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BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE (July 2016)



VICARAGE BLACKBIRDS ABOUT TO COMMIT BREXIT

*The Reverend Canon Andrew Neaum became the “House for Duty” Anglican priest of the lovely Boldre Benefice in August 2013. The Vicarage in which he and Diana live is on the edge of the New Forest, a couple of miles north of Lymington in Hampshire. He is old fashioned enough a priest to visit his flock in their homes, but “house for duty” clergy are supposed to work only two days a week and Sundays, which means visiting everyone in the parish takes a long time. The following are the **July 2016** weekly ruminations, aired prejudices and footling observations that in the weekly pew sheet augment his visits and help keep folk in touch week in and week out. Earlier articles are available from the Article Page on this Website:*

<http://www.andrewneaum.com/articles.htm>

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“This and That” - 31 July 2016

My parents each had a sweet tooth. Chocolate was their particular delight. When, in the late nineteen fifties, we went to live on a mission station in the tropics, they began to take daily siestas. After lunch they lay on their bed for half an hour or so with a book and slab of Cadbury's chocolate. At boarding school we too had to lie on our beds after lunch. Though with tuck-shop junk, not a chocolate slab.

Yogo toffees and teeth

Before this, on Tristan da Cunha, it could be four or five months before a supply ship was able to replenish our larder. Flour, butter, slabs of chocolate ran out. To ensure our deprivation of sweets was not total my father ordered huge, inexhaustible tins of Yogo toffees. I remember them with joy. Last Monday I lost yet another tooth.

It was an easy extraction. The tooth popped out as easily as a stone from a ripe apricot. I cycled home diminished but relieved. Sorry for myself enough to be writing this piece on my bed though. Wimp.

Yogo toffees. Years of cursory brushing. Shonky teeth. I have spent a fortune on dentists over the years. Thousands and thousands of Australian dollars and English pounds. In Australia I relieved my feelings at my so unmercifully relieved pocket by writing this:

Ten Cents a Second!

With barefaced gall and practised ease,
My dentist, for his expertise,
At my last visit charged per second,
(I've worked out, it's carefully reckoned)
Ten cents! And with a smile as well.
Ten cents a second! Bally hell!

So just a minute's idle chat,
To laugh with me at this and that
Or sixty seconds idle patter
Or sixty seconds worth of chatter
Means I bid goodbye, farewell
To six good dollars! Blast and hell!

Meddling in an orifice
Shouldn't cost as much as this,
For filling teeth and fitting dentures
Is hardly one of life's great ventures!
Should never cause a head to swell.
Ten cents a second! Bally hell!

Building houses

Our daily walk takes us past the new house being built next to the Memorial Hall. It replaces an ugly bungalow, the demolition of which, in a mere couple of days, delighted our hearts. The foundations of the new building seemed as modest as the ugly bungalow. Now the walls, upper storey and roof trusses are in place, how imposing.

We built a home for ourselves on our second Rhodesian mission station. To my father's design, and helped by an able African builder and a couple of men, it took us months to finish.

Internal as well as external walls were of brick. These were locally moulded from anthill mud and then kilned. Horribly coarse to handle they were a beautiful pastel pink and violet in colour. It was great fun to come home from boarding school to participate in the effort. I remember sitting with my father on the roof sawing asbestos sheets. More dangerous than Yogo toffees.

Frequent long trips by car to outstations and churches in those days were undertaken in a fug of tobacco smoke. Both parents smoked. This inspired my brother and me to take up the filthy habit from an early age, at first to the mild disapproval of our parents. Then my father relented and permitted us to smoke, so long as it was a pipe and not cigarettes. My brother went to a day school for his A-levels. He would bicycle there contentedly smoking a pipe.

The best of parents

How easy to resent and blame parents for being people of their time. That's not for me. I brim with gratitude for life in fascinating places and a home full of laughter, stimulation and the Gospel of love lived irresistibly. Hence my priesthood. The best of parents. May they rest in peace.

(151) "This and That" - 24 July 2016

On a hot, sunny, summer morning, the flowers on our courgette plants are a gigantic, gaping, garish yellow. If Tim Peake was still in orbit, he would remark on them.

