



LETTER FROM TUSCANY...

Old Collegian Malcolm Ayres creates a home in Italy.

After a long cold winter the barren hills south of Siena are springing to life. The winter wheat, planted in November, grows and covers the hills with an astounding green carpet. From my front door I can see the two towers of Siena in the distance with numberless soft ridges between there and here. So, after two years' hard labour, the romantic ruin that my wife, Daniela and I fell in love with has become a home.

I arrived in Naples, Italy in 1997 to be with my future wife, then a person whom I hardly knew. We had met the previous year on holiday in Brazil. A long shot at best but something had told me to go. Having spent four and a half years together in Naples and after the birth of our daughter Alice we both felt we needed a change. A compromise had to be found between our two cultures and lives. We moved north to Tuscany. Simple it may sound. We spent a year commuting at weekends looking for a property before driving down a country lane on a cold blustery February morning where we found Podere Fineri - an old dilapidated farmhouse with no water, power, or phone but a hint of magic and in need of a life time of care and attention.

The house has probably stood in more or less its present form since around 1700. Built from bricks and fieldstones and held together with mortar made with precious little cement, it faces south to catch the sun all year. It rises on two floors framed by aged cypresses protecting it from the bitterly cold northerly, "La Tramontana" as the north wind is called. In the past animals occupied the ground floor, their bovine heat rising to warm the upper floor and its occupants. The house was once part of a large estate owned by Siennese nobility who still own the patrician villa a couple of kilometres away. It was inhabited until the 1950's by a long list of "mezzadri" or tenant farmers who worked the surrounding land and surrendered half their crop to the landowner. Until we took over, the

house had been slowly crumbling and the two wings, which had once formed a courtyard, were little more than piles of stones and rotten beams when we arrived. We had to wait 6 months before our team of builders was available and we spent those long months sorting these piles into bricks, broken bricks, roof tiles, floor tiles, stones, corner stones, interesting stones and salvaging any old or useful lengths of timber.

When work began we realised this house had been built on to rather than into the clay. Here the clay breathes, inhaling the winter rains and exhaling as it is dried by the summer sun. Cracks appeared and disappeared in the brick and stone work throughout the year. Somehow this had to be stopped. We spent the first four months building foundations under an old fragile, two-storied building. Considerably more complicated than re-piling a Victorian villa in New Zealand.

After the foundations we spent a year and a half doing roofs, floors, windows, plumbing, wiring and furnishing. Our builders were, to say the least, stoic. A thermos of hot sweet coffee and a case of red wine on Fridays and they toiled on in all conditions. The team was from Naples and when happy would sing Neapolitan ballads at work.

The master builder was a notable tenor. It seemed an oxymoron to hear "O Sole Mio" and "Funiculi Funicula" so far removed from the bustle of Naples. They crossed themselves in the morning and then swore, cursed and smoked their way through until 6.00p.m. every evening. No morning or afternoon teas in this part of the world. Podere Fineri was considered one of the more remote farmhouses around Asciano, our local village, and we soon

found out what remote was. We had to lay electricity and phone cables and water pipes 1.5kms underground, three long winter weeks of mud, mud and more mud.

Respecting the architecture and Tuscan traditions we are living with, we have transformed the old farmhouse into four apartments and an adjacent hay barn into another two, creating a family home and five rental apartments. Searching far and wide we have been able to furnish the apartments with antique country furniture and each apartment has a private outdoor living area with views on to the surrounding countryside. The formula we are following is fairly common in this area, renting from Saturday to Saturday or long weekends. All the apartments have fully equipped kitchens so guests can try cooking with the wonderful local produce or simply grilling a Florentine steak in the large fireplaces.



The country-side is much as it was two or three hundred years ago. Tuscany was largely passed by during the post-war building boom that scarred much of Italy's countryside with ugly reinforced concrete edifices. Our area, "La Crete Senesi" which stretches 30 kilometres to the south of Siena

Continued on Page 7

Peter Rickman - Champion Chaplain



Rev says goodbye to his beloved Chapel Team - Moss Down, David Cooper and Rebecca Crompton

It is not easy to say goodbye to people who have touched so many lives in their time at St Paul's. Peter and Jane came to us like a comet and soon that light will be brightening the other side of our world. My wife and I first got to know the Rickmans during a parent bike at Tihoi in 2001. We have since remained close personal friends.

