

Triumphant Travels in 2008 – extracts from logs and letters

We eventually left the Rio Dulce, Guatemala 9 months after we arrived at the end of January 2008 having spent the hurricane season here (we now know why they call it “the river that eats Gringos”!!).

The river and lakes on the Rio Dulce are very beautiful, surrounded by jungle and the odd house or hut. The river is full of indigenous Indians fishing from their dugout canoes



Arial Photo of the east end of the Canyon
Texan Bay Marina is in the Centre



Arial view of Fronteras and the bridge at the west end of the Golfete lake

After motoring down the 12 mile canyon towards the sea we arrived at Livingston where we checked out of Guatemala (cost about £35) and crossed over the bar with no problems and emerged into salt water again after 9 months (a great way to stretch the life of the antifouling as every water change kills the weed you have built up previously)

For more information on the Rio Dulce check out the cruisers web site www.riodulcechisme.com and www.Texanbaymarina.com



The Rio Dulce Canyon



Livingston

We spent the night anchored off the Guatemalan coast then the following day motored straight into a 20+ knot breeze to Placencia in Belize (about 50 miles and not very pleasant) and, after checking into Belize (customs + immigration) the following day – cost £7, spent a couple of weeks there meeting up with old friends and other cruisers that we had met last year.



Chilling out in Placencia with Harry the “pirate”



Belizean Fishing boat with the canoes tied astern



Our Local in Placencia - Yoli's bar



Belizean fishing boat under sail

The sand flies (no see 'ems) are very small and can be vicious if you are not careful. These bugs are so small they get through mosquito netting and cause painful bites.

We then set off to some of the Cayes offshore that are just inside the barrier reef. The barrier reef in Belize is the second large barrier reef in the world.

The names of the Cayes are amazing: Ranguana, Laughing Bird, Middle Long, North Cocoa Plum, Bugle, North Long Cocoa – (yes we went to all of the above Cayes except Laughing Bird where they charge for anchoring)

Most of the Cayes are uninhabited except for fishing huts which are used only occasionally by the local fishermen. Some of the Cayes are mud and mangrove trees, others are sand and palm trees.

The fishermen have 20 foot long wooden sailing boats drawing less than 3 feet with ice boxes on board and up to 4 or more dug out canoes they use for fishing. They catch conch, lobster, snapper, grouper and barracuda all by diving with a spear gun or via a hand line.

The fishing on the Cayes is amazing, just throw a weighted hook baited with conch into the water and you will probably have about 8 small snappers (trout-sized fish) in a hour



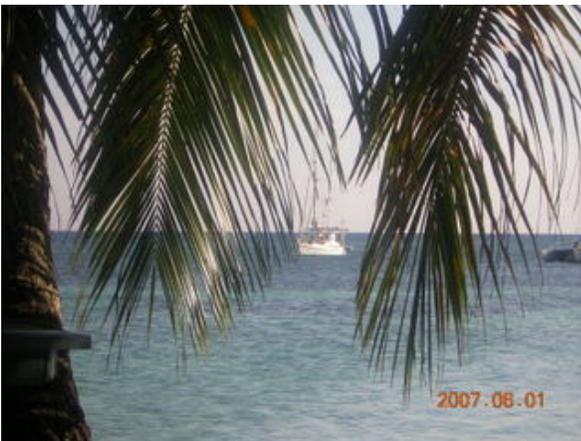
Sheila fishing off North Long Cocoa Caye



Bugle Caye



Ranguana Caye



Triumphant at Anchor off Ranguana Caye

After a couple of weeks we returned to Placencia to stock up (out of beer and rum again) and set off to northern Belize in company with an American boat called Let It Be heading for Caye Caulker in easy day hops stopping off at various Cayes on the way

Bad news - We had our dinghy and outboard stolen during the night. We and Let It Be both were anchored ½ mile off St Georges Caye – just

north of Belize City in the middle of nowhere when it happened and were not expecting any security problems.

The other boat did not have their outboard locked on and so the thieves removed the outboard and then anchored their dinghy 100 yards astern of them.

We had our outboard locked onto the dinghy so they took the dinghy away to cut the locks. The dinghy had been secured alongside the boat next to where Sheila sleeps but we did not hear a thing.

The outboard they took was John's fathers 1995 3.5hp mercury which is getting a bit long in the tooth (hope it blows up on them) covered with a old T-shirt with William Blyth on it.

