

Home

FROM BEHIND THE STAIRWELL BALUSTRADE

July to December 2026



Wells Cathedral from the Strawberry Line

With gratitude and many regrets, the Reverend Canon Andrew Neaum retired as the 'House for Duty' Anglican priest of the lovely Boldre Benefice, on the edge of the New Forest, at the end of January 2023. His new home, with Diana his wife, is in the heart of Wells, in Somerset, a mere 5-minute walk from the Cathedral.

The articles that follow are the continuation of his weekly pew-sheet ruminations, aired prejudices and footling observations, now written in his study, on the landing behind the stairwell's balustrade, