

Home

BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE (September 2016)



NEW FOREST DONKEYS

*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 **September 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>

(160) **“This and That” - 25 September 2016**

In the middle of Harare is an impressive Cathedral. I spent the first three years of my ordained ministry there.

The waters of mammon

It is notable for a fine, total-immersion font in the middle of its great centre aisle. Shaped like an egg it has a glittering gold-orange fish set in the blue mosaic tiles of the bottom. Water trickles down into it from a more conventional small font hollowed in a great lump of local granite. The falling water gently troubles the large font's surface, reminiscent of the Gospel's restorative pool of Siloam.

Ignorant tourists throw coins into the water. The gaudy fish is all but obscured by them. As too is Christ by mammon out in the world at large. Thieves venture warily into the Cathedral, roll up their ragged trouser bottoms and descend into the waters of baptism. They search not for Christ's faith, but for mammon's coins.

Delirium tremens

Tranquil cloisters with thick granite walls provide a peaceful rendezvous for sandwich lunches away from the madness of a bright and bustling city. Derelicts encountered there commonly claim to have sung as youngsters in the Cathedral choir. A common fantasy of drunks and down and outs slumped in the shade of cathedral walls.

There was an oratory for the clergy in the organ loft. If we wished to escape the phone or incessant visitors in order to pray, think or read, we unlocked a narrow wrought iron gate in one of the Cathedral aisles. Up a narrow, winding stone staircase was a space destined one day to be crammed with additional organ pipes. In my time there was a carpet, a prie dieu and some comfortable chairs, as well as space to pace. Oblivious to silent devotion in the loft, practising organists sometimes pulled out all the stops to blast forth a disturbing precursor of the last trump.

Stealing the Contessa's ring

Each day began at 6.00am with Matins in St George's Chapel. The first Eucharist of the day followed, usually in the larger Lady Chapel, sited in the apsidal, extreme east end of the Cathedral, beyond the sanctuary and choir. It was furnished with small stools over which pious ladies draped themselves in quiet ecstasies of devotion. We had a breakfast of toast and marmalade together afterwards.

Curates led busy lives. On most mornings I taught the faith in local secondary schools. I was responsible too for the city's Maternity Home and for two wards of the large city hospital. Each were visited weekly. I was not infrequently called out to baptise premature babies in their incubators with a dropper. I also ran one of the most successful youth groups of which I have ever been a part.

Then there were parishioners to be visited systematically and reported back upon to the Dean. I took hours and hours over sermons. Most difficult of all was an insecure Dean who required constant affirmation, his tall stories appreciated and genius applauded.

It was a good training. The laity were many, varied and for the most part wonderfully supportive and tolerant. The liturgy was beautifully performed and the choir excellent. The half dozen clergy were excellent company, talented, eccentric, fallible and flawed, but also authentic and faithful. We had great fun together.

One of my more flamboyant colleagues was tried and found guilty of stealing an Italian Contessa's ring. Initially he fled the country on bad advice from the Diocesan Chancellor, but then returned to face the music. He was fined for his misdemeanour. There were mitigating circumstances.

Skulking in the cloisters

I returned to Zimbabwe with Diana in 2010. At the end of a fascinating few weeks we

waited in the Cathedral's cloisters before catching the bus back to South Africa. Tired we lay there on the benches chatting and dozing like the drunks of old. Me reminiscing about my time as a curate, rather than fantasising about having once been a choir boy.

I recalled returning to my stall from the pulpit one Evensong having preached my heart out on the blessed Trinity. As I passed the Dean's stall he whispered loudly with his microphone on: 'Heresy'. From such a shonky and fallible judge it was an accolade more than an insult.

(159) "This and That" - 18 September 2016

Funny lot the clergy. I sat behind hundreds in St Paul's Cathedral, Melbourne, some years ago. All were status signalling, wearing that ridiculous, empty bag of a garment called an academic hood. An outsized but shrivelled goitre, flung over the shoulder and out of the way for convenience's sake.

Given the snobbery and pretension associated with education in England, it won't be long before secondary and even primary educational establishments start conferring academic hoods on matriculants. They come in every colour, size and shape, sometimes trimmed with fur of ermine, rabbit, mink and possibly skunk. Outward and visible signs of academic competence, achievement and snobbery.

A third class degree

Academic insecurity is widespread, a debilitating and depressing disease. Not a few bishops I have known have been victims of it. Many of the clergy are. It manifests itself in the pursuit of degrees by correspondence, or demeaning folk without "pukka" or first class degrees, as well as in name-dropping and an excessive regard for academic pedigree in acquaintances and favoured authors.