This was a big problem as

- a) this is like our car, it is the only way we can get ashore when we are anchored (we try and stay out of marinas where you can walk ashore as they are expensive); and
- b) the replacement costs for the dinghy and outboard will be at least 2,500GBP assuming we can get a replacement in Belize

On a more positive note, we do have insurance and will claim on it and we do have a spare (old) dinghy - an Avon which we bought just before Christmas in the Rio Dulce and an old 2 HP outboard but it is still a pain in the ****!

In Central America it appears that the thieves only want to steal outboards not the dinghy as well so we will ensure that from now on that the outboard is removed from the dinghy each night and locked onto Triumphant. A pain but there you go.

The following morning, after searching high and low for the dinghy we went to Caye Caulker (the nearest police station and internet) to report the theft. The passage to Caye caulker is very shallow, if you have 2 feet below the keel this is deep water!

We anchored on the west side of Caye Caulker in 6 foot of water with 30 metres of chain out just 30 yards off the shore so we could row the Avon in..

Shortly after arriving in Caye Caulker we had to set the second anchor and ride out a “Norther” (a cold front sweeping down from Texas and Mexico) 24 hours of 25 – 30 knots of wind with higher (40 knots +) gusts. We stayed where we were but about 8 boats dragged with 2 blowing ashore – highest winds arrived after dark as usual so an anchor watch was essential. So an entertaining time was had by all!!!!

We had got there early and found 2 patches of sand and J had dove on the anchors to ensure they were in properly.

The problem here in Belize is that the sand is very thin and there is a lot of grass so you have to be very careful where you anchor and we are typically anchoring in 2 – 3 feet of water below the keel with 100+ foot of chain and rope out and usually 2 anchors.

After having the same problem with the type of sand here last year and discovering our Bruce and Spade anchors need at least 1 foot of sand to dig in, we managed to pick up a second-hand Aluminium Fortress anchor in the Rio Dulce last summer which is proving to be very effective in thin sand.

We needed to get a police report covering the lost dinghy for the insurance company. This was not as easy as you might think. It took 3 trips to the nearest town by fast water taxi and 3 weeks to get the ½ page report!

We spent the next month or so sailing up and down Belize trying to source replacement bits. We eventually received authorisation from the insurance company to buy a new 4HP Yamaha outboard (£530) from Belize City and also buy the replacement equipment that was in the dinghy when it was stolen (ropes, anchor etc.).

The dinghy we wanted was a problem as we could not buy it in Belize and we could not find anyone who was prepared to ship the dinghy to Belize from either Miami or St Maartens in the Eastern Caribbean.

The new outboard LOOKS very nice but it is too big and powerful for our Avon dinghy so it is sitting in the fore cabin awaiting the replacement dinghy before John could play with it).

We still managed a bit of travelling as well.



Placencia - Easter fishing fest



Inland Belize



More views of the interior of Belize



Our allotted time in Belize was running out and as we had discovered that the nearest place we could get the new dinghy was Mexico so we decided to go to Isla Mujeres near Cancun in Mexico to pick it up.

This was not the cheapest option but the Insurance company had approved the price (approx £2,500) so off we went

We motored from Caye Caulker up to San Pedro to check out of the Belize. The passage between Caye Caulker and San Pedro is VERY SHALLOW, quite often only 1 foot (or less) of water below the boat!

This time in San Pedro we managed to get the anchor set a bit better than our last time here. The sand is very thin in San Pedro so you need to find a patch of sand to bury the anchor. We anchored with 1 foot of water below the keel with 40 metres of chain out. The tides here are very small so you just hope there is no swell.

We checked out of Belize OK and on Saturday 26th April we motored across the bay and went out through the gap in the barrier reef into deep water again. It was quite strange to be in 400+ feet of water again after 1 year!.

The pass through the reef was not too rough this time. This pass is only to be attempted in calm conditions otherwise there are very large swells and breaking waves.

We motored out to sea for 2 hours and then put up the sails. The course we had to steer was North East, the forecasted winds were for east or south east. Yes, it was blowing from the east so off we sailed to windward, wind hard on the nose!!

The distance from San Pedro to Isla Mujeres is about 240 miles so we were reckoning on about 2 ½ days at our usual speed BUT we also knew that we could expect some help from the north flowing Yucatan current.

