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### **BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE (October 2017)**



**LINCOLN CATHEDRAL FROM THE CASTLE**

*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 **October 2017** 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>*

## (216) “This and That” - 29 October 2017

To enjoy wild weather at home it is necessary to be aware of it. Double-glazed windows mitigate against this.

### **Soughing wind and calling owls**

In our vicarage bedroom we've gauzed one window against insects. We intend to leave it open all through winter and so hear the soughing of the wind in the trees on tempestuous nights and the call of owls on still ones.

Log fires are another winter delight. It is central heating that mitigates against them, rendering them self-indulgent. Perhaps this winter we will turn the heating off whenever we light one. Trips away to get a cup of tea will be turned into exciting sorties into the arctic, and returns to the fire all the more blessed.

### **The Hearth**

*In front of the fire  
With you, the folk song  
Of the wind in the chimney and the sparks'  
Embroidery of the soot - eternity  
Is here in this small room,  
In intervals that our love  
Widens: and outside  
Us is time and the victims  
Of time, travellers  
To a new Bethlehem, statesmen  
And scientists with their hands full  
Of the gifts that destroy.*

*R S Thomas*

Not all poems of the priest poet R. S. Thomas are as lovely as that. After matins last week one was so bleak, and dour I expostulated “fancy having to shake hands with a parson like him on the way out of church every Sunday.”

### **Promiscuity and monogamy**

Promiscuity in birds was the subject of “*The Life Scientific*” last week. We learned from Professor Birkhead that the guillemots of Skomer Island cheat on their mates as readily as suburbanites throughout the western world. Which is interesting enough, but chastity is more remarkable and challenging than promiscuity. Even in birds. Which makes bullfinches more fascinating than guillemots.

Take their singing. The usual song of the male bullfinch is unexceptional. Reminiscent as it is of a gently squeaking wheelbarrow. Yet in the nineteenth century, male bullfinches were popular as pets just because of their singing. German foresters took youngsters from the nest and whistled a tune to them over and over again for two or three weeks. Whereupon the young bird memorised and reproduced it more perfectly than its trainer had whistled it.

Bullfinches are strictly monogamous. They also have a relatively large brain. This, it seems, goes with monogamy and close pair-bonding in birds. Monogamy requires a great deal of cognitive effort in watching, anticipating and empathising with a mate. Professor Birkhead, who has kept bullfinches, says that they're better than a Labrador at falling in love with you. Their perfection in memorising and singing up to three songs might be an attempt to elicit a response from the owner they've fixated upon and bonded with.

Spin offs from monogamy, like larger brains, developed memory and musicality are of interest to a parson like me, looking to expand his repertoire of wedding homilies.

### **The greedy curate**

Our Pot Pourri of comedy, musical theatre and church music last Saturday was a great success. All those present on the year's wildest night enjoyed it enormously.

It brought to my mind one of several rum curates I have had over the years. He was the very first, an ancient and humourless retired chemist. He loved his food. At parish buffet meals he was always up there at the head of the queue piling his plate with mighty portions of everything to hand.

I observed him once help himself to heaped spoons of dried petals and twigs from a pot pourri bowl. I eagerly awaited the inevitable eruption of spluttering horror when he took his first mouthful. Sadly I was denied this treat. A spoilsport alerted him to his mistake before he tasted it.

### **(215) "This and That" - 22 October 2017**

An ancient fellow zoomed disdainfully past me on his bicycle as I, on mine, laboured up the hill from St John's towards Thistle Lane. His disdain and speed had nothing to do with muscular legs or eternal youth. It was one of those silent electric motors. Left in his dust, I muttered to myself dreamily "Zoom, zoom. Zoom zoom." Like Toad of Toad Hall.

#### **Dual British and Australian citizens**

In the centre of the front lawn of the Vicarage there's a large and ancient Bramley apple tree. Its gnarled, lichened trunk and lower limbs are hollow. Squirrels disappear into these and reappear in unexpected places. It's been a prolific year. For weeks and weeks Diana has pressed apples upon everyone she meets. More insistent and just as successful as the serpent in the Garden of Eden, but with no guile.

At the St Nicholas Singers and Marchwood Orchestra concert in St Thomas's last Sunday, the programme concluded with some robust audience participation. We were invited to join in the chorus of "Rule Britannia". My newly discovered Australian patriotism prompted me to alternate the usual version with "Rule Australia, Australia rule the waves and Ozzies, never, never, never shall be slaves." Both versions a pipe dream in the twenty first century.

