

What Hannah's Day's About

Hannah. Who's Hannah? I hear you say. And why should she have a day of her own? If that's what you thought, you've obviously never heard of Hannah's Day. So you'll need a bit of background before you go any further. Hannah was my mum's name and although this party isn't to remember her or talk about her, she's the reason why I hold it every year. The idea is to keep in touch with everyone who's meant something to us, whether they be relatives, friends or people we've just met.



Picture courtesy of
Hemel Hempstead
Gazette

Let me explain. When my mum turned 90 she moved in with my husband Nigel and me. One of her favourite pastimes was meeting up with family and friends. So every year for the last 10 years of her life, we held a birthday party for her. For her 100th she had two, one here and one at the day centre she went to regularly. Both were brilliant. (This pic of me and her was in the local paper. I'm the one with the dark hair by the way.)

I have to admit that it wasn't pure altruism. I loved the parties and wanted to keep in touch with everyone as much as she did.

(Collecting Friends was always put on job application forms as one of my hobbies.) When my mum died, so did my excuse for a party every year. I needed another. So Hannah's Day was born.

Every year since then, round about the date of my mother's passing, which was on the 28th July 2003, we've held Hannah's Day. Each has been very different, but all have been fun.

Last year I wrote a diary when it was all over. This year I decided to start writing before the event to make sure I remember the trials and tribulations of the build-up as well as the fun of the day itself.

So this, then is my diary of our 9th Hannah's Day.

Arranging The Date

It's May now and about time I started to think about this year's Hannah's Day. The first thing I have to do, before I can plan anything, is to arrange a date to suit as many of my family members as possible. Naturally I start with my two daughters, Mara and Barbi.

Mara, the older of the two, has lots of commitments. Sometimes her Aikido practices take up an entire weekend. She and her husband James also have regular sessions with the Landmark Forum, from which they both feel they are getting tremendous results. On top of all that, Mara's studying clinical hypnotherapy to help her in her

work as an Occupational Therapist mainly with palliative care patients both in the community and in hospices. As if those things weren't enough to have to take into account, she's also got to schedule in visits from her New Zealander in-laws who are coming to England towards the end of July, which is when Hannah's Day is normally scheduled.

Phew. Quite a lot of juggling to do there then. It's no wonder we had a bit of a misunderstanding when we first spoke about it. Thankfully we got it all sorted when she gave me the dates she hasn't got anything in her diary. That narrowed it down to the 29th June or 6th July.

My younger daughter Barbi has just started a new job as a Carer. As she knew she would have to work some Saturdays and Sundays but hadn't yet had a regular route allocated to her, we had to wait to find out to about her days off to make sure Hannah's Day would fit round them. Mara's ability to come on one of two consecutive weekends made it a bit simpler as Barbi would expect to work one then have the next one off.

The biggest fly in the ointment of the two dates which suited Mara were the birthdays of my two granddaughters. Katherine will be 24 on the 8th July, whilst her younger sister Becki's birthday will be on the 28th June so I had to consider any celebrations they might be having.

After Barbi got her rota, we finally agreed on the 6th July but had to ignore the birthdays and hope that both girls could manage to come and join us at some point in the day.

Organising Entertainment

Rather than just have an ordinary party, for the last few years I've tried to include something a bit different. First we had Biodanza, which is moving to music under the direction of an experienced teacher - no set steps to remember so anyone can join in. For a couple of years running we were able to dance in Ashlyn's School's lovely grounds round the corner from here. Another year we danced in the gazebo in our own back garden.

More recently we've had Indian Drum Ceremonies, again in our gazebo led by a friend who's experienced in holding sessions of this sort. (The first one she held for us was when Nigel and I got married almost 19 years ago.) This lady was the first person I thought of asking for this year. Unfortunately she can't commit herself as she's waiting to be called for an operation. So that arrangement has been left as she'll do it if she can.

Being me though, I didn't want to just wait and see. I wanted to get something else lined up if possible. As I haven't been to Biodanza

classes for some time, it felt too cheeky to contact the teacher to ask her if she'd like to hold a session here, so that was out. I asked another friend who teaches Egyptian dancing but she's already got plans for that day.

One afternoon at the beginning of June, Nigel saw an advertisement in the local paper for a flower sale in aid of the local hospice, being held in a nearby town. We didn't realise they had events which started early in the morning, so by the time we got there we'd missed all their entertainment. What a shame that was. We were told they'd had a folk group, three different bands, a couple of individual musicians, a face painter and what I'd really have loved to see, a Flash Mob.

With Hannah's Day in mind I wondered if any of these turns could be any good for us. I managed to speak to the guy who organised it all and he was kind enough to send me contact details of some of their acts, but none of them were really suitable for our tiny garden. The only one which was likely to be any good for our event was the face painter, but her name wasn't in the list he sent me.

But that had given me the idea. I belong to a local barter group which is part of the national Local Exchange Trading Schemes (LETS) organisation and I knew that at least one of our members did face painting. So I 'phoned her. She was busy on the 6th July,

but told me of another member who does it. Yes, you've guessed it. She was busy that day too. But this lady taught face painting so said she'd ask one of her students if she'd be interested in doing it. As I needed to get started on the invitations, I decided to just say that I hoped to have face painting for kids so that people would know it was likely.

Having got the idea of an extra for the kids, now I only had to worry about something for the adults. My yoga teacher suggested that maybe I could find someone to do Tai Chi. Another light bulb moment - Michael, the husband of a friend from our LETS group is a Tai Chi teacher. And guess what - he's going to help out. I told him about our gazebo and he suggested Chi Gung exercises. (No, I don't know what they are either but I've been told they're good. You never know, we may discover we want to learn more about it.)

Invitations

Once I'd got the entertainment sorted I could start to think about preparing the invitations. There's not just one design for everyone I want to invite though. Oh no, that would be too simple for me. I have to have several different ones.

There's electronic invitations to email to everyone whose e-address I've got and printed ones for people who either haven't got email or if they have, I don't know it. Both of these have two variations.

There are the regular sort for family, friends and acquaintances who I think may actually turn up on the day. But for people who live too far away to come, or who I know for one reason or another won't be able to make it, I make special ones which I call my Distance invites.

For the last few years, I've tried to use Hannah's Day to make new friends too. So there's a third type, named as Getting To Know You invitations. These are given to neighbours who I may know slightly, or even not at all, or emailed to people I met whilst I was selling Avon (I gave it up a couple of years ago) but would like to get to know better.

