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### **BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE (August 2022)**



#### ***Sun scorched paddock: Boldre, Hampshire, England***

*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 **August 2022** 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>

## (466) “This and That” - 28 August 2022

In his poem *The Elixir*, now a well known hymn, George Herbert tells us that:

*A man that looks on glasse,  
On it may stay his eye;  
Or if he pleaseth, through it passe,  
And then the heaven espie.*

### **Braided shallots and garlic**

When I look up from my desk to the glass of my study’s window, I stay my eye on a compact braid of our home grown, golden-brown shallots, hanging from the top window’s latch. Such braids adorn several Vicarage windows and are beautiful, but Herbert is right, once I let my eye pass beyond them, through the window, there’s a heaven of oak tree and rhododendron leafiness to lift the heart to praise. Diana, having expertly braided our garlic harvest, cajoled me into helping braid the shallots, a skill that I reluctantly applied myself to master and, having done so, am filled with pride. The garden’s abundance is now beans, spinach, leeks, courgettes and gem squash.

### **Tell it not in Gath**

Strangely, the shallots bring to mind one of the most beautiful of all Old Testament passages, David’s lament for Saul and Jonathan. It begins: *The beauty of Israel is slain upon thy high places: how are the mighty fallen! Tell it not in Gath, publish it not in the streets of Ashkelon; lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice, lest the daughters of the uncircumcised triumph...* It’s a lament poignantly set to music by the Scottish born 17th century composer, Robert Ramsey.

The name of both shallots and scallions comes from Ashkelon, the ancient Canaanite city, mentioned in David’s lament. It was where the ancient Greeks and Romans believed shallots to have originated. They are a useful little onion to have in profusion about the house, to be snipped off at will.

### **Arriving and leaving**

Today, Sunday, 28 August 2022, nine years ago, in 2013, was a Wednesday. Way back then, on that day, there was an evening service in St John’s at which, aged a mere 67, I was ‘licenced’ as the new “House for Duty” priest for St John’s. Diana and I, Australian residents, had arrived a few weeks earlier after several fascinating months aboard freighters crossing the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans, to take up the appointment, unseen. It has proved to be a very happy and rewarding relocation.

Arrivals are preceded by departures. Until then I had been Rector of the Australian parish of Shepparton for eleven years, a longer time than anywhere else I have ever lived, even as a child. During my time in that parish I survived a bout of cancer myself and suffered the loss of my first wife to that dread disease. During both of those trials the parish proved itself to be well and truly the loving, caring and forgiving community that all local church congregations are called and aspire to be. So we left, finally retired, with many regrets.

### **A Claytons service**

There was one serious flaw to the ‘licencing’ service at St John’s. There was no licence. To qualify for one I needed, for some obscure reason, permission from the Archbishop of Canterbury. This had not been granted because a form that should have been filled in and submitted had never even been sent to me. So the service, which was lovely, was in fact not the real thing, was what in Australia would be called a “Claytons” service.

Claytons was the brand name of a non-alcoholic, non-carbonated drink, coloured and packaged to resemble whisky. In the 1970s and 80s it was vigorously promoted in Australia and New Zealand as “the drink you have when you’re not having a drink.” Alcohol at the time was being targeted by wowers as a major factor in the road death toll. Although not advertised since the 1980s, the name has entered the Australian vernacular, standing for an *ersatz* or phony product, or for anything that is obviously ineffective. A cohabiting pair of ‘partners’ might be described as having a “Claytons marriage”. A knowledgeable, but unqualified handyman would be a “Claytons carpenter” and so on.

## (465) “This and That” - 21 August 2022

A common argument used to deny the existence of God is his absence, his silence, his inaction in the face of terrible suffering.

It's an argument that can be turned round to God's favour too, though. I was reminded of this when I came across a little verse by a Canadian poet, Sheldon Zitner.

### **Deus Absconditus**

*Where women groan in labour He does not go  
to uncurl the clubfoot or forestall dementia,  
nor does He rise in parliament or in the street  
to strip the rhetoric that flattens cities,  
nor does He enter intimate rooms at midnight  
to unsay the unforgivable,  
yet all His absences cry out,  
evoking human charity.*

In the early nineteen seventies I read a book that used just such an argument in eloquent, extended and polished prose, not verse. It bowled me over and allowed me to continue to believe, and passionately.