Celebratory chefs deep fry flowers like these stuffed with goat cheese, herbs and egotism. They serve them up with purple prose enough to convince the gullible that they are delicious. Our flowers are left for frenzied bumble bees to fumble and frolic in, dusted in golden pollen.

Vicars' daughters

My mother was a vicar's daughter. My sister is a vicar's daughter. My two daughters are vicar's daughters. I love them all. The very best thing about Theresa May is that she is a vicar's daughter. I am disposed to love her too.

Her father was the vicar of St Mary the Virgin, Wheatley, a large village five miles east of Oxford. He was trained at the high church theological college, Mirfield. Father Brazier then, not Mister. He was killed in a car crash when his daughter was 25.

On Desert Island Discs Theresa May's choice of popular music was limited to two items: the Jersey Boys' *Walk Like A Man*, and Abba's *Dancing Queen*. There was also a snatch from *Yes Minister* about the Compassionate Society.

Her choice of less popular music included the opening of Edward Elgar's *Cello Concerto*, a Henry Purcell *Rondo*, Mozart's *Queen of the Night* aria and two hymns, *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross* and *Pange Lingua Gloriosi* (*Therefore we before him bending*).

Faith and the Vicar's daughter

David Cameron described his faith as *a bit like the reception for Magic FM in the Chilterns: it sort of comes and goes*. By all accounts Mrs May's is stronger and more constant, though reticent. Not displayed for political purposes.

Her choice of the hymn *Pange Lingua* is interesting. She might well have selected it just for the austere beauty of its plainsong melody. On the other hand, written by St Thomas Aquinas, it is expressive of a deep sacramental faith. God revealed in the bread and wine of ordinariness. The antithesis of bible-bashing and God bothering:

*Therefore we, before him bending
This great Sacrament revere;
Types and shadows have their ending
For a greater rite is here;
Faith, our outward sense befriending
Makes our inward vision clear.*

France or Devon

We had guests from London for a few days last week, one of limited mobility. Before they left Diana took them to Milton on Sea to view the Isle of Wight, the Needles and the Solent. Enough to lift the spirits of any Londoner. On her return she told me that they had clearly seen the coast of France. I was doubtful. A distance of ninety miles, plus the curvature of the earth would surely render France invisible.

Less than trusting of my geographical nous she put greater faith in the judgement of Brian Dagnal. Popping in to say hello to him on the way back from taking our guests to the station she asked him if the coastline they had seen could have been France. He replied “*more likely Devon.*”

Visiting outlandish places

Last week I gave a talk on the Falkland Islands to the W.I. It was received graciously and I enjoyed the task. Visiting outlandish places needs keeping in perspective though. As Rory Sutherland reminded me in last week’s Spectator:

A week ago I asked for a show of hands in a London lecture theatre. As I suspected more people in the audience had been to Machu Picchu than to Lincoln Cathedral. What I didn’t expect was the ratio: over three to one. I was once offered a trip to Machu Picchu myself, but decided it was one of those places Dr Johnson called ‘worth seeing, but not worth going to see.’ Why endure a long flight and altitude sickness to see some rubble in the Andes when for £40 I could take a day trip to one of the world’s architectural masterpieces where the only discomfort would be finding the tea shop had closed? It seemed a lot to pay for posting a letter to Facebook saying ‘Hey, I’m next to some stones’ before collapsing with hypoxia. But what do I know?

(150) “This and That” - 17 July 2016

The happiest news of the week. David Cameron humming his way back into 10 Downing Street and into retirement. What a relief both to him and his wife. At last an end to minute and merciless scrutiny.

I hummed my way into retirement for two whole months over the Pacific and Atlantic oceans three years ago. The tune I hummed became the theme song for that happiest of voyages on two great freighters, a simple ditty from Gilbert and Sullivan’s ‘Patience’: *Prithee Pretty Maiden*. I love it to bits. Every time it comes to mind, which it often does, I relive that lovely, liberating voyage.