That sounds complicated, so to try to simplify it,

Invitation types		
a) Regular	b) Distance	c) Getting To Know You
i. Printed	i. Printed	i. Printed
ii. Electronic	ii. Electronic	ii. Electronic

here's a breakdown in a box. I've used the identification letters here as a key to the descriptions below.

For me, the easiest way of starting is to open up the computer file of any one of the previous year's invitations and make changes. The front pages of all of them proudly proclaim HANNAH'S DAY and

give the date for this year's event. But after that are differences depending on the type of invitation.

a) Regular

- i. Here's a pic of the front page of this year's invitation for friends, relatives and people I know well. The day and date are followed by the party's start time (no end time is given other than 'till late.' After that's our address and how to find us if the person doesn't know where we live.



Every year I finish these with: 'Bring some food to share, a bottle and a friend if you want to.'

b) Distance

- i. For these invitations, the time, address and directions aren't needed. Instead, on the bottom half of the front is: 'Even though I know it's unlikely you'll be able to be with us for our party, you're invited because I want you to know that I think of you.'

c) Getting To Know You

- i. Under the date of Hannah's Day on the front page of these invitations, unlike the Regular invites, an end time is give for

the afternoon. That way no-one will feel obliged to stay if they don't want to, or if they don't feel comfortable with other guests. Of course if, once they're here, they want to stay longer, no-one would be telling them to go home.

Once the front's done, there's an ABOUT THE DAY section in which I talk about what we're planning regarding food¹ and drink² and what other stuff I've organised. As you can imagine, that's usually the biggest section. Obviously this will vary depending on the type of invite. But whilst the invitations are still in the creation stage, changes can easily be made, so if I hear about the face painter before I print them out, I can change the wording to let people know her name and when she'll be here.

All invitations finish with WHAT HANNAH'S DAY'S ABOUT so that new invitees and others who may have forgotten, will know what the event's about. (I copied most of that bit from this year's invitation which made the first paragraph of this diary really easy. Well, it made sense to tell you about it first as otherwise you may not have known what I was rabbiting about.)

¹ For the last few years we've opted for a 'community picnic' which works really well. We always get a great selection of food so we're now doing that every year. I ask guests to please bring along something they enjoy eating to share with the other guests.

² Like any bottle party, guests are invited to bring their favourite tippie.

Every year all the invitations finish with:

We hope you can join us, but if you can't please keep in touch
anyway.

And whether you come or not, why not contact someone
you don't often see to let them know that
you think of them and care about them.

After all the printed ones are sorted, I then have to redo each of
the three types as their ii. versions so that they can be sent
electronically.

Still hoping for a face painter for the children, I crossed my fingers
when I got a call from my friend's student. She would have loved to
help out, but doesn't get back from holiday till the 8th July. So that
was another no-no then.

I still hadn't got anyone, when an invitation came through my door
towards the end of May. It was from one of Katherine's friends who
lives nearby. A local children's centre together with several big
companies came up with an idea for a one day get-together for
neighbours. They're calling it a Big Lunch and it's scheduled to go
across the UK on the 2nd June.

Katherine's three year old daughter Lexi was really looking forward to the party, but the day before Katherine became quite ill. Much as she wanted to keep her promise to Lexi, she really wasn't well enough. All she wanted was to go to her mum Barbi in Hemel Hempstead for some TLC. So Nigel and I drove to Hemel and picked Lexi up to take her to the Big Lunch party.

The Big Lunch had sounded a brilliant event to go to get to know neighbours and I planned to hand out invitations to Hannah's Day. Finishing the 'Getting to Know You' invitations with the possibility of face painting for children, I printed some off the day before and gave them out to the mums and dads during the afternoon. One of the neighbours I gave an invite to, offered to bring some big play equipment for the kids in the afternoon of Hannah's Day, so that'll be an added bonus.

Lexi had a wonderful time playing with the other kids at the party, joining in with the different fun stuff which had been organised: bouncy castle, sticking 'jewels' on cardboard tiaras and masks and taa daa having her face painted. Yes, I now had another face painter to ask if she could do the honours on Hannah's Day. And this one said 'yes!'

Guess what though? Sod's Law came into play. A couple of days after I got the OK from Christine, the face painter, I met a friend

who I told I'd organised the face painting. She told me that her sister-in-law, another friend of mine, does it too. Both had already planned to come to Hannah's Day. But that wasn't the end of it either. Yet another friend, Jenny, told me it was something her daughter did. As I've known her since her daughter was 3 months old, there's a good chance they'll both be there joining in with the festivities. What is it they say about busses? Never one when you want it, then three come along at once. It obviously applies to face painters too.

As you can imagine, all of that lot took a bit of time to get together. Of course, with my luck, loads of things happened to delay me even more. You've stuck with me this far, so I hope you don't mind if I offload all the problems.

Incidental Problems with Invitations

First of all Nigel and I have been trying to give our bedroom a face lift. I've lived in this house for over 30 years and have only managed to decorate the bedroom once since then. You'd better get out the violins for this next bit. The floor's covered in a patchwork combination of cast-off carpets: blue from my mother-in-law when she had her living room recarpeted (she's been dead for quite a few years now and she got a good number of years' wear out of her new

one before she went) and a bit of ivory which Barbi had left over when she had it laid in the flat she lived in before she moved a few years ago to where she lives now. My bed's over 20 years old and don't get me started on the ward-robies. They were hand-me-downs from an aunt who died over 30 years ago and they were old then!!!

OK. I think I've made my point about why we want our bedroom done. But we couldn't get started because although we had our roof repaired last year, we had a leak through the ceiling a few months later. Admittedly it was during a gale-force winds and bucketing rain, but it shouldn't have been dripping down the wall.

Originally we thought it would be easy to sort out. The first guy who came round was referred to us by a builder we knew. He said it would simply be a case of taking down a ceiling board to investigate where the rain was coming in, quoted us a price to repair and replaster the ceiling, then dropped off the face of the earth. I made countless calls to him to pin him down to a start date, but only managed to leave messages which never got returned.

Enter workman number two. I suppose I was a bit silly here really. Have you heard of Freecycle? It's an on-line group where you can offer stuff you don't want to throw away or ask others for things you need which they might have, but not want. But obviously these people are strangers. Anyway, someone on Freecycle wanted an

office chair. We had two which I hadn't yet got round to offering on the site. So I answered, telling the guy he could have one or even both of ours if he wanted.