The first day and night at sea was quite windy (up to 23 knots) and bumpy (we are not used to sailing into the wind!) but with the current we managed 120 miles in the first 24 hours all under sail and to windward.

The second day was much better, still bumpy but the wind gradually moved to the South East allowing a smoother ride and better boat speed. The current also got stronger the further north we got.

We had a visitor in the afternoon just south of Cozumel! A small land bird, a bit finch-like, came aboard and spent a half an hour or so with us. He was very tame and seemed to like to sit on Big Ted's (Sheila's very large teddy bear that lives in the cockpit) shoulder and then his ear!



Big Ted Chilling out in Guatemala

The last thing we wanted was for the bird to go down below into the boat as, when they are trapped, they crap everywhere. So we covered up the main hatch entrance and were unable to go

down and get the camera – what a shame! We filled up an ashtray with fresh water and crushed up some peanuts but he didn't seem to notice them.

By the afternoon of day 2 we were sailing in the channel between Cozumel and mainland Mexico doing about 4.5 – 5 knots through the water but 7.5 knots over the ground - way to go!. The north bound current is impressive.

BUT, because we were going so fast we calculated, we would arrive in Islas Mujeres at night – about midnight.

The entrance to the harbour is quite tricky so we decided to slow down, wait for the moon to come up so we could see and try to get there at daybreak.

As we got closer and near to the mainland shore, the current got weaker and the wind died so we managed to keep the speed down to about 3 knots or less and entered the harbour at 5 o'clock just as the sun came up in the morning and anchored close to the airport and Naval Academy.

Total passage time 44 hours, much less than we expected. If we had not slowed down it would have been a record 24 hour run for Triumphant!

Neither of us like the passages over 14 hours and under 3 days as the body does not get into the rhythm of watch keeping so you arrive at your destination short of sleep and a bit glazed.

Even so, instead of getting our heads down on arrival, we decided to pump the dinghy up and go ashore and try and check into Mexico.

Last year it took us 2 days to complete the formalities so we were not expecting a quick process, also there was a yacht race from Florida finishing in Isla Mujeres so we expected to have some delays.

We were pleasantly surprised to be able to complete everything in about 2 ½ hours so we went to have lunch (Sheila: Fish filets in Garlic, John: Pork Mexican style total cost about £4.50 - 9.00 USD and very tasty).

After initial contact with the Mexican Dinghy Dealer via email, it had all gone very quiet so we

were hoping he was on holiday and would be returning soon. We thought we would try and get someone whose Spanish is better than ours to ring him and find out what was happening

STOP PRESS

We have now spoken to the dealer, paid him 3,500 USD and the dinghy is on its way from the Pacific coast of Mexico to Cancun. It should take about 1 week (how long is a Mexican week?) to get here

Isla Mujeres is very nice – laid back and inexpensive, beer costs about 0.75p per bottle and the food is excellent. We used the time to tackle some very overdue painting jobs

The dinghy eventually arrived but as soon as we launched it we discovered it leaked water through the Aluminium hull drain – a real disappointment.

We contacted the dealer again who wanted us to return the dinghy to him on the other side of Mexico for repairs. This was not practical as we needed to be heading south as the hurricane season was fast approaching and Isla Mujeres was too far north for comfort.

We used the US version of Sikaflex to stop the leak (it takes 7 days to cure), put the new outboard on the dinghy were soon zooming around the harbour

Time to leave so we got our act together and, after stocking up we checking out of Mexico for Belize and headed south

30th May 2008

Isla Mujeres
Mexico

As you can see we are back in Mexico.

We set off on Monday afternoon (26th May) south for Belize. The forecast seemed good, winds light from the east or north east for 3-4 days.

We motor sailed out of Isla Mujeres as we had 2 – 3 knots of current against us giving us a speed of about 3 knots over the ground. The strategy was to try going outside (well to the east) of the island of Cozumel to try and get out of the current.

This proved to be not too good an idea as I think we should have had to have gone at least 50 miles offshore and we were only about 20 miles from the coast.

Sheila went down to bed around sunset and J had the watch. We were motor sailing with the electric autopilot on when all of a sudden, the auto pilot stopped working and displayed an error.