Not a few of us will have suffered the shame of attaining only a third class pass for a degree. If so, take heart from what Sir Geoffrey Faber said of Cardinal Newman, who graduated as a BA at Oxford with only third-class honours: *at least he was spared the ignominy of a second.*

It is a witty comment, though also, in its own way, snobbish. To achieve a second means that for all the work and effort invested, the intelligence necessary to attain a first was lacking. Whereas a third, rather than incompetence, might well signify an admirable, cavalier idleness and insouciance in the face of mere examinations. In Newman's case his third had more to do with a mental breakdown.

The best sermons

The sermons I most enjoy are of the quiet, reasonable and academic sort. Emotional harangues, anecdotal rambles, histrionic appeals for commitment, or waffling exhortations to be good are not my favourite fare. However, except perhaps for the last, all have their place in our pulpits. To each his taste.

The best sermons I have heard, of the sort I most enjoy, have come from priests without degrees. The first was the great Gonville French Beytagh. Before he became Dean of Johannesburg and *bête noir* of the South African government, he was Dean of Salisbury in Rhodesia. He was a mesmerising preacher. Not at all quiet, but excitingly reasonable and lucidly intellectual, in the bright and shining rather than dusty sense.

The other was Robert Mercer CR. He became bishop of Matabeleland and then jumped the pale to become Bishop of The Anglican Catholic Church of Canada. He is now a Roman Catholic and presumably still a witty preacher. He was extremely well read and logical of argument, but with a whimsical side. An unlikely mixture of radical and conservative views. His Evensong sermons, when he was Rector of Borrowdale Parish in Salisbury, Rhodesia, earned him a small coterie of discerning and devoted fans.

How noble of me

Academic competence should be the mark of every parson. A degree is not an infallible sign of this. Some of the best degreed clergy of my acquaintance have been the most inarticulate and seemingly foolish.

Even the smallest of rural parishes are likely to have sitting in the pews folk with a better degree than the parson's and more intelligent. Once upon a time, in the days when I was academically insecure myself (and there remains a residue of such insecurity in me today) it used to disconcert me enormously to be preaching to folk more intelligent and better educated than myself. Nowadays I regard it as a blessing. Looking down on one's congregation from the pulpit becomes, paradoxically, a looking up to them in respect. A remedy against pontification and sloppy or cursory preparation of sermons.

I seldom wear my academic hood. Entirely for the noble reasons outlined above. I insist it has nothing to do with its miserable, chocolate-brown colour and lack of an ermine, rabbit or even skunk fur trim.

(158) "This and That" - 11 September 2016

As a child I attended four primary and two secondary schools. As an adult I taught in a dozen secondary schools.

Head teachers

Of all the head teachers I have experienced, only one has left me feeling indebted to him. Mr McGee was the headmaster of my final primary school in Rhodesia, a bush boarding school called Digglefold. He was a strict but kindly man and a keen naturalist. He encouraged us to birdwatch, collect butterflies, bush walk and keep, feed and protect abandoned baby birds. Every spare moment of one summer term was spent catching grasshoppers to feed a clutch of voracious young pied crows. A man of sentiment, he wiped away tears as he read us tales of heroism.

It is only now, in Pilley, at this late stage of my life, that another head teacher has emerged to double the number of head teachers in my pantheon. We commission her today as head teacher of William Gilpin: Kirsten Kennedy.

She speaks the English language as it ought to be spoken, with a strong Derbyshire accent, and hails from the town that is the wellspring of all the world's Neaums. Full of vivacity, vision, vigour and verve, she has an empathy with and love of children that brings out the best in them. A fine teacher and lovely person she's a great talker. An enthusiastic, bright-eyed cataract of ideas, plans, stories and fun.

Remembered with a shudder

There is one head teacher I remember with a shudder. I took a government teaching grant to help pay my way through university. It meant a year of teacher training after obtaining my degree, followed by two years of teaching for the Rhodesian government. Student teachers spent a term in a local high school teaching under supervision. My allocated school was Cranborne Boys High, notable for little, except that I had been a pupil there for two and a half years before moving on to the intriguingly named Guinea Fowl Boys High School.

I had modishly long hair. On my second day at Cranborne I was summoned to the headmaster's office. *Mr Neaum*, said Mr Court, a po-faced, disciplinarian, *if you are going to teach in my school you will have your hair cut*. I resolutely refused to comply. The university, chagrined at my intransigence, sent me to a more congenial black, township school in that segregated land. Competition for school places in these African township schools meant that the children were all refreshingly eager to learn. It was an enjoyable term. My supervisor, the head of the English department, was a genial fellow who left me to teach pretty well all his classes, while he sold insurance around the township to augment his meagre income.