He came round the next day bringing a friend with him. Not only did they want both chairs, they also were happy to take a printer for which we no longer had any use. The friend was over the moon to also have a saw thingie that Nigel never used.

Making conversation I found out that the friend did maintenance work on houses, so without giving it much thought, mentioned our problem with getting the workman back to do the ceiling in our bedroom. He had a look at what needed to be done then said he'd be able to do most of it, but not the plastering, so we'd need someone else for that. A friend's dad is a plasterer so I knew that wouldn't be a problem. When he came round we discovered him to be Brian, a friend of Nigel's from years ago,

This new guy had to finish the job he was on before he could come to do our work. Well waiting for him went on for a couple of months. Finally he got in touch to say he would be able to start, but Nigel wanted to meet him before letting a stranger loose on our home. Pinning him down to a meeting proved to be impossible, so we decided to find someone else.

The most sensible course of action seemed to be to ask Brian's advice. After all, he dealt with builders, etc. all the time. But he was more honest than the others and said that we should really get the guy who repaired the roof to come and check out where the leak was coming from before we did anything else. He also said that we probably wouldn't need to have the entire ceiling board replaced as he should be able to patch up the water damaged section for us.

After two or three 'phone calls I finally managed to get in touch with the roofer, but now we had another wait for him to check what the problem was. When he came round he said he could do the work, but was going on holiday the next day but promised to sort it out as soon as he got back. It's now the 28th June and he got back last Saturday. Guess what? The roof's repaired.

Brian's going to come round on Sunday to see what's needed to sort out the ceiling. Before he starts though, we're waiting for another guy, who's been doing odd jobs for us, to sort out removing a bit of wall to open out a walk-in cupboard to make it part of the room.

Then Brian can plaster over the newly exposed bit of ceiling at the same time. Once that's done and the whole room's decorated, then, woo hoo, we'll be able to order the new bedroom furniture. (We've already gone through the process of looking at what's available and have chosen what we want, so that's one less job to have to do later.)

So how did all this delay my creating the invitations? Well as I'm sure you're aware. Nothing happens in isolation. So at the same time as getting all the above sorted out, we also had to sort out years and years worth of accumulated items, some rubbish, others valuable memories, but all taking up space in our bedroom. Several weekends and evenings were spent moving, sorting, reminiscing, tearing up and throwing away all sorts of stuff.

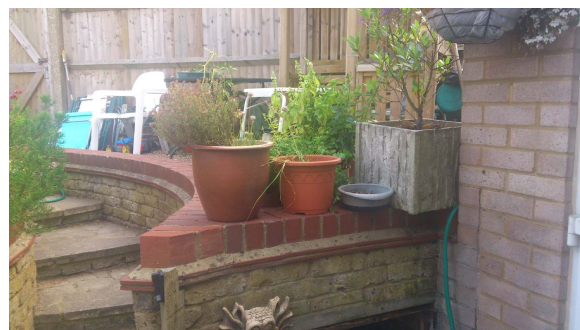
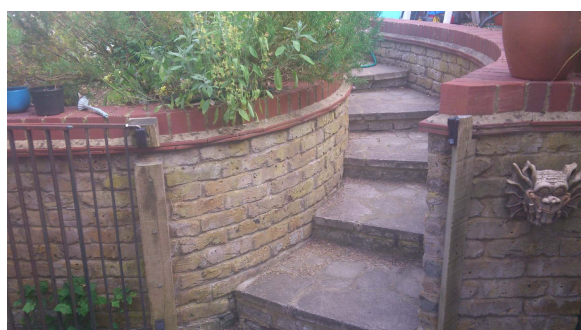
On top of that was the garden. In 2012 we hadn't got much done out there before Hannah's Day because not only had Nigel been recovering from an operation earlier in the year, but also most of the time the weather was too bad to go outside and the soil was too wet to do much with it. This year we vowed to be different.

When we 'd been to the local hospice flower sale at the beginning of June, we'd bought loads of seedlings, both vegetables and flowers (bee friendly of course), to try to make our garden beautiful before Hannah's Day. I also wanted to make up another hanging basket but couldn't find everything I needed for it at the sale. So on our way home we stopped off at a garden centre. To make sure our purchases would be established before our party, we had to plant them sooner rather than later.

Now our garden's not your usual strips of lawn separated by a long path up the middle. We don't like square edges, so we've used swirls and circles wherever possible. I'll try to give you an idea of it.

Just outside the back door of our house is a paved patio on the left of which is our dog Pinto's much chewed kennel. (It wasn't chewed when she first had it but Labrador puppies love chewing wood and we preferred her exercising her teeth on the front piece of her kennel rather than the legs of our table and chairs.)

I was going to have a go at describing the steps up from the patio to the garden proper, but decided that pictures would make it much easier - better than 1000 words and all that.



The pots in the right hand picture are in front of Nigel's herb garden, just behind which you can just see a corner of our arbour.

The area behind the wall to the right of the steps is gravelled to the back gate. Behind the round wall in the left hand picture is our round flower bed. The lavender, rosemary and sage bushes around the outside edge were originally intended to be a low hedge. They've been there for years but sadly have been neglected. They're now very tall and had loads of dead wood which had to be cut back. Some of the other flowers had survived, but once the dead wood of the

bushes was removed, there were lots of patches of bare earth. So this was where most of our new plants were put.

We'd left a gap in the 'hedge' opposite the wall which opens out to the rest of the garden to allow us to get to the flower bed and had planted a lemon balm bush to one side of it. I don't know if you've ever grown lemon balm, but it grows, and grows, and grows, Now you have to hack your way through the jungle to get to the broken paving stones I'd laid as a make-shift path which leads to the centre where we've got a ball, fountain thingie in a wooden tub.

After the dead wood had been removed from lavender bushes on the left of the lemon balm, there was a huge gap. It occurred to me that if half the lemon balm bush could be dug up, it could be moved from where it was and replanted to fill the gap. Then the entrance to the flower bed wouldn't be blocked.

Now that sort of stuff is man's work, so Nigel stepped forward to do the deed. Well, he tried to do it. Unfortunately the first time he tried to make a hole for the transplanted half to go into, his garden fork's handle snapped. Did you notice I said, the first time he tried? That's because, there were more efforts. But first he had to have a new handle for his fork.