J disconnected the auto pilot and discovered that the steering had become very hard to turn, It needed 2 hands just to move the wheel a quarter turn!! too hard for the auto pilot to handle so J had to hand steer for a couple of hours until S came back on watch. The wind speed instrument also stopped working – not a show stopper but a very useful instrument

The seas were quite lumpy and it was not easy to steer by hand, to turn the wheel required both hands and lots of strength and due to the waves it was difficult to balance the boat, very tiring, so we decided that we should continue under sail only.

This meant we could use the wind vane self steering to steer the boat. The wind vane self steering is a completely separate system from the main ship's steering and was working fine.

However under sail alone we were only making about 1.5 – 2 knots of speed over the ground with about 200 miles to go meaning it could take us 100 hours or 4 ½ days to get to Belize.

We sailed through the night and the following morning (Tuesday) we checked in with Chris Parker (the weather man) via the SSB radio (the long range radio) to get a weather update.

A tropical low was forecasted to be around Belize around the time we would be arriving with squalls forecasted to be from any direction of 30 – 50 knots of wind (up to Force 12).

Belize has very few safe heavy weather anchorages so we decided that the safe thing to do was to turn back to Isla Mujeres, (a little voice was telling us that we should not go on!)

If we could have used the engine and had been prepared to hand steer the whole way we could have made Belize before the weather arrived,

however there was also the risk of the steering getting worse or stop working altogether.

We turned around and set a course back to Isla Mujeres. Going this way we had the current and the waves with us so we were able to use the engine and by a combination of balancing the boat under sail and hand steering (with great difficulty – one hour each) we headed north again. With the current with us we were able to make 8.5 – 9 knots over the ground.

We arrived back in Isla Mujeres just before sunset on Tuesday very tired and got the anchor down had a meal and got an early night.

The bad weather for Belize was forecasted to come from the north and arrive in Isla Mujeres first and as J wanted to try and fix the steering, the following day we moved the boat into Marina Paraisio (old friends) as we did not fancy being at anchor in a blow with no steering.

We got the bicycles out and went about the fun of trying to check back into Mexico. We had checked out of Mexico before we left with a destination of Belize, however as we never technically left Mexico we needed to be checked back in again, makes sense?

The bottom line is that we were not following the normal procedures so things are a bit more complicated. The immigration side was sorted easily but the Port Captain's office was not so easy to convince.

Our plans at that moment were to try and find the problem with the steering and fix it along with a few other items then go south again for Belize hopefully in about a week. As hurricane season approaches we cannot stay this far north for too long.

We ended up staying in Isla Mujeres for 3 more weeks due to weather and fixing the steering (The autopilot is chain driven and the chain had dropped off the cogs and jammed up against a bulkhead)

At last we were ready to leave so we went off to check out again, no problem with the Immigration but the Port Captain was not a happy camper, however after applying money to the problem we received clearance to leave the Mexico

Re the current between Isla Mujeres and Belize

We left early in the morning (for us) and followed the coast down no more than ½ mile off shore and tried to stay in 50 foot of water. This seemed to work well, we did stray into 400 feet and the water was like a washing machine and the current 3 knots+ against us.

By the time night fell we were past Cozumel and then followed the rum line south – current here was about 2 knots

It took us just over 2 days but as there was very little wind we motored for 40 hours of the trip.

We arrived at San Pedro Belize and discovered that the buoy marking the reef entrance was missing so trusting out GPS waypoints we gingerly made our way in. You pass through the gap in the reef and then immediately have to do a hard right to miss another reef that is right inside the entrance. A real nightmare at night or with a large swell running.

We anchored off the ferry dock and went ashore to check in.

The following day we went down to Caye Caulker, our plans were to move slowly south to Placencia and then shoot for the Rio Dulce

Placencia
Southern Belize

5th July 2008

As you can see, we have arrived in Placencia again,

We eventually left Caye Caulker after meeting up with Scott off Detroit Copper who we had met in Isla Mujeres and experiencing 40 Knot rain squalls. Luckily the same 2 sand patches were free so we put both anchors down and held fast

We motored for about 4 hours as we had the wind on the nose and 2 shallow cuts between the mud banks (Porto Stuck and Ships Bogue) to negotiate then we were able to sail on down to Middle Long Caye where we stayed for one night.

Quite windy but as we were inside the reef, very small waves. We had real problems getting the anchor to hold (5 attempts). The bottom was very thin sand and grass, we ended up using our secret weapon for Belize, a Fortress anchor, as well as the main anchor with lots of chain which held us OK for the night.

To our surprise we met Chuck on Paravida who we had also met in Isla Mujeres. Chuck is on his way north back to the States.

The following morning we sailed down to Sittee Point on the mainland for another overnight stop, still quite breezy 20 knots+ and were able to anchor under the lee of the river entrance.

Holding here very good, thick mud, just like home, quite windy over night.

The next morning we up anchored and sailed down to Placencia, the wind still breezy, we were able to sail into the anchorage through the North Cut (S says J was showing off). Total distance about 75 miles

We were now securely anchored off Yoli's bar again in 16 feet of water with 160 foot of chain out and catching up on our post (thanks to our friend Mina in England) and e mails.

This time of year you have to watch the weather very closely, Tropical waves are coming off the African coast every 72 hours, any one of which COULD develop into something nasty.

The first task each day is to listen to the various weather nets on the SSB and VHF and then check the internet to see if the rumours are true

We already had had our second named Tropical storm – Bertha 45 knots with 65 knot gusts in the Atlantic near the Cape Verdi islands but projections showed that it would go North West of us (we hoped)

We were within 6 hours of the Rio Dulce if anything bad developed. Very few cruisers are left out there at this time of year, I guess we were all trying to squeeze the last bits of sailing before we checked in to the Rio Dulce for the summer.

Texan Bay Marina
Rio Dulce
Izabel
Guatemala
Central America

24th July 2008

As you can see we arrived in Guatemala.

Our plan of seeing some Belizean Cayes after leaving Placencia did not happen as Tropical Storm Dolly appeared on the horizon so we played safe and stayed in Placencia for a few more days before heading south

As it happens we were lucky and Dolly went to Mexico (Isla Mujeres and Cancun) instead, we were waiting to hear how our friends in Marina Paraiso got on with 40+ knots of sustained winds

We left Placencia with no wind and really flat seas under engine and motored south along the mainland coast for about 20 miles to a little bay called Newhaven, very sheltered and remote.

Scott on Detroit Copper was there so we invited him over for beers and supper – Spaghetti bolognese.

Newhaven is on our list to re visit and explore a bit more as there are lagoons and rivers which could be used as hurricane holes if we can chart the entrances, most of which have a bar protecting them, once over the bar they look to have deeper water and very good protection – but probably lots of bugs!!!

The following day even LESS wind and even flatter seas so we motored south again and anchored at a little bay at Cabo Tres Puntas just inside the Guatemalan border overnight.

As we still had Spaghetti left from the previous day we had Scott over again for supper

The following day we motored (again) over to Livingston which is at the entrance to the Rio Dulce about 10 miles away and crossed the bar at the entrance just before high water, mean depth not less than 6 foot so not a problem for us.

We dropped anchor off the town, called up the agent who was arranging our check-in to

Guatemala for us and within 10 minutes 4 officials arrived on board (Customs, Immigration, Health, Port Captain).

They looked at our papers, asked the usual questions in Spanish (their English was worse than John's Spanish) and left us with instructions to see Raul the agent.

We picked up Scott, went ashore and had an arrival beer, then off to Raul's office. He took our passports and said everything would be ready in 20 minutes so we went off to find a bank and had lunch - Special of the Day: Chicken with rice, mixed salad and mini tortillas for about 1.50GBP.

We returned to Raul's office where all our paperwork was ready. No walking around town to different offices this year, very easy and we were charged about 75 GBP in total – not as cheap as other places but we and the boat are now legal for 3 months. Last year we did not use an agent and it cost us 50 GBP so quite a hike in prices

Our next destination was Texan Bay, just the other end of the famous canyon. (This is where we spent a good deal of time last year.)

Due to very heavy rainfall over the last few weeks the River was very high, 2 – 3 feet higher than we had seen it last year. Some of the marina docks are under water!!!

The result is that all the water running down the river out to sea through the canyon causes a very strong current of 3 knots +.

This proved too much for Scott's little 7.5 horsepower diesel so we ended up towing him up the canyon at about 3.5 – 4-5 knots with our engine running at what would normally be 7.5 knots in smooth water. (Detroit Copper is a 28 foot sailing boat)

We arrived in Texan Bay about 5:00 pm and announced our arrival/return by playing RULE BRITANNIA very loud on the CD player (with good outside speakers) to ensure everyone knew we were back.