Peter has that rare ability to communicate meaningfully with teenagers and St Paul's has been blessed by his three plus years as religious studies teacher and Chaplain. Our students and staff have experienced a fantastic range of Tuesday and Thursday mornings and Sunday evening chapel services that they could easily relate to. For example, rather than 'The Pharisee and the Sinner' it was 'The Prefect and the Smoker'.

I was continually amazed how,

week after week, Peter would come up with a different skit or visual presentation to get across the message chosen for the service. Knowing how passionate I am about chess he asked me to think of a way to include chess. Wearing a white robe and a long conical beard I was a caricature of God, playing a game of cosmic chess with the Devil (a Chapel prefect wearing a mask) while Peter narrated the Devil's fight for a soul.

Peter's sense of humour and fun often translated themselves into the Chapel, the classroom and into all interactions with him. Whether he was cracking jokes at a staff member's farewell, being 'shot' in the middle of a Chapel service, jumping off the Sky Tower for charity or making pizzas or pancakes by the altar, I and the rest of the School couldn't help but smile,

laugh and at the same time be constantly challenged by the God of love that Peter was an ambassador for amongst us.

In addition to his creativity in the Chapel, he also encouraged students and staff to take Chapel services. The Year 9 students in particular and students of the Chapel team also conducted some excellent and memorable services under Peter's direction.

Peter also had a wonderful way of caring for St Paul's families in times of need. For instance, after Gerri and I were told of the tragic death of her brother and his wife, Peter came to our house and stayed until late into the night. His caring presence and advice helped get us through that sad day, and beyond it. I am aware that many students, staff and families have benefited by Peter's ability to listen and support them through difficult times.

The School will miss Peter, Jane, Daniel and Toby and they leave St Paul's with our very best wishes for whatever lies ahead for them. Our loss will definitely be another community's gain.

Gary Judkins



Rev with Bishop David - "We've had a ball, Peter!"

From Page 6

is known by the locals as still the "real Tuscany", not too overpopulated by tourists in the summer or completely abandoned in the winter. The Crete Senese is an expanse of sedimentary clay that three million years ago was under the sea. Not far from our back door waves lapped onto a primeval shore and along this prehistoric shore fossils frequently can be found.

The area around us is ideal for visiting some of the smaller Tuscan hill towns such as Montisi, Trequanda and Sere di Rapolano and with a little local knowledge there are wonderful off the beaten track jewels to be discovered. One of the best of these is a country deli in an almost abandoned village that serves fantastic salamis, hams and pecorino cheese with chilled white wine overlooking one of the most splendid Raphael-esque landscapes of the area.

Half an hour's drive away lies Siena with Piazza del Campo and the twice-yearly horse race, The Palio, in July and August and the frescoes of Duccio and Ambrogio Lorenzetti. Not far from us the Chianti hills begin, vine-clad slopes giving way to oak and cypress forests. On a hot summer afternoon there is nothing better than to stop the car and take out the cold cuts, bread and cheese you bought in the village ten minutes back, open a bottle of Chianti, lie back in the dry grass and soak it all in. We can perhaps begin to enjoy some of these delights now the wheelbarrows mud and mortar are mostly behind us.

The project has been a huge challenge for both of us. I have learnt new skills, becoming a proficient stonemason and logistics expert, juggling university lecturing time, building site time and family time and Daniela as an architect, learning to drive

excavators, bobcats and becoming a bricklayer. A few days before we moved Daniela found an old iron key in the courtyard. Finerri had accepted us.

We are slowly taking control of the five hectares that complete our property with a new olive grove planted to complement the 50 or so survivors we found here and future plans for 2 hectares of sangiovese vines. Nothing much likes growing in the heavy winter clay or the cracked dry terracotta it becomes in the summer. Plant what the locals plant being the most of the story.

So after a long battle (not all Italian building sagas are exaggerated) we have something to offer and if and when you come there will always be a fine glass of red and a hearty Italian meal awaiting old companions.

Malcolm Ayres (Clark 84-87)
www.thelazyolive.com