Relishing simple tasks

A recipe for contentment: learn to relish simple tasks. Like polishing shoes, best performed sitting outside in sunshine. Thanks to the ubiquity of sneakers it is a rarer pleasure than it used to

be. I don't wear sneakers. They are for young people, not old and I have a horror of appearing mutton dressed as lamb. The priest and poet David Scott gets the pleasure in polishing shoes right:

Cleaning the Shoes

*To anyone passing
(I tend to be in the yard)
They would see the cleaning of shoes.
For me it is a daily remembrance
Of the holiday where I brought the brushes.
Holywell was the place, and we picnicked
On the hill, and I carved on one brush
'ON' and on the other brush 'OFF'*

*Holywell is near Chester
Where I once stayed with the nuns.
They wore light blue,
One had a father who was dying,
And all this comes back to me
As I twist off the lid of the polish.
Its smell brings to me the nuns of Chester.*

'What are you doing?'
'Oh, just cleaning the shoes.'

You used to be able to identify Anglo Catholic priests by looking at the soles of their shoes. So frequently and enthusiastically do they genuflect, the leather sole of their right shoe is almost invariably split right across.

Leather soles are rarer these days though. The identification of Anglo Catholics requires getting up close and sniffing for incense residue.

Viviparous blow flies

My study has been infested with fat, hairy, dozy flies. Horrible. Thirty or forty of them at a time gradually accumulate on the west wall, behind me. They are so dopy we Hoover them off. Unable to find their point of entry we suspect the source to be a redundant chimney behind the plaster board. For some weeks I have been disturbed by eerie scabblings and scratchings. These have now ceased and so there is probably a dead baby jackdaw riddled with maggots behind the wall. The flies look like blowflies, though happily they are not viviparous like the Australian variety I am familiar with. When you squash those they disgorge a full belly's worth of wriggling maggots rather than eggs.

The daily walk

Walking up Burnt House Lane each morning we notice that this season's first batch of silage bundles are already stacked and beginning to ferment. A most pleasing scent.

Apparently three trainee farmers have now invented an edible plastic silage wrap. This is good news for the environment. Enough baleage wrap is used in New Zealand alone to go around the world eight times. Even our local farmers inadvertently leave strips of plastic to litter the hedgerows when they transport the great bundles.

Cattle will welcome the innovation too. Food wrapped in edible containers is especially delicious. Pastry crusts enhance the delicacies they enclose enormously. My own corned beef pasties are my pride and joy.

We return from our walks these days with Diana, like Ophelia, festooned with flowers. We have begun identifying wild varieties and weeds and return from each walk with three or four new examples to identify, classify and press.

(149) “This and That” - 10 July 2016

Sunday, said Dr Johnson, *should be different from another day. People may walk, but not throw stones at birds. There may be relaxation, but there should be no levity.* Dr Johnson was the soundest and wisest of men, his feet on moral bedrock. Yet he was irascible and eccentric almost to the point of madness. A quintessential Anglican. I love him.

Saving grace

He would be pleased to hear that Sunday mornings at Boldre Vicarage are different from other mornings. Though the degree of levity would disturb him. We turn on Radio 4 early enough to enjoy *Bells On Sunday*. The epitome of jubilation. Then we succumb to the temptation to stay in bed until the end of *Something Understood*. Often, though not quite always, the very best listening of the week.

Last Sunday's programme was put together and presented by the poet Michael Symmons Roberts. His subject was Grace, a word freighted with all sorts of religious and theological significance, now lost in current usage. Such losses thin out a poem's suggestiveness and allusiveness. For example the word *water*, in times gone by resonated 'baptism', and the word *wood*, 'crucifixion'.

He then went on to explore *Grace*, broadening my musical and literary tastes, as well as confirming some of my prejudices, with snippets and nuggets of music, prose and verse both classical and popular. I was particularly moved by this love lyric by the American poet *Elizabeth Bishop*.

Breakfast Song

*My love, my saving grace,
your eyes are awfully blue.
I kiss your funny face,
your coffee-flavoured mouth.
Last night I slept with you.
Today I love you so
how can I bear to go
(as soon I must, I know)
to bed with ugly death
in that cold, filthy place,
to sleep there without you,
without the easy breath
and nightlong, limblong warmth
I've grown accustomed to?
—Nobody wants to die;
tell me it is a lie!
But no, I know it's true.
It's just the common case;
there's nothing one can do.*

*My love, my saving grace,
your eyes are awfully blue
early and instant blue.*

He finished with a better known example of Grace from the acerbic Welsh priest and poet R S Thomas, who died in the year 2000:

The Bright Field

*I have seen the sun break through
to illuminate a small field
for a while, and gone my way
and forgotten it. But that was the
pearl of great price, the one field that had
treasure in it. I realise now
that I must give all that I have
to possess it. Life is not hurrying
on to a receding future, nor hankering after
an imagined past. It is the turning
aside like Moses to the miracle
of the lit bush, to a brightness
that seemed as transitory as your youth
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.*

Why would anyone go to church?