We anchored in the lagoon and retired ashore to the bar to say hello to our friends from last year and also met some people we had last seen in Mexico



Triumphant anchored in the lagoon at Texan bay



One of our neighbours in the lagoon



View from Texan bay restaurant at sun set

Texan Bay now has electricity and WIFI and as a result the marina is full which is good news for Mike and Sherrie who have worked so hard to build the marina from scratch in the jungle.

We were now getting the boat and ourselves ready to spend the hurricane season here, sun/rain covers up and a list of jobs that we should be doing

We will be basing ourselves at Texan Bay at anchor and also at Fronteras (Rio Dulce) when we need civilisation



The Bar/Restaurant at Texan bay

Fronteras
Rio Dulce
Guatemala

20th August 2008

We spent about 2 weeks anchored in Texan bay after we arrived in the Rio Dulce where we celebrated our wedding anniversary and Sheila's birthday. They do throw a good party there and it was good to meet up with old friends from last year.

To rest from the partying we motored on up river through the Golfete, a large inland fresh water lake about 12 miles long and 2 miles wide and surrounded by jungle with purple mountains in the distance, to anchor at Fronteras (2 ½ hours) by the bridge where the shops, bars, restaurants, bus station, hotels and most of the marinas are.

We anchored about 200 feet off the town. (For those of you who want to play with Google earth, our position was 15.39.69N 89.00.10W). It has been very hot and humid here recently maybe due to tropical storm FAY to the north of us which may be dragging all the moisture away.

We were trying to arrange to take the boat out of the water here (probably in October after we have popped to the States to stock up on parts) as we are have some welding that needs doing along

with the usual rust work, hull painting and bottom painting .

We had a walk around the boatyard where we will probably haul out and spotted Oyragh who crossed the Atlantic with us in 2005, and a French boat Bleu Nuage that we met last in Granada 3 years ago in the east Caribbean – small world!

The bad news is that the welding that is required is inside the boat in the galley and companion way area and possibly in the aft cabin as well.

Because of the mess and metal dust that will result, we will have to take a lot of gear off the boat and find somewhere to stay ashore and store the boat gear whilst the work is going on.

We estimate the work should take about 2 months but this is Central America so if we complete everything in 3 months we will be ahead of the game. We will probably employ some local labour to help us (at a cost of between £7 - £11 per day).

The local guys can put in 8 hours a day in the heat, us gringos are lucky if we can manage 4 hours on a good (cool) day

We have not had to do major work on the boat since we left the UK 5 years and 15,000 miles ago so we cannot complain.

The last time we hauled the boat out of the water was just under 3 years ago. I just wish Eric the welder was here to do the work as he is the best and he speaks English. Our technical Spanish is poor.

Things here are much cheaper than Belize, a bottle of beer in a bar is about £0.75 and a good 1 course meal between £2.00 - £4.00. A Marina dock here costs between £75 - £175 per month. The range of fruit and vegetables sold on the street in town is impressive and very cheap as well.

AUGUST UPDATE

All is well, it has been VERY hot and humid here for the last 2 weeks (95 Degrees F) and no rain either, we are hoping the weather will break soon.

We were in the UK at this time last year so did not experience August on the river.

J's birthday was spent in good style.

On the morning of J's birthday, to our surprise, they announced his birthday on the morning VHF radio net so everyone knew about it.

We took the boat back to Fronteras in the morning and went ashore for lunch with some friends and had Chicken curry for lunch, (the yanks still have to learn how to make a good curry!!!)

After that we wandered off to met up with more friends at a bar right on the waterfront and ended up in a another very nice little bar called the Sundog run by a couple of Dutch people, a good time was had by all and lots of good music as well. Everywhere we went, the cruisers were called out happy birthday – quite embarrassing

After spending too long in the Sundog, we retired home more than a bit jaded in a heavy thunderstorm, well it is the rainy season!

We will stay in Fronteras for a few more days before returning to Texan bay for Sherries Birthday (3rd September) and Mike and Sherries 30th wedding anniversary (4th September). Life is never quiet here

December 2008

We are in the process of getting all the welding work done by Carlos the welder in Fronteras but that is probably a story for the next news letter



Well that's all for now

John and Sheila