There's a brilliant shop in our High Street which sells virtually any type of good quality hardware item you might need. So that's where Nigel went to get a new handle, rather than going to a general garden centre and perhaps getting a cheap one that wasn't up to the job. After he'd bought it he realised that he'd missed the opportunity of a lifetime to go in and ask for 'fork handles.' (If you've seen the two Ronnies sketch you'll know what I'm on about.) Anyway, he replaced the broken handle with the new one and tried again.

I bet you know what I'm going to say before I say it don't you? Yes, the first time he tried to dig the hole with the newly repaired fork, the new, super duper quality handle broke. So all the while, whenever I wanted to plant anything in the flower bed, I had to break up the soil with a diddy widdy garden fork. The lifesaver there was Barbi who remembered we'd bought her a full size garden fork not long after they'd moved into their house, when they were full of enthusiasm for getting their garden sorted. That was third time lucky as Nigel managed to make the necessary hole and transplanted half the lemon balm bush into it.

Then the grass on the lawn was too long for the lawn mower, so we had to use the strimmer on it. But that works on a rechargeable battery which didn't hold enough charge to do the whole lawn in one go. (Well, I did say the grass was very long.) Whilst Nigel got on

with finishing the job with the lawn mower once the grass was short enough not to keep clogging it up, I planted up the flowers we'd bought for the hanging basket.

There was also loads of weeding to do all around the edges of the garden, where against the fence on the left of the garden we've got jasmine entwined round (f)artichoke leaves (we planted the artichokes a few years ago but haven't managed to dig any up in time to eat them before they regrow.) Along the same side are perennial sweet peas, a climbing rose, a pretty white plant which comes up every year in several different places (I've no idea what it is but Nigel said it came with a pack of wild flower seeds), gooseberry and Quince bushes (the latter looked as if it had given up the ghost, but a new shoot seems to be hanging on in there) and a perennial gardenia.

In the midst of garden problems, loads of us had health ones. The worst and final crunch was that Katherine's illness at the time of the Big Lunch, ended up with her being admitted to hospital, so my three and a half year old great granddaughter Lexi stayed with us for several nights and daytimes. Needing to still get on with the garden even whilst Lexi was with us, she helped me plant some onions which had decided that growing would be more fun than being eaten. We also took her with us on another trip to a garden centre where she 'helped' chose more plants.

The back left hand corner of our garden is overgrown with comfrey which Nigel reckons we've got to keep because it makes excellent fertiliser. I keep surreptitiously removing leaves as they block out the light from the unknown named bush in the half wooden barrel we rescued from Nigel's mum's garden. We'd bought a tray of several purple and yellow violas, which Lexi helped me plant round the outside of this bush after I'd removed all the weeds.

We couldn't ignore the double planter outside the front of our house. One side was fine, with lavender, tiny rose bushes, St. John's Wort and Nigella covering the entire area. The other one has a huge Red Robin, which we had to cut back so that it didn't attack passers by and take up the entire path alongside the house. In front of this is a Mock Orange, which smells glorious when it's in flower. We did have an Echinops out there, but the only time I liked it was for a very short time when its spiky heads were flowering. The rest of the time it just looked shabby and I really didn't like it.

I finally persuaded Nigel to get rid of it but there was a huge empty space after he dug up the root. I'd already removed weeds and planted out some of our purchases from the charity plant sale, so Lexi 'helped' me again by sprinkling marigold and larkspur seeds. Sadly the local feline population decided that this nicely turned soil would make a wonderful toilet, so many of our seeds got lost when I removed the pussy faeces before Nigel and I covered the area in netting.

Once the front was sorted we could return our attention to the back garden. A few years ago we planted our little cherry tree against the back fence. This promises to have lots of fruit this year. Unbeknown to us, a fruit bramble was in with the cherry tree when we first got it. This produces fruits which look a bit like loganberries, but has very spiteful thorns all along so must be handled with care and very thick gardening gloves.

Many years ago I went out with a gardener who gave me two fig tree cuttings. One of these I gave to Nigel's dad who was a keen gardener when he was alive. The other cutting soon outgrew its small pot and was replanted into its present home, a large, plastic container where now, complete with baby fruit, it's growing well, beside the cherry tree and it's fierce friend.

With the exception of our two year old apple tree (yes, that's got fruit this year too) the rest of the earth along the back fence was a shamble. Weeds and dead plant matter which had been cut back at some point, but not cleared away, filled the gaps between half full bags of compost, manure and other types of black earthy stuff piled on top of broken bits of flower pots, buckets, watering cans and the like. After Lexi had gone back home, this area became my mission and one Sunday I rose to the challenge and cleared the lot. Another trip to the garden centre and a bit of work later, we had broad beans climbing a pyramiddy trellis thing next to the fig tree,

beside beds of curly kale and purple sprouting broccoli and a few rows each of seeds for beetroot and Chard (which has beautiful coloured stems.)

With Sweet William in a few pots round the wall, courgettes planted in the now cleared areas in front of the rose and sweet peas, aubergines and peppers safely growing in small half-barrel type pots, Nigel neatened the lawn's edges. Everything which needed to be planted was snuggled in their earthy beds. Seeds were sprinkled in the planter in the front of our house as well as in gaps in the back garden. Then finally dead-heads were removed from flowers as necessary, broken flowerpots and the like were stacked by the garden gate, ready for the mass exodus to the tip.

So that's enough about the garden. Now back to the invitations. As you can imagine, I was over the moon when I finally managed to get them finished. But life wasn't ready to smile on me just yet.

Problems with my PC had delayed my starting to get the invitations created in the first place. But after being on a high and congratulating myself when they were done, I sunk to another low when the email versions refused to go out. I had to wait till Nigel came home but fortunately, my husband is a Technical Genius Extraordinaire. He found out that Outlook limits the number of people to whom you can send messages in any one day. Why, you

might ask. Well, you never know. I may have been trying to send out spam. Judging by the comments on the on-line help page Nigel found, Outlook are also protecting the general public from email newsletters from charities and churches and other similar nefarious groups.

The next glitch was when I tried to invite folk on Facebook. I thought it'd be a diddle to just upload the electronic invitation but when I tried, the little circle just kept on going round and round and round and

In the end I left it to it and went in the other room to have my supper. But the little circle was still going round and round the next day too. Thinking cap in place, I wondered if maybe my files were the wrong format so I saved them differently and tried again. No, still got problems. Maybe they're too big, so I made them smaller. Yaay. That worked. So now I could create a Facebook event and invite friends that way too.

Every year I make a list of everyone that I want to send an invitation to, identifying with a code letter whether they need an a) i. or ii., b) i. or ii. or c) i. or ii. one so I can work out how many I need to print. The snail-mail ones also need labels, so after printing both, I spent a 'fun' evening putting invites into envelopes and sticking on labels then postage stamps. The remaining printed invitations for local friends and neighbours, were to be put through letter boxes.

As there were too many by hand deliveries to do in one go, Nigel and I walked our dog Pinto in various different directions each day to cover as many as possible. I also kept a batch of type a) and c) invitations in my coat pocket or handbag so that if, whilst I was out, I could give one to anyone I happened to meet who should have been invited, but for some reason, such as my having an old address or 'phone number, had been missed.

Personal deliveries took longer than I'd hoped. One day was taken up visiting someone in hospital whilst another was used up visiting a sick relative in a nursing home. We finally got all but one of the invites delivered by 23rd June - only two weeks before the big day.

I handed out the remaining printed invitations to friends I met at a party we went to last week. Typing this has just reminded me that we still haven't delivered one to that last person. Now that's really cutting it fine. Hannah's Day's this Saturday! Always the optimist, I've printed another couple (they come in twos) in the hope we'll be able to get one to the friend in time.

Responses and Replies

There have been roughly the same amount of people saying they can't come as those who've said they will be joining us. That bodes

well as a lot of the people who usually turn up don't bother to RSVP. But a few responses I have had are worth a mention. Two were 'phone calls and arrived on the same day within 5 minutes of each other.

The first one was a call from my friend Jenny telling me that a mutual friend will be coming. This lady never usually goes anywhere, but apparently she thought I was so kind to keep inviting her in spite of the fact she's never come, that this year she would make the effort.

The second call was from the wife of someone I met many years ago. Although never a close friend, he had an impact on my life at that time. He used to live close by, but moved to Wales a few years before the first Hannah's Day. We've always exchanged Xmas cards and I've sent him and his wife Distance invites every year. This call was to say they don't want to be invited to any more Hannah's Days, nor do they want me to send any more Xmas cards as they consider them a waste of resources. Well that's telling me then!

The other reply worth mentioning was from another friend who'd emailed me to say he was coming to the party. I love the way he ended and I quote:

Good luck with the setting up: if the wind and the gazebo take you both hang-gliding, I hope you have a great time and make many pals in distant lands.

Two Days to H Day

Last year I was told by several people who didn't turn up to Hannah's Day that they'd forgotten and would appreciate a reminder closer to the date. So I spent most of the day sending out emails and texts to jog memories and had a few replies.

One that stuck in my mind was from a friend saying he'd already arranged something else before he got my text today. I replied that I'd sent him an email invitation weeks ago. He'd forgotten. Thus proving the point, but I'm not going to keep sending out reminders every day to make sure people remember. I'll just stick to my maxim. I'll do what I can but that's it. Whoever's meant to be here with us will be. There's no point in worrying about it.

But I thought I'd better make sure that the entertainment I'd organised was going to be exactly as planned. First I 'phoned to see if my friend was likely to be able to hold another Indian Drum Ceremony. Sadly for us, but happily for her as it means she's on the way to getting sorted, she goes into hospital tomorrow (Friday) for her operation.

Next I sent texts to Michael and Christine. Within the day I had confirmations from them both. Michael said he'd be here between five and five thirty to set up for the Chi Gung exercises and

Christine said she'd get here between three and quarter past to set up her tables for the face painting.

Nigel's off work tomorrow as two of us to get everything ready has got to be better than me trying to do it on my own. A friend who lives round the corner is on call-out if we need an extra pair of hands. Mara and her husband James hope to get to us by about half past two Saturday afternoon so will be able to offer last minute help.

One Day to H Day

Nigel and I underestimated how long everything was going to take. Although we'd been working on the garden for the last few weeks, there was still all the debris that we'd heaped by the back gate to go to the tip. So before we could think of putting up the gazebo, we had to get rid of that, which had to start with us getting it all down to the car.

To get to our closest car park you have to go down a steep flight of stone steps about 100 yards from the back gate of our house which lead down. Both of us had to make several journeys up and down the steps with broken flowerpots and buckets, empty soil and potting compost bags, rusty garden tools and broken hanging baskets and

assorted other things including some broken or recyclable stuff from other parts of our home. Finally, with the back seat and the boot filled, we set off. At the tip we eventually found where everything needed to be left. It was a great feeling after we'd got shot of it all to drive back home with a nearly empty car.

By now it was about half past one and we were starving. We had to go to Waitrose to get stuff for the next day, so stopped for lunch in their café. There wasn't much that suited my arthritis friendly diet (I can't have anything with tomatoes in, so the vegetable lasagne was out; I can't eat any beef, pork, bacon or ham, so all their sandwiches were no-nos.) I finally settled for carrot and coriander soup with a brown rustic roll and my free cup of tea (for presenting my My Waitrose card.) Nigel had a toasted sandwich thingie and a diet coke.

Grocery shopping was the next job after eating. Hannah's Day guests are asked to contribute to the communal feast, but we also provide some food. Going round Waitrose aisles took longer than we thought it would 'cos I hadn't made a list, so we drifted a bit. Each time we thought we'd got everything, we remembered something else. Eventually we made it to the check-outs.

Earlier, when we'd finished clearing debris from the garden, I'd noticed bald patches in the gravel to the right of the steps. Just in

front of the harbour, clumps of grass and a few weeds were trying to take over. After we'd paid for our shopping at Waitrose, I left Nigel loading it into the now empty boot, whilst I toddled off to the garden centre where I bought a couple of bags of stones. Nigel drove round to meet me round at the back gate of the garden centre where one of their helpful staff hoiked the bags of gravel out and put them onto the back seat of the car.

Before we came home we had one final trip, essential for Nigel, which was for his alcohol supplies from Tring Brewery not far from here. They've won loads of awards for their beers. They have prize winning certificates all over the wall behind the serving counter, so it's not just Nigel who thinks they're great. You can buy their ales in bottles or choose larger quantities of your favourite tipples. They had bottles of his favourite ale, but didn't have it on tap so he couldn't buy the amount he wanted. Nigel asked for a sample (always fairly substantial) of one of their new beers and liked it so much he was well satisfied to buy it as a substitute.