What is so special about belonging to a church community. The philosopher Roger Scruton, puts it well:

In the rituals of a religion, all worldly differences are overcome: the Sultan bows in submission beside his subjects, and the good-natured fool takes communion beside the crook who cheated him. The ritual shines on both of them from a place beyond their ordinary experience, and includes them in a community whose home is in some way not of this world.

Step into St John's Boldre to step out of the world of *getting and spending* into a different realm, the Kingdom of God. It is good to be there.

Intoxicated on chlorophyll

We bicycled to South Baddesley for Evensong last Sunday. The lane's are so verdant we were intoxicated on chlorophyll when we arrived. There is a brief open stretch shortly after the Portmore crossing offering, over a low hedge, a view of the Solent and Isle of Wight that is all the more exquisite for being unspectacular. Nick Walford tells us he has a painting of the view by his father and treasures both the view and painting.

(148) "This and That" - 3 July 2016

I am no politician, and so don't give political advice. Years ago, however, I wrote a verse which, until I voted 'remain' in the Referendum, I had all but forgotten.

The Kiss of Death

When the result was announced it came back to mind. Called '*The Kiss of Death*' its first stanza goes:

*Like King Canute of old I stand a fool against the tide,
Every cause I've ever backed's been overwhelmed and died.
Consider me a Jonah, and my patron saint St Jude,
As long-term gain from my support has never once accrued.
In order to avoid the slight of failure and derision,
Always tip me overboard, or seek my opposition.
Support from me for any cause exacts a deadly cost,
The cause is doomed, is done for, finished, absolutely lost!*

I always back losers. Had I voted 'leave' instead of 'remain', the outcome might well have been different!

I am not angry at the result. That would be futile. On the contrary I am fascinated. The tediousness of the campaign has given way to intriguing politicking and has thrown up surprising paradoxes. For example, affluent southern Conservatives on the same side as poor, disillusioned, northern Labourites. Nicola Sturgeon deploring one divorce while threatening another.

I voted 'Remain' after some vacillation. Although national sovereignty is important, my faith enjoins togetherness and community not going it alone. It encourages reconciliation and the resolution of differences rather than divorce, and mutual dependence as preferable to independence. Nor do I much like nationalism. We can be patriots without being nationalists. Scottish nationalism and Russian nationalism are equally unappealing.

The Scottish poet Robert Crawford might well be making my point more poetically in this little gem....

Credo

*As a candle-flame believes
in the speed of light
I believe in you.*

*As the shoelace of glass
believes in the full grown eel
I believe in you.*

*As Perth in Australia
believes in Perth in Scotland,
As an old hand's vein
believes in a baby's wrist,*

*Since what we cannot speak about we must,
As worlds have done, still do, will do, I make*

*For you, to you, in you, now and through this
My declaration of dependence.*

What made the three month campaign ugly was the appeal from both sides to fear instead of to courage. We were exhorted to remain in Europe for fear of being much poorer if we left. We were exhorted to leave Europe for fear of being drowned by immigrants if we remained.

Yet, *Blessed are the poor*. Less affluence here and greater generosity to the poor elsewhere would mean fewer desperate folk risking their lives to join us. So why are we wedded to economic growth? *Blessed are the poor*. No fool Jesus.

Unfortunate verse

Enough of politics though, let's be frivolous. Poets sometimes get it wrong. Robert Herrick, the seventeenth century priest and poet, who taught us to seize the day in his poem that begins: *Gather ye rosebuds while ye may*, also gave us:

*Fain would I kiss my Julia's dainty leg
Which is as white and hairless as an egg.*

James Elroy Flecker, who gave us the *Golden Voyage to Samarkand*, also gave us:

*Their bosoms shame the roses; their behinds
Impel the astonished nightingales to sing.*

Ingenious Deceit

Alexandre Dumas's son considered the famous actress Sarah Bernhardt's deceitfulness as an essential part of her genius: "You know," he said of the famously thin actress, "*she's such a liar, she may even be fat!*"

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