The lyrics and tune of the song that became the Australian National Anthem date from 1878. As you would expect from that era, they were originally as much patriotically British as Australian. One of the verses goes:

*When gallant Cook from Albion sailed  
To trace wide oceans o'er,  
True British courage bore him on,  
Till he landed on our shore.  
Then here he raised old England's flag,  
The standard of the brave;  
"With all her faults we love her still"  
"Britannia rules the wave."  
In joyful strains then let us sing  
Advance Australia fair.*

#### **Inconsistency**

As soon as Diana learned that like me she is now an Australian as well as a British citizen, she began to learn by heart the Australian National Anthem. To consolidate her knowledge of it we sang it each morning as we walked across the playing fields. When told of this, my son Peter said it proved her to be not yet a true Australian. The genuine article,, he suggested, manages only the first two lines and then mumbles and bumbles through the rest.

I pronounce Warborne Lane, Warb'n Lane. Probably because Australians pronounce Melbourne, Melb'n. I don't, though, pronounce Southbourne Southb'n, or Bournemouth, B'nmouth. Inconsistency is a virtue.

#### **A not unpleasing priestly task**

The most useful and memorable of our car's attachments in Australia was a tow bar. Memorable for painfully barking our shins on its protruding ball socket as we walked round the vehicle. Useful for carting bags of manure to our garden and bales of hay for harvest festivals. It also enabled us to help move the furniture of a slightly neurotic woman in the process of freeing herself from a domineering paramour. A not unusual priestly task. It required several trailer trips from their modest flat to a caravan park outside of town. On the last trip we carefully loaded a tottering, chipboard, sky-scraper of a cupboard that filled the rear view mirror. The caravan park had fierce speed bumps. Although we carefully negotiated the first of these, a horrified glance in the rear-view mirror revealed a very gentle, slow-motion, total implosion of the cupboard. We inherited the mangled pieces of chipboard with little joy.

#### **Severe charity**

On my kindle I have the biography of the classical scholar and wit, Maurice Bowra. In the days when he was Warden of Wadham College, Oxford, students were locked in at 11.00pm, but could sneak out along a route that included Bowra's sitting room. One night an escapee, realising that Bowra was still there, dived behind the sofa. He stayed hidden for two hours, breathing as quietly as possible. Finally Bowra got up and left the room. Reaching the door, he said: 'Turn the light out when you go to bed.'

### **(214) "This and That" - 15 October 2017**

An old and excellent university priest and friend of mine became addicted to jogging in middle age. For a couple of hours every morning he would pound along the sea front of the town in which he ministered, rejoicing in wind, waves, seagulls and sunlight. Reluctant to stop.

#### **Spiritual jogging**

Ultimately it did him grievous harm, wrecking his legs permanently and horribly. A trifle rueful, but uncomplaining, he is now more or less immobile. Undaunted, he has turned his study into an Aladdin's cave, a colourful grotto of icons, candles, rosaries, thuribles, knick-knacks and a billion books. He jogs the world of the spirit and of letters these days. To his inestimable joy and benefit.

I too once took up jogging. Never to the point of addiction though. I hated it. Twenty minutes a day for a sedentary God-botherer like myself, I had been advised, could only be of enormous benefit.

As well as bald I was heavily bearded at the time. Ponderous athleticism in so unlovely a middle-aged fellow would be unsightly I thought. So I ran always under the cover of darkness, pounding my way up the Beechworth Road every night. Exactly ten minutes one way, exactly the same back. It was horrible. Though the outpouring of sweat at the end did bring with it a grim, masochistic pleasure. As too did the spring of fitness in my step in the days that followed.

#### **Pleasurable walking**

Diana and I now walk every day not jog. A brisk twenty five minutes, unless we stop to pass the time of day with Janet Corbin and Jasper her collie, or Paddy Grocott and her Nordic walking poles. We love it.

It is always the same route. Down the Vicarage drive, past the night's new mole hills in the lawn, waiting to be raked, and crunching acorns on the tarmac to be swept up later, bagged and donated to Warborne Farm pigs.

Once on Pilley Hill Road we almost immediately dive off into a tunnel in the holly and walk alongside our neighbours' hedges before crossing the road into School Lane. From there we eventually turn into Warborne Lane, then up Burnt House Lane, across the playing fields back on to Pilley Hill Road, by the Memorial Hall, and so home.