If “charity”, in the old fashioned sense of the word, i.e. agapeic love, is the virtue of virtues, residing at the very heart of the Godhead, then no world other than one of the sort that we inhabit will do. For agapeic love to exist and flourish, together with all the other great virtues we hold dear, an evolving world of inviolable and inexorable natural law, as open to pain and pleasure, woe and joy, hate and love is required.

### **The foolishness of God**

The book is an Anglican classic and in its garish cover remains on my shelf, a treasured survivor of many culls of my library over the years. Because I was then wondering if there were any grounds for honest belief at all and Baker is so serious about the reasons for doubt and honest about so much in our bible and faith that is beyond belief, I read his book with a degree of trepidation. He kept me on the edge of my seat, suspecting and fearing, as Tim Darton, the book's publisher said, he was “...about to throw in the towel, but he doesn't.” Nor does his faith, though sanely liberal, need to lose the baby with the bathwater. Sadly, these days liberals are in decline, evangelicals hold sway. Here's a sample of Baker:

*“Perhaps the best news our day has to offer is the collapse of Judaistic Christianity under the pressures of history; for this affords Christians the best chance they have ever had to regain the perspective of the original Gospel. Because people are ceasing to believe in a Providence of simple, retributive justice, or in a magician-god who will wave his wand to give them whatever they ask; because they are beginning to value freedom and the responsibility which has to learn by making mistakes; because they are more acutely aware than ever before of being one small single family of Man in a universe too vast for their imagination to take in; because of all these things, what Jesus said and how he lived has more meaning, more relevance, not less. The world has not left Jesus behind; it is getting to the point where it can just see him, far ahead, blazing the trail. In the so-called ‘ages of faith’ it made endless false Christs in its own image. Now these images are for the most part broken and abandoned; only in the churches do men and women in any numbers still fall down and worship them..... The frightening urgency is that if Christians continue to misrepresent the information they have, and go on fiddling ineptly with the key, in time everyone will have given up and gone home.”*

### **A world gone feral**

Stick with the faith. In a feral world what sense it makes! Think and read about it, pray and practise it. Love it to bits.

## (464) “This and That” - 14 August 2022

1985 was a significant year. On 28 April the Neaum family sailed from the island of St Helena for Avonmouth, via Tenerife. Later, on the 21 August they flew, via Amsterdam, to settle in Australia. There, on All Souls Day, 2 November, Rachel, the last of the four children, was born to finalise the formation of a familial United Nations: Dad born in England’s Staffordshire, Mum in South Africa’s Transkei, Peter and David in Zimbabwe’s Harare, Elizabeth on the South Atlantic’s St Helena, Rachel in Australia’s Ararat.

### Sod the Public

Another notable event in 1985 was the publication of an article in *The Spectator* by the novelist and poet Kingsley Amis entitled: “**Sod The Pubic: A Consumer’s Guide**”. It was an A to Z glossary of customer abuse. In the introduction Amis maintains the expression “*Sod the Public*” to be the working slogan not only of the government, service industry and retail trade, but also, as “*sod the customer*”, “*sod the audience*” and other variants, to be that of interior designers, providers of culture, playwrights, composers and more. A few examples:

**Light-switches:** When carrying a tray etc. you used to be able to put the light on with your wrist or elbow (and also sometimes open the door-catch in the same sort of way), but now you have to put the tray etc. on the ground or somewhere.

**Modernism:** This is an immense subject. For now, consider only that the movement in its very beginnings 80 or more years ago set out to “liberate” the “artist”... from the need to please, or be comprehensible to, or otherwise concern himself with the public. “I believe that a real composer writes for no other purpose than to please himself. Those who compose because they want to please others and have audiences in mind are not real artists” [writes] Arnold Schoenberg [who]...does not go on to say whether or not he considers Mozart, Beethoven and others to be real artists...In this country the movement would probably have expired altogether by now without the life-support machine provided by the Arts Council.

**New Bible and Prayerbook:** A big one, sodding congregation, Church and people at a single stroke. Nobody except those in the trade wanted it.

### Vapid music

A particularly infuriating contemporary example of *Sod the Public* is being required by public institutions, public services and businesses to wait on the phone for ages and ages before being attended to. Vapid music, doubtless intended to assuage impatience only exacerbates it. Frequent interruptions for insincere, robotic-voiced apologies and gratuitous advice as to how much more preferable it would be to use the internet likewise. It is an outrageous example of *Sod the Public*. Why do we so meekly tolerate it?

