OMEGA.

Several members enjoyed our visit to Rouen in September and you can read more about that in the next edition of OMEGA so I shall not repeat the item here. Also in September, Patrick Noble and I represented AOUG at the Versailles degree ceremony. I am sure that many of you attended your degree ceremony there and have fond memories of that special day.

At the beginning of October I mixed work with pleasure and went to Milton Keynes for the annual AOUG Awards Ceremony and Foundation Lecture which was extremely good. A full report of both those events will be in the next edition of OMEGA but can I persuade you to make a note in your diary for next year? The same event takes place on the first Friday in October.

Our e mail contacts list for members in Europe is growing slowly. Why join an e mail list you well may ask? The idea of the list is so that members can contact other members with the possibility of linking up with someone who has similar interests, besides being on Open University graduate, and creating a dialogue over the air as and when you have time. To be on the list I need your written permission to release your e mail address to others on the list. After that, it is up to you who you choose to contact.

During a conversation with members in Rouen the subject of, "what shall I do when I retire?" came up. I know many retired people say they do not know how they found time to go to work, there is so much to do!

I well remember when studying for my degree with The Open University, at the run up to examination time I would be thinking, when the exam is over I can get that book read/paint the kitchen/visit an art gallery, and then before I knew where I was, it was study time again and very little on the list had been achieved. It was only after I graduated, but still working full time, that I got around to doing some of the items on the list.

I am still working but I have a long list of hobbies which I pick up and put down, as and when the desire takes me. The list includes reading, quilting and embroidery, AOUG (!), writing and photography. However my favourite hobby is antiques, which I turned into a business and I now have an antiques shop in Bayeux. Note, gardening is not on my list, but I find mowing our enormous lawn very relaxing sitting on our mower tractor and not having to worry about traffic.

Which brings me to the question, what do you do with your precious spare time? Do let me know. I am sure there are a great variety of hobbies and it is possible that other members' hobbies will start another member giving it a try.

Autumn has arrived and in my part of Europe the flowers in the garden are dying off, the grass no longer grows at a rapid rate and soon the leaves will start to fall.

I received several e mails from members in Europe following the garden article in the last Newsletter. For many, living in apartments it means that there is no garden although it is possible with a balcony to create a splash of colour with plant pots or window boxes. However, not to be put off by this, a member from Paris wrote, "I can't complain. I live 15 minutes walk from the Louvre and the Jardins des Tuileries, and I walk in the Tuileries every day and walk across the Seine to get to them, so lovely from another perspective."

We can all benefit from public spaces in towns and enjoy the beauty of the country side as Geoffrey Mitchell wrote. "We live in an apartment so our garden consists of two window boxes! There is a garden for the block which we use and sit under the Nispero trees near the swimming pool. Living on the Costa Blanca we have the benefit of many palm and conifer trees and shrubs - the Bougainvillea is prolific and the colours are wonderful. We do miss the lushness of the English countryside but we do not miss the weather or the persistent rain! The Costa does get rather dry and brown during the middle and end of the summer months but we have an 'escape route' into the valleys between the mountains twenty minutes drive from our home.





Here, in the Jalon Valley particularly, the Almond Blossom is magnificent in February and March and there are two other 'gardening attractions' which we visit each year. The first is the Cactus garden near Callosa where old terraces have been transformed into beds for hundreds of different varieties of Cactus many of which flower during the year. The Cactus garden is worth a visit throughout the year but we usually go in the Spring or Autumn months. The other attraction is the Iris Farm in the higher mountains of the Bernia range. Here a husband and wife have developed their passion for Iris's. They again have used the old Olive terraces to lay out their beds of over a 1000 different species of Iris. They propagate and produce new varieties and of course they have a ready market and sell far and wide. The Iris grows well at high altitudes (between one and two thousand feet) and doesn't require a great deal of watering once established. They bloom over a period of about six weeks during May/June. The colours are so varied - they can be vibrant or subtle and they can be in plain or variegated colours. There are miniature strains as well. The farm is a riot of colour and you can imagine that it is very popular."

Thank you very much for these wonderful photographs Geoffrey, another is on the next page and there were many more but to put them all into this Newsletter would overload the system! Geoffrey has asked me to let him know of any AOUG contacts in Spain. If you would like to contact Geoffrey please give me your permission to release your e mail/address to him.