Back home, I put the shopping away whilst Nigel made us something to eat. When our tummies were full, we allowed ourselves a short break before our next, and last, job - putting up the gazebo.

What a difference from last year. Although I wanted to have it ready for use by the day before at the latest, 2012 had been so wet

that we'd had to put off erecting it till the morning of the party. Assembling the frame had to be in fits and starts. (I nearly typed stits and farts - Spoonerisms as I write. What next?) to fit in with the few dry spells in between the wet stuff. Every time we'd put a bit of frame together it started raining so we ducked back to the house, then ran back out again when it stopped armed with a towel each to dry off the frame rods before we put on the cover. The only bonus was that after Hannah's Day the gazebo had to stay up for ages before it was dry enough to put away. I absolutely love the atmosphere in it, so even after the event, so when it wasn't raining too heavily I still went out there for meals. (I didn't want my food to get drowned!)

This year the weather was glorious. The sun was shining and we knew summer was here at long last. The cherries on the tree now glow red in the sunlight. The sweet peas and jasmine perfume the air and the unnamed white flowers shine in all their glory. The gooseberry bush is now covered in green berries and the gardenia's got loads of buds at the end of each stem. I'm really looking forward to them opening as their perfume is glorious. Even the cotyledons of all the seeds, both in the back garden and the front one, have peeped above the soil. Our garden's lovely, ready for our special day.

Whilst I emptied the splish splasher (dishwasher to the uninitiated) Nigel went out into the garden and took all the gazebo bits out of

their blue and white stripey bag. A couple of years ago we had our garden 'done.' Following our love of round shapes in the garden, we had a circular lawn laid, just the right size for the gazebo.



By the time I'd finished putting away the dishes, Nigel had assembled the hexagonal bit for the top and had got the rest of the poles together, laid out in position round the lawn at the points they'd be needed. It looked very artistic. (Sorry I didn't actually get a pic of it looking like that but I didn't think of it at the time. So the one of the lawn as it is now will have to do.)

We started off well enough, but although we tried to raise them at opposite points we got a bit muddled, so as we combined two poles and raised them in one place, one of those already up lost its bottom half and had to be replaced. But eventually we got the whole thing up and fastened firmly with guy ropes to the concrete fence posts on three sides and to the very heavy antique lawn roller we inherited from Nigel's dad, on the fourth. We thanked our lucky stars for the light evening so we could see what we were doing, but by the time we'd finished it was nearly half past ten and we were both shattered. We did feel pleased with ourselves as we got loads done, but we couldn't wait to get to bed.

The Big Day

After a bath and breakfast, we got started with our final preparations. Even after all our efforts in the garden, there were still a few empty flower pots and other bits to clear. Once these were out of the way, I noticed big gaps round where new plants had been put. We're not the tidiest of people, so our living and dining rooms also needed to have clutter removed. As the weather's so good, we 'killed two birds with one stone' and took all the indoor plants outside to fill up the spaces.

Here I must just add how proud of my indoor plants I am. We have ordinary ones, such as chrysanthemums and begonias, but also have several Pogostemons also known as Patchouli. (These pale green leaves have an amazing smell and are often used in perfumes. There was only one in the living room so that was the only one taken out and one of our guests was so impressed with it, I gave it to her.) We have several types of orchids (I only took a chance with the Catlea which has long thick green leaves and amazing yellow flowers. I think will be ok with being outside.)

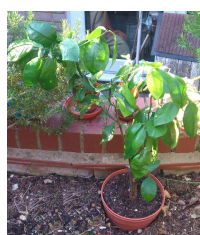
We've got two pots of bird of paradise which we brought back as a single baby when Nigel and I went on honeymoon to Madeira³.

³ This is such a long story that I'll leave the explanation about how we brought it home in a basket for another time.

They've only ever flowered once since we had them but the beautiful orange peaks like a bird's plumage with a blue 'tongue' sticking out, lasted for absolutely ages. We finally managed to find an Iresine, which is a beautiful red leaf plant, also known as blood leaf⁴ which actually glows when the sun shines through the leaves. Then on to citrus with a mandarin tree, bought at the Eden Project at the same time as the first of our Pogostemons, and a grapefruit tree which I grew from a pip.⁵

Back in the now cleared living room, Nigel Dysoned (that doesn't have the same ring as hoovered) whilst I cleared shelves of the precious pictures and ornaments I wanted to be kept safe in case of accidental drink spillage, etc. Then we inserted the rectangular piece of wood which expands our dining room table from its usual round shape to a larger oval. Once that was in place, we moved the table to the back of the room against the window beside the door to the garden. The last thing before getting the food ready was to cover the table and another cupboard against the wall, with tablecloths.

⁴ First seen and coveted in Madeira but not obtained till years later. Also a long story for another time.



⁵ Several years ago I found a pip with an inch-long tap root in my breakfast grapefruit. Although I immediately wanted to plant it, when I'd finished eating I forgot and started wrapping the skin, peel, etc. The pip jumped out of the paper and landed on my shoe, reminding me it wanted to grow. It's now about two foot tall and usually lives on our kitchen window-sill. When the weather's as good as it is now, it goes out into the garden where its pot fits into another one which has been specially sunk into the earth by the wall just inside the flower bed,. The pic here shows it in its summer home.

I'd been panicking a bit 'cos there were a few things we'd forgotten to get at Waitrose, but Mara saved the day by 'phoning to see if we wanted her and James to buy anything on their way here. That was a lifesaver as it meant Nigel didn't have to go out again today and I needed his help with the food.

I guessed right when I thought we'd still be busy when Mara & James got here with shopping, so I wasn't disappointed with my predictive powers. When they arrived, they were wonderful. James put up lights in gazebo whilst Mara cleaned up the white plastic chairs in the garden. I had to apologise to her as she had to work really hard on them as they'd been out all year and were in a dreadful state. I must try and cover them this year before the weather turns bad.

Christine arrived soon afterwards to set up tables for face painting. I was still nowhere near ready so had to apologise to her too, this time for leaving her to get on with it by herself and not being able to be sociable. Sadly, as has happened every year so far, we had no response to any of the Getting To Know You invitations. So the only child who got her face painted was Lexi. Christine joined in with the party though, and hopefully enjoyed herself. I didn't realise but she was a friend of Katherine's so my granddaughter gave her a lift home.

