

As the season of goodwill approaches, children all over the county are busy writing letters to Santa and either looking forward to their reward for having been good or promising to be good for the rest of the year.

More years ago than I care to remember, our coal fire was replaced with a gas one and I worried that Santa would no longer be able to get down our chimney with all my presents. Luckily our neighbour still had an open chimney and she saved the day by promising to let him have a key.

Despite all attempts, I have never yet managed to see Santa, although my older cousin saw him arrive every year. She was supposed to wake me up, but either forgot or woke me too late and I missed him every time, sometimes only by seconds. I did hear him once putting out the presents and also the reindeer bells jingling outside, but that's the closest I ever got. Maybe this year I'll catch him.

What are you asking for? Hopefully nothing too expensive as even Santa is tightening his belt this year. Those householders who used to decorate their homes with fairy lights and reindeer on their roofs are cutting back as they can no longer afford the electricity. A good thing for the environment; and some may say a good thing for taste too.

All this gloom and doom credit crunch stuff really is beginning to bite. Most families I know have put limits on spending, for the adults at least. Even so, the must-have gifts for children are disappearing fast and the elves are going to have to do an awful lot of overtime for the next few weeks. Young children yet to learn the value of things ask for the most bizarre gifts. A friend's daughter has put on her list a chocolate orange or a space rocket. I wonder which one she will get.

I've written before about Shannon Matthews and wonder what she is asking for this year. She is lucky enough to have been rescued from a life of neglect and

cruelty, and I hope that this Christmas is the start of happier times for her and her brothers and sisters. Thank goodness that we have the wonderful people who foster or adopt little girls like Shannon. Still, they do say that even if a child has been abused by her parents, she will miss them if taken away from them.

Once again, there has been a lot of talk about social work failings and whether these children should have been kept on the 'at risk' register. It is easy now for amateurs like us to make a judgement on the care she should have had from social services, but no-one can deny the difficulties front line workers face. They are criticised for not taking Shannon and her siblings into care and in the almost the same breath berated for breaking up families at this time of year, when they have no real evidence of neglect.

I know how cheesy it is to wish for world peace at Christmas, but now more than ever it seems as though the simple things in life have more value than the ones with a high monetary value. With only twelve sleeps till Santa, wouldn't it be nice if all the children's wishes could come true.