Those beautiful pictures are so tempting. Thank you Geoffrey and another thank you to Robert Girling. Read on and you will see what I mean.

“I would be happy to provide free accommodation to members who would like to explore Gozo. My flat is situated in the centre of the island, within easy walking distance of a reliable and frequent air conditioned bus services to all parts of the island. As the island is quite small no journey takes more than ten or fifteen minutes. My flat is sited in a close, near to a bus route, with a supermarket, baker, chemist and greengrocer within two minutes walk.

The flat consists of a large combined sitting room/dining room/kitchen, with a gas hob, electric oven, microwave, fridge freezer and a flat screen television connected to cable channels and a broad band Internet connection. Visitors would have a bedroom with two single beds and a visitor’s bathroom. I could arrange a third bed if this was required.

I am also willing to provide full board or meals as required. I can cater for special diets. Visitors may prefer to have the use of the kitchen to cook their own meals.

I will be happy to meet visitors at Malta International Airport and escort them by means of the Arriva bus service and Gozo Channel Ferry to my flat. If visitors arrive at an unsocial hour I can arrange reliable private taxis to the ferry and on to my flat.

“A lot of cultural activities take place in Gozo and I will be happy to arrange for visitors to attend these events as required. The city boasts two old musical societies, "Il Leone" and "La Stella" and two opera houses, in which tenors of world renown have performed.”

Robert continues with his autobiography.

May I start my story by stating that I am aged 71, 6ft 7in (2.04mt) tall and slim built. My parents were both over 6ft tall. This could help to explain why in later life I suffered both from back pain and sciatica. Since I relocated to the Island of Gozo (one of the Maltese island) a few years ago, my pain problems have been resolved.

After I left school I took up a career in amenity horticulture. After seven years experience and training, I was appointed as assistant head gardener to a university botanic gardens. It then became clear to me that I wanted to work with people rather than plants. At the age of 26 I gave up my job, and became a volunteer with Community Service Volunteers. I was sent to a residential home for physically handicapped adults. My work there as an orderly gave me a lot of satisfaction. At that time 'Health and Safety' rules barely existed, and as I was young and strong, I was happy to lift people bodily without any assistance. I was warned at the time that this could damage my back, but I took no notice.

I remained in the social care field for the remainder of my working life. After qualifying in social work at Middlesex University, I held various posts both with a charity and a local authority. While I was working I also studied for an Open University B.A. degree. After spending a long time in charge of a very large local authority home for the elderly, I decided that I would like to run my own Home.

It became possible, with assistance from my parents, for me to purchase a suitable building in Scotland. This was converted to meet the needs of elderly people requiring care. All the staff I appointed we trained in lifting methods, and suitable equipment was provided. After ten years, a sudden deterioration in my eye sight made it necessary for me to sell the home, as I could not do the essential paper work.

During most of this period I was also caring for a disable elderly relation who lived with me. Although I had help from the District Nursing Service, and a hoist, I still had to do quite a lot of heavy lifting. This may have led to my two hernia operations.

After I had sold my residential home I was keen to carry on working in the field of social care. I therefore took work with a number of employers who provided care for disabled and elderly people living in care, or in their own homes. Although this work gave me a lot of satisfaction, it was also physically demanding, as most households did not have lifting equipment.

For many years it had become necessary for me to take time off work with back pain and sciatica. I found that the best recovery method was bed rest, and some chiropractic treatment. I also broke my hip walking my dog on ice, which left me feeling anxious about snow conditions. As I got older my back pain became much more serious, but I did not want to give in as I enjoyed my work, and could not see myself doing anything else. The work often involved taking handicapped adults out in my car. Driving became more difficult for me, and after my back got locked while I was working, which meant that I had to send for help, I gave up driving. I subsequently concentrated on home care work. I was determined not to give in to my back problem, and as I found the NHS would only provide painkillers, I sought help from many alternative practitioners. I quickly found that they were always keen to take my money, and assure me of a cure, most of them made no difference, and some even made me worse. The Back Care advice telephone service gave me support. It was getting to the stage when I was often in a worse physical condition than the clients I was meant to be looking after. Some of them became quite concerned when I used to come to work on crutches.