As you've probably guessed, I still wasn't ready at half past three, when the party was supposed to start. Fortunately the first guests arriving on time, were Katherine with Lexi and Becki with her three year old son Archie. Then came a friend who lives round the corner with her husband and two of their sons. They were closely followed by Barbi, then my ex-husband (who I now call my big brother) and his second wife.



More people followed quickly and by four o'clock the place was heaving. I'm not going to bother naming all the other guests as there were too many of them. But I must just mention a few. One of them, Jane, who came with her husband, I hadn't seen since Nigel and I got married nearly 19 years ago. And what about this beautiful, hand embroidered cushion? This was made by Rosie who started off being one of my Avon customers, but soon became a good friend.

Other guests included people who I've known since they were babies, together with their now grown up children. There were friends I've met recently, some who I see regularly and some who I hadn't seen for weeks, months, or in many cases, years. This was the true spirit of Hannah's Day for me.

Of all the friends who turned up, Jenny's the longest standing. (I can't say oldest or she'd never forgive me.) We first met over 40 years ago. She's managed to come to every Hannah's Day, but normally waits till the evening so that she doesn't get too tiddly. But this year was different.

The friend who'd 'phoned Jenny to say about me always remembering her (who, by the way, really went overboard, bringing a huge joint of sliced up beef she roasted specially for the occasion and a couple of dozen home-made chocolate cup cakes) wanted to come along for the afternoon. So Jenny said she'd come along with her, then leave for a while and come back again later in the evening. Except it didn't work that way. Food, chatting and alternating glasses of water with those of wine ensured she didn't go over the top and she just stayed till the end and was amongst the last to leave.

Finally I finished our food preparations and our offerings were on the table together with the contributions from guests. As usual they'd done us proud and the table was groaning with food. I never have to worry about what will be brought as every year the selection is amazing without any additional help from me.

Most of us were in the gazebo catching up on news when Michael and his wife arrived. (She'd brought ready prepared elements of Eton

Mess which she combined when she got here for us all to indulge - I have to admit to having two helpings of that which could explain why I put on so much weight that day.) I hadn't realised how much space would be needed for the Chi Gung exercises, certainly more than our entire garden, let alone inside the gazebo as I'd hoped. But everyone who wanted to join in didn't mind being overlooked by neighbours, so we trooped outside the house and Michael took the session on the grassy area on the public side of our garden gate.

Before he started our session, and without giving the rest of us any explanation, Michael had taken Nathan, the youngest of our little group of Chi Gungers, to our exercise area and gave him some advance coaching. We found out later that he'd been teaching Nathan a few moves to show how being relaxed can make you stronger than being rigid and when we'd had our turn, they gave us a demonstration

When it was time for all of us to join in. Michael started by talking about, and instructing us all on, breathing. Not the usual stuff that we do without thinking though. This was making us aware of what was keeping us alive. Very gradually he brought in movements for us to do in conjunction with this mindful breathing. Gradually the actions became more pronounced, but always remained graceful.

I have to admit to being a bit distracted during some parts of the session as I was desperate for Nigel to come out and take a



few pics of us all. He was busy with hosting duties, but as you can see, he did come out eventually.

Hannah's Day is an Open Day where people can arrive or leave at whatever time they wish. So some of our guests had left before we'd started the exercises, whilst others had arrived by the time we'd finished them. Nigel's a great one for music and he'd set up a play-list on his iPad to last for at least 24 hours, so he only had to tweak it if a track came on which needed to be repeated because of demand or passed by if it was disliked. He'd planned it so carefully though, that there were no complaints at all.

Up to this point I was still wearing the pale green shorts and white top that I'd put on that morning. I'd hoped to change into something a bit prettier before the party started, but as I've already said, guests started arriving before I was ready, so different clothes hadn't seemed that important. It was gone half past eight when I finally nipped upstairs to put on a fancy grey chiffon top with pink and blue flowers on it and turquoise, three-quarter length trousers.

Coming downstairs again was the first time I realised that for the whole evening so far, I'd only been drinking water. With the exception of people who were driving, most of my friends had been on something a bit stronger. I thought I'd like to do the same. It was ten past nine as I took my first swig of my first alcoholic drink of the evening! Normally Nigel has a beer fairly early when we're getting ready for a party. He says it helps him concentrate on what he's doing. (Yeah, a likely story.) But usually as he pours his tipple out he asks me if I'd like one too. Earlier though, as soon as he knew he didn't have to drive anywhere because Mara and James were getting our forgotten shopping, he'd opened the supplies he'd bought at the brewery and poured himself a drink. But he hadn't offered me one and I hadn't thought to ask - then. I did now.

I don't think it was just the alcohol, but the rest of the evening was spent in a happy haze of eating and chatting. As I've said before, I so love the atmosphere inside the gazebo. Everyone else seemed to agree as that was where we all gathered, only returning to the house to collect more food or liquid refreshment, or to use the loo to get rid of what they'd already had and perhaps pick up something else to eat or drink on their way back out into the garden.

As it got dark, Nigel switched on the fairy lights which James had fastened to the inside of the top of the gazebo. Then Nigel brought out and plugged in a rope of really bright L E Ds we'd bought

recently, which he attached to the poles holding the gazebo cover up. The effect was magical, as I knew it would be. And so the party continued as before: chatting, food, drink, loo, chatting, food,

We don't have anything as mundane as a clock in the garden, so I had no idea of the time. But gradually guests decided it was time for them to leave. It was



three o'clock in the morning before the last couple left. I took one last look back at the gazebo as I followed Nigel back indoors where he was just about to turn off the mains feed to the lights. It looked like a fairy-tale house.

Mara had put all the chicken and meat in the fridge earlier to stop the heat of the day spoiling it. Even without that, there'd been such a feast that there was still loads on the table. I don't like to leave food out and uncovered overnight, so Nigel and I set to. First we put the butter, hummous and Nigel's home-made coleslaw in the fridge. Then we transferred the remaining olives back into their jar, and began bagging up bread, pasta salad, gherkins, olive salad, crispy seaweed, crisps and peanuts and anything else not eaten. (It's just dawned on me why we had more to put away this year. Usually our single, male friends are the last to leave and we give them bags of goodies to take home. But they didn't come this year.)

When I got into bed I was absolutely shattered. I finally put my light out at half past five. Nigel, who was more pickled than he has been for ages, was already fast asleep.