Once qualified I taught English for two years at a boys technical high school in what was then Salisbury. I have no memory of its head teacher. His deputy Mr Heunis, a teacher of Afrikaans, was proud of his nickname Hitler. He replicated that monster's moustache and forelock.

There followed a year and a half of 'supply teaching' in London. Terrible schools, impossible children. They helped to turn me wholeheartedly back to God. Soul-destroying they proved soul-saving. A pleasing paradox. Lousy English state secondary schools reignited my faith.

Our fortunate village

Any village worthy of the name requires a fine pub, a beautiful church, a village shop, an attractive centre for community gatherings and a first rate school. Our straggling village has three pubs, one of them the oldest in the New Forest, all of them distinctive. Two churches, one ancient and all but perfect, the loveliest in the New Forest. A thriving, friendly village shop and post office, and a well equipped, versatile and much used community centre.

Then there is William Gilpin School. Small enough to foster a sense of family. Large enough to provide excellent facilities and good teaching. Christian in the best, broad and inclusive, Church of England sense, with talented staff and dedicated, well lead and hard working governors. And now Kirsten Kennedy, the best of head teachers. *Deo gratias.*

(157) "This and That" - 4 September 2016

Fed up with my study desk, I write on our bed. Diana's in London. I am free to be slovenly.

Not slovenly, sensible

Our bedroom at the Vicarage has a main window facing south. Of its two other and smaller windows, one faces east the other west. There is more chance, on a muggy day, of catching a through draft than in any other room. Not slovenly then. Sensible.

A wounded butterfly and a caber

A friend from Australia came to stay a few days ago. He is six foot five, and one of the gentlest and most civilized men I know. He comes to see his aged parents in Edinburgh every other year. Although well embedded in Australia he is not quite totally a deracinated Scot. He and his wife were members of our Scottish country dancing troupe in Wodonga. Dancing with him was like dancing with a caber. An agnostic, his god is the environment and his politics rather to the left of mine. Fifteen years ago now, over coffee after our Scottish Country Dancing sessions, three of us had stimulating and sometimes vehement arguments. The third protagonist was a lanky, cartographer, atheist and cycling fanatic. He danced like a wounded butterfly.

Age brings with it greater tolerance and a convergence of views. My Scottish caber friend and I spent so much time on this visit agreeing with each other, we had almost to renegotiate our friendship.

A wounded butterfly and a caber. How did I myself dance? Not like an angel, but wildly. On frosty Australian winter's nights, wisps of steam rising from my over-heated bald head were clearly discernible.

Ten reasons to look forward to the future

We are bombarded with bad news. It is more interesting to us than good. Why? Because, says Johan Norberg, in an article puffing his new book *Progress: Ten Reasons to Look Forward to the Future*:

We've evolved to be suspicious and fretful: fear and worry are tools for survival. The hunters and gatherers who survived sudden storms and predators were the ones who had a tendency to scan the horizon for new threats, rather than sit back and

enjoy the view. They passed their stress genes on to us. That is why we find stories about things going wrong far more interesting than stories about things going right. It's why bad news sells, and newspapers are full of it.

And yet, he reminds us, there has never been a better time to be alive.

Poverty, malnutrition, illiteracy, child labour and infant mortality are falling faster than at any other time in human history. The risk of being caught up in a war, subjected to a dictatorship or of dying in a natural disaster is smaller than ever. The golden age is now.

There is a fraud being perpetrated against us that things are going from bad to worse. In materialistic terms this is certainly not the case. So whenever interminable, pessimistic news programmes begin on Radio Four, swap immediately to Radio Three. Though should the music of John Cage or Alvin Lucier be playing there, Radio Four's mayhem, murder and gloom are preferable.

Sheenagh Pugh, in a well known poem, reminds us rather more concisely that sometimes things go well:

Sometimes

*Sometimes things don't go, after all,
from bad to worse. Some years, muscadel
faces down frost; green thrives; the crops don't fail,
sometimes a man aims high, and all goes well.*

*A people sometimes will step back from war;
elect an honest man, decide they care
enough, that they can't leave some stranger poor.
Some men become what they were born for.*

*Sometimes our best efforts do not go
amiss, sometimes we do as we meant to.
The sun will sometimes melt a field of sorrow
that seemed hard frozen: may it happen for you.*

Home