The situation became much more difficult when the sciatic pain prevented me from lying down without taking strong pain killers. The medication eventually led to such serious side effects that I had a sudden admission to hospital during the night. I was eventually placed in a ward which dealt with gastric problems, where they could not do much to help with my sciatica. An MRI scan showed a compressed disc in the lumbar spine, but no nerve involvement. This meant that the orthopaedic surgeons would not have me in their ward. I was depressed when I thought that nothing more could be done.

After I complained about the situation I was referred to a pain clinic, where my medication was reviewed, and it was suggested that I should have a one off cortisone injection into the lumbar spine. This was an extremely painful experience and I needed two injections of morphine. The cortisone did eventually give me some long term relief.

Physiotherapists told me that it would be a long time before I would be able to return to work. My financial advisor visited me in hospital, and firmly stated me that I should retire, even though I was only 64. He said that he could arrange for my private pension to be paid out early. At this stage I had limited mobility with a walking frame. As I lived alone, my relation had by then died, arrangements were made for my flat to be adapted to meet my needs. Meals on wheels, and a daily home help were organized.

For the first few months after my return home I was virtually house bound. Later a shopping service took me in a mini bus to the local super store where I could get around in an electric wheelchair. The driver would place my shopping in the kitchen. A yoga teacher visited to give me exercises to strengthen my back. She encouraged me to go out in a special taxi with a new wheeled walking aid I had purchased. The aid was fitted with a seat, so that I could sit down when feeling tired.

The next year I took my walking aid on a World Cruise. As my back condition did not allow me to take long haul flights, this was the best way of seeing a great many foreign countries. I now needed to find somewhere warm to go to in the winter as I was frightened of icy conditions. My choice was Malta, as it is a fairly short flight from the U.K., and no language problems.

My first booking was in a self catering apartment for the months of December, January and February. It was a steep learning curve as I tried to find my way around a strange country, with the assistance of my walking aid. I quickly got to know a British Pilates teacher who gave me a lot of help. He introduced me to a chiropractor who prescribed water therapy in a local spa. A major problem was the old fashioned buses, whose owner drivers were reluctant to carry my walking aid -- 'Don't damage my bus!' The pavements were also most unsuitable for my walking aid.

In spite of these difficulties I fairly quickly felt at home on the island, and decided to return for a further three months the following winter. This time I booked full board in a hotel I had got to know, with a spa, so that I could continue water therapy, and be near my Pilates teacher. During this stay the rough pavements and difficult buses damaged my walking aid to such an extent that it became unsafe to use. I therefore had the choice of trying to buy a new aid, or managing to get about without its assistance. I decided to buy a shopping trolley, so that I could carry items without damaging my back. This proved to be most successful.

By this time I was feeling the need of a more settled life, and I and others had noticed how much better my health was during my stays in Malta. I had visited the nearby island of Gozo

frequently to visit friends. Gozo is a much more compact with a quieter life style, and as I already knew people there I decided that this was where I wanted to settle.

The first Gozo apartment I rented was in a seaside resort near to my friends. Unfortunately it was situated on the third floor, with no lift, and at the top of a hill. There was only a bus three times a day, the last at 2.30pm. Although I coped very well in this flat, I was advised by my G.P., and a physiotherapist, to find somewhere more suitable.

Earlier this year I moved to my present accommodation, which is situated on the edge of the capital of Gozo, on the ground floor, and close to shops and other amenities. Full details are in my above offer, which indicates that I am happy to host members of AOUG who would like to try out the pleasures of Gozo.

Since my move to Gozo I seem to have grown considerably stronger and my problems with pain no longer seem to exist. I try to keep myself healthy with a daily twenty minute exercise routine, a weekly Pilates class, and a gym work out twice a week. I also make sure that I walk as much as possible.

I hope this account indicates that although my sixties were a very difficult decade for me, since I turned 70 my life has taken a major change for the better. Readers can draw their own conclusions as to why this may have happened.”

Well, there we go for another edition of Europe’s Newsletter. I hope you have enjoyed the contents and I look forward to hearing from you.

Patricia Cowling – Local Contact