For three years we have been glad witnesses of winter's reluctant surrender to spring's blackthorn blossom, bud-bursting hedgerow leaves and Queen Anne's lace. To summer's dandelions, buttercups, luxuriant nettles, sweet-scented new-mown grass and green tree-shade, dense enough to drown in. To autumn's blackberries, acorns, hips, haws, hazelnuts and turning, falling leaves.

These measured seasonal changes are accompanied by a polyphony of more random ones. Three of the young elm trees in the hedge in Burnt House lane have died this summer. The wide new gateway into Friars Wood has been observed and discussed from the first bulldozed breaching of the bank, through its foundation digging, brick by brick building and gravel surfacing over many months. The earth slopes on either side were planted with ivy last week. We have watched with similar fascination the demolition of the bungalow alongside the Memorial Hall and its replacement by a great, double-storied house. It has taken over a year.

Lambs in the paddocks of Warborne farm have delighted us from birth to maturity. Two rams, their fathers, we nicknamed "Ugly" and "Ying". The former appears to have disappeared. Not, we trust, into pet food. We celebrated too the arrival of half a dozen handsome Valais Black Nosed sheep. Their faces, feet and knees are as black as their noses. There seems no nostalgia for alpine meadows.

### **Goat caruncles**

Last week we introduced ourselves to a new family of goats on the farm. Mum and Dad with long beards and a pair of furry wattles or caruncles on their necks. No one is sure why goats have these. In birds they tend to be unfeathered and are often brightly coloured and used for display. Flushed with blood in an excited turkey, they go bright red or blue. On goats they're as useless as ear lobes on us.

Our walk always ends in saying Matins together. We sit down in the study and begin: 'O Lord open our lips....' and he does. Praise comes easily after so lovely a walk.

## **(213) "This and That" - 8 October 2017**

Arguments against the existence of God are rarely surprising or disturbing. Those of the Richard Dawkins and Jerry Coyne sort are all open to an authentic: "yes, but..."

### **A nauseating old roué**

My faith's foundations did quiver momentarily at the news of a peaceful end for the nonagenarian Hugh Hefner though. The nauseating old roué deserved worse.

How absurd his "bunnies" with fluffy scuts stitched to scantily clad backsides and flopsy, mopsy ears attached to vapid heads. How pretentious the magazine *Playboy*. But then many rogues and monsters achieve longevity. Think of Mugabe. *C'est la vie*. The rain falls upon the just and the unjust. It has to be. If virtue was unduly favoured we'd all be bribed into goodness instead of freely choosing it.

There are rewards for virtue though, and punishments for vice. But they are intrinsic. A vengeful, vicious, selfish life punishes us with torrid ephemeral relationships, few friends, many enemies and only shallow happinesses. We are punished by our sins, not for them.

A loving, selfless and compassionate life rewards us with lasting relationships, many friends and profound happinesses. We are rewarded by our virtues, not for them.

### **Glossop, gressop and Glott's hop**

We were in Glossop a few weeks ago, a market town in north Derbyshire. Every man I heard talking there sounded like my decidedly rum, though always interesting, uncles.

Arriving by way of the spectacular Snake Pass, we parked at the top and walked a mile or two of the Pennine way, rich in peat, breath taking of view. Manchester was visible in the distance, Sheffield, though even closer, was hidden from sight. What a small country England is.

The name Glossop brought to my mind the word gressop from a poem by John Skelton (1463-1569) meaning grasshopper. The name Glossop has nothing to do with grasshoppers though. It originated well before Skelton.

Glossop comes from Anglo Saxon *Glott's hop*, meaning the valley of *Glott* (a local chief). That brings to mind "glottal stops". Again pointlessly, for it has nothing to do with glottal stops. They are more cockney than Derbyshire.

Derbyshire is my home county, the wellspring of all Neums, though I only lived there for nine months as a boy of eleven. In Glossop Diana interrogated a friendly local greengrocer about the place and its history. Like Belper, where my family comes from, it used to be a thriving mill town. Substantial buildings are evidence of past prosperity. Now it is more a commuter town for Manchester and Sheffield than anything else.