### Hobgoblins

In *The Spectator* for 6 August, Matt Ridley had some wise words about pessimists and pessimism:

*The pessimists are usually wrong. When I was young, the adults said the future was bleak, just as they do today: the population explosion was unstoppable, famine was inevitable and pollution was going to shorten average lifespan. No adult said anything optimistic in my hearing. “The outlook for man is painful, desperate, and the hope that can be held out for his future seems to be very slim indeed,” wrote Robert Heilbroner in a 1970 best-seller. Yet over the next half-century average human lifespan grew by five hours a day, extreme poverty collapsed from 50 per cent of the world to 8 per cent and child mortality fell by three quarters. Pessimism is the handmaid of statism. “The whole aim of practical politics is to keep the populace alarmed (and hence clamorous to be led to safety) by menacing it with an endless series of hobgoblins, all of them imaginary,” said H.L. Mencken (1880-1956), presaging the pandemic.*

## (463) “This and That” - 7 August 2022

The endless cycle of alarming news has spawned a dubious psychological malady known as Headline Stress Disorder. We are not equipped for 24 four hour, 7 day a week, doom-laden and catastrophic news bulletins. Which makes news-avoidance an important ingredient of a contented, worthwhile and productive existence. There are post-pandemic folk still too timid even to return to churchgoing.

### News Briefing

To live each day in hope, with a sense of daily life’s possibilities and a conviction that we can do good and make a difference, it is advisable to ration our news consumption. The BBC’s thirteen minute “News Briefing”, at half past five each morning, is sufficient for the likes of me. It consists of a news summary, a short weather forecast, a look at the leading newspaper headlines and a concise sport and business report. It is more than sufficient. Thereafter there’s fascinating “Farming Today” or music on BBC 3, the best of all solaces:

#### On listening to a piece of music by Purcell

I cast no slur upon the worth  
Of modern men and modern ways,  
And our no whit declining days –  
On modern heaven and modern earth;  
Yet in your muse I seem to find  
Something our later muse has lost –  
A note more sure, less trouble-tossed,  
A carelessness and ease of mind –

Relic of times when History’s ink  
Had scrawled less wantonly the page,  
When man had had less time to think,  
Less circumspectly flowed his blood:  
Trace of a prelapsarian age,  
Echo of days before the flood.      *A S J Tessimond*

#### Go away bald head

In the past fortnight I have been required to endure two Zoom seminars on safeguarding. The Church has a dubious record in such matters and so now dutifully compensates. The Old Testament’s prophet Elisha might well have benefitted from such sessions. In our Matins readings each morning we’ve arrived at the Second Book of Kings and always read the bits censored by those who compile the lectionary. This means we recently encountered the fascinating, though unedifying, account of a group of boys from the city mockingly taunting Elisha: ‘*Go away, baldhead! Go away, baldhead!*’ Whereupon he curses them in the name of the Lord and two she bears come out of the forest and maul 42 of them. Nasty.

#### Consuming fire

A similarly unedifying story, in chapter one, reminded us of Spike Milligan. The King of Israel, Ahaziah, sends a captain and 50 soldiers to persuade Elisha to attend him in sickness. Elisha uncharitably responds: ‘*If I am a man of God, let fire come down from heaven and consume you and your 50.*’ Fire comes down from heaven, and consumes them all. The King sends another captain and 50 men who suffer the same fate. A third captain is wiser and pleads for his own and his soldiers’ lives. Elisha consents and attends to the king.

#### Hellfire thwarted

In his novel *Puckoon*. Milligan tells of a parish priest in Ireland fed up with a congregation who pay no heed to his preaching. He devises a plan, with the verger, to change this. In a room above the

pulpit the verger has a pile of well oiled rags and a box of matches. During the the priest's sermon, on the cue: *let fire come down from heaven and consume you*, the verger is to set alight the rags and waft billows of smoke down into the church to terrify the congregation. On Sunday the priest reaches his cue and thunders: *let fire come down from heaven and consume you*. No response. He repeats it, louder. No response. He repeats it even louder. No response, and then a plaintive cry from the verger wafts down from on high: *It's no good father, the cat's peed on the matches*.

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