

We have been away for much of the holidays. Reluctant though I am at the best of times to travel beyond the village boundaries, it really was our turn to venture out this year. We had a big in-law family party that lasted longer than a Muslim wedding. I have eaten and drank more in the last couple of weeks than I plan to consume in the next six months. I suspect the number of people present encourages each of us to eat more. There's always someone proffering food, drink or sweets.

One of the challenges we face when going away is taking care of our domestic mini-zoo. The chickens were boarded out in a luxury pad by the sea. You may have seen our little procession slipping about with clucking cardboard boxes and Florence tucked happily under my husband's arm.

They couldn't have been too traumatized as they produced a couple of eggs to pay for their keep. I am told that their temporary room-mates have been less than content. Just as soon as they got used to their new friends squawking and fighting for the best perches, they were gone again. We can only guess what they are thinking, but their demeanour suggests they think our chickens might have been snatched by a fox rather than a couple of humans.

I spent most of our first day back insulating their little house. A heady mix of bubble wrap and cardboard and a careful assessment of wind direction has allowed me to ensure their continuing comfort. I must have done a good job because they are now refusing to leave. The only bribe that entices them into daylight is a macaroni pie which unfortunately takes less time to eat than it takes me to clean out their house. You'd think they would show a little more patience.

Although it was so cold while I was doing these renovations, I was quite happy. The work helped me keep warm, along with the many layers I had on. The

coldness on your face and fingers is quite satisfying especially when you know there's a boiled kettle waiting for you inside.

To add to our luxury this winter is our newly re-opened fireplace. It was one of our first priorities when we moved in two years ago to get it working again. We may be slow but we get there eventually. What a joy to have a proper fire again instead of our fake electric stove that we could hardly afford to run. And what hilarity in the coal merchants when I rang on Hogmanay and asked how soon they thought they could deliver.

When I was lining the chicken house with newspapers and cardboard I realised that I knew how well paper insulates as I know that is what homeless people wrap them selves in for warmth. I was suddenly struck by how much better my birds are catered for than many people in our communities are.

As we pile coal on to our fire, backed up by oil-fired central heating, there are neighbours who are more likely to go to bed early or wrap up in a blanket as they struggle to heat their homes. It's easier to keep warm when you are able to move about and cheaper when you only have to heat your home in the evenings. Elderly people and those caring for young children do not have those luxuries, and the winter fuel payment would barely cover one month's electricity bill.

I've signed up for a workshop that promises to help me stick to my new year resolutions. I'm told that we often aim for too much (go to the gym every day, write that novel and learn to play the saxophone). This year I'm going to try & be a little bit kinder to strangers than I was last year. Wish me luck!