### **Two tales of tails**

Two tales about tails to augment our recent and lovely St Francistide pet service. The first is an idiotic one told to us as children by my father to explain why dogs sniff each other's behinds.... "Long, long ago, dogs had detachable hindquarters. Whenever they went inside they would hang them carefully and hygienically on hooks in the cloakroom. One day there was a great dog convention in a mighty hall. All the world's dogs attended, respectably hanging up their hindquarters in the cloakroom before entering. When all were assembled a disgruntled, terrorist dachshund suddenly and frenziedly barked "Fire! Fire! Fire!" All the dogs panicked. They rushed from the building, grabbed the first hindquarters to hand, instead of their own, and scampered off into the city. Ever since, whenever they come across another dog, they sniff its behind to see if it is theirs.

The second tale is a little sermon about happiness: "A wise old dog observing a young one dancing around chasing its tail asked why. The youngster said that he was a philosopher who had discovered that happiness resided in his tail. All he had to do was to pursue it and catch it for life to be worth living. The old dog replied that in truth happiness does reside in a dog's tail, but that if you desist from rushing around in circles chasing it all the time, you find that it is always there, behind you, never leaving you.

## **(212) "This and That" - 1 October 2017**

Talking to general practitioners is stimulating. Their job is almost as interesting as that of a parish priest.

### **Coping with malingerers**

Last week we stayed with one for three nights in a city in Yorkshire. A lovely, fascinating and still idealistic doctor at the age of 69. A friend of Diana's from their school days. Over many years she has built up and worked in an inner city surgery, loving and respecting those whom life has clipped round the earhole.

I asked a young doctor on the island of St Helena how he coped with malingerers coming for certified validation of the desire for a day off work. He admitted that on Monday mornings, after seeing a dozen or so of such patients, he found himself praying for some exotic and truly nasty disease to arrive for diagnosis and thwarting.

I asked an elderly doctor in Australia how he dealt with folk who made an appointment merely to unburden themselves of all their anxieties and woes. He replied, “It has never been much of a problem. Though I do remember one such person coming in and launching straight into a relentless monologue. But when I woke up she’d gone.”

### **The ultimate cure-all**

With Diana’s friend we talked of patients obsessed by an illness they think they have, but don’t. Week after week they make appointments and can never be reassured. That it is a mental not a physical problem is a diagnosis they find unacceptable. It brought to mind the less than happy cure suggested in the hymn: “O happy band of pilgrims”

*The trials that beset you  
The sorrows ye endure  
The manifold temptations  
That death alone can cure.*

### **Your parson’s nightmare**

On Tuesday morning I awoke anxious from a mild nightmare. It is one that has recurred in slightly different forms for years. I was officiating in a strange and many roomed cathedral. All was disorganised and chaotic. We processed into the service very late. Something I hate doing. When I arrived at the altar the candles were not lit, and the lectern had nothing on it for me to read. And so on and so on. Few things are more boring than other peoples’ dreams.

Under a scalding shower anxiety dissipated and I decided that my horror of unscripted, shambling, rambling church services, full of interjections, silly asides and unfunny comments reflects a similar distaste for that sort of daily life: shambolic, unpredictable, disordered and without routine. It’s one of many reasons I remain a Christian. God orders and gives purpose to my existence. He hands me a script, a narrative culminating in sacrificing love’s inevitable cross and then death’s all but unimaginable defeat. I love it.

The cure for the anxiety of my nightmare was a scalding shower. The cure for life’s anxiety is a sprinkling of baptismal water, followed by a life of grace-filled, ordered faith.

### **Plump aubergines and bounteous udders**

What a splendid Harvest Evensong last Sunday at St John’s. Two lovely anthems. The first, Maurice Greene’s “*Thou visitest the earth...*” its solo sung clearly and beautifully by David Woodgates. The full choir’s entrance after the solo was spell-binding. The second was Charles Wood’s stirring and heartening “*O Thou the sacred Orb*”. A devotional and musical feast with robust hymns and fine canticles.

The sermon ended with a paean of praise to the Creator for

*the bright redness of tomatoes, the deep, glossy purpleness of aubergines, the crisp crinkliness of cauliflowers, the cosy, white moist, soft, protectiveness of the inside of a broad bean’s pod, the fabulous fecundity of courgette plants, the tight, tight packaging of the grain-head on a wheat stalk, the bursting, bloated, bulbous bounteousness of a cow’s udder, the yellowness of butter, the creaminess of cream, the softness of raspberries, the bloom on a damson... Thank you, thank you, thank you.*

The acknowledgement of bounteous udders was particularly appreciated by Maggie Cobb, a dairy farmer.

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