The Next Day

You've probably guessed that we didn't set our alarms to wake us up on Sunday. Nigel went downstairs first. I woke up at half past nine but didn't feel ready to get up yet. I finally got out of bed three quarters of an hour later. By the time I got down, Nigel had eaten party food for breakfast. After the excesses of the day before I didn't fancy that so made my usual fruit, nuts and yoghurt. As it was still sunny and warm, we went out into the garden and I ate my food in the gazebo.

Back indoors afterwards, we put back nearly everything we'd taken out of the kitchen, dining and living room to make room for our guests. We've left the indoor plants outside though. Hopefully they'll benefit from the warm, fresh air. We've tried to be tidier than before and our home is nowhere near its usual untidy state.

With the dog walked and the splish splosher loaded, we washed up the plates, glasses and dishes with wooden handles and things which have to be treated carefully. Then, hungry once more, I found a

tray and took a selection of party food out to the gazebo for our lunch. After we'd eaten, we decided that we'd done enough tidying for a while, so sat down and watched the box.

Nearly A Week later

The weather's still great so we've left the gazebo up and eaten all our meals out there. We'll have to take it down soon as it's shading the plants by the fence just outside it. (After all our hard work getting the garden looking good, we don't want to spoil it.) We've agreed that we'll enjoy the gazebo for one more Saturday, then dismantle it on Sunday.

I wondered if neighbours don't respond to our Getting To Know You invites and come to Hannah's Days, because maybe they too forget. So next year, the first thing I'm going to do after we've decided on a date, is to create a huge banner to hang on the outside of our garden fence. Nigel was against it at first, but I promised him that if it doesn't do the trick to get neighbours to come along, I won't bother asking them to Hannah's Day again. Also, if I make a big enough display, I can put a picture of it on Facebook to remind friends who also might otherwise forget. As next year will be the 10th Hannah's Day, I really, really want it to be great.

By the way, at the time of writing, we still haven't got the bedroom sorted and we never did get round to delivering that last invitation either. But stuff like that becomes insignificant when I get great feedback from guests who did come. I'm still corresponding with both those who joined us and with friends who didn't make it for a variety of reasons. And that's what Hannah's Day is all about.

Two Weeks later

We did the deed last Sunday and now the gazebo's down. Nigel and I had our last breakfast out there first, then to delay the event as long as possible, we had a leisurely bath and took Pinto for a walk. But eventually we had to give in to the inevitable. It wasn't nearly as much fun taking it down as it had been putting it up. (That sounds awfully rude, but I don't mean it to, so please forgive me.)

I'd wanted to lay all the poles out as Nigel had done when he'd put the gazebo together, then take a picture of it to put at the beginning of this diary to pretend I'd been really conscientious. But it was too much hassle so I had to give that idea up as a bad one.

Once the poles had all been taken out of their respective sockets, we had to escape from the collapsed cover, never an easy task. Our back garden isn't big enough to lay the canvas out to fold it

properly, so we did as we do every year and took it outside the back gate. Once it was spread out on the grass where a week and a day earlier we'd done the Chi Gung exercises, it was easy to fold it then put back into its blue and white stripey bag. We slipped the support poles into the bag and fastened the draw string at the top. Then, with a tear in my eye, I waved farewell to it for another year as Nigel took it down to its storage place in the garage.

Most of the indoor plants are back in their usual homes. Some of them are still fine, but the Chrysanthemums found the fierce heat of our really HOT July a bit too much for them. I've now cut off frizzled flower heads and the remaining leaves are looking green and healthy.

And the weather's STILL great. It's so hot there are heat-wave warnings on the news. Even though the gazebo's gone, we've still managed to eat all our meals al fresco in the arbour.

Several people have asked why we had to take the gazebo down when it gave so much pleasure. I've told them all about the plants, which by the way, are all recovering and doing really well, but there's something else which I only thought of after the dissolution. (I'm showing off now. That's a posh word for taking down the gazebo in case you're wondering.) If it stayed in place permanently, it would lose its novelty, which in turn would erode the magic. So it's right

and proper that this diary should finish on the high note of looking forward to the 10th Hannah's Day next year. You never know, we might even buy some more lights to make it even more magical - if that's possible.

PS Still waiting for the bedroom to be finished. Hope it'll be done before next Hannah's Day!!!!

Epilogue

We picked our very first true crop of cherries last Sunday morning. (Last year the birds and the wasps got to the measly few which had decorated the branches that wet and rainy summer.) Nigel stood on the left side of the tree whilst I was on the right. Gradually we worked our way towards each other, removing every bright, shining fruit we could see until we were both absolutely convinced there were none left. I'd weighed the bowl first, so that we could work out the final weight of our total crop - Four pounds five ounces!

We took some to munch on the train whilst on another visit to the sick relative in the London nursing home. Feeling noble, we didn't eat them all, but saved some to leave with her.

It was still light when we got home so we sat out in the arbour to eat our supper. When I saw a single bird on the fence, I pointed it out to Nigel because it was really unusual. Birds normally avoid our garden because of our cat but two days earlier I'd seen two of them. Nigel reckoned they were eyeing up the cherries on our tree. (They couldn't get to them because we'd learned from our mistakes and this year Nigel had fixed netting over them.) So this time we laughed at the thought that this bird had left it too late for a cherry feast 'cos we'd got them all that morning.

Then the unbelievable happened. The bird flew onto the tree, then quickly off again holding in its beak the unmistakable outline of stalk with a beautiful round, ripe, luscious red cherry firmly attached. Who had the last laugh then?!!!

But eating them was something else. Isn't it amazing that things so fragile can metamorphose into such an explosion.

They all started life as delicate flowers with soft white petals. We watched them drop one by one until tiny buds were all that was left. Then those buds grew. Green faded, changed, red blush became crimson until their glow in the sunlight was of sparkling rubies peeing through the leaves. Crimson deepened, darkened, getting richer but still shining brightly, surrounded by green.

Then it was time. We reached every branch, plucked every cluster; filled our bowl to brimming. Over four pounds in weight. We couldn't wait to try them.

The shiny red globe on its stalk was solid, plump and ripe. You could smell the freshness. As my teeth closed against the firm skin, the explosion of taste was incredible. The luscious sweetness filled every part of my mouth. I salivate with the memory. Each and every one since has relived that first experience.

The verdict from others is unanimous. They are undoubtedly the most delicious cherries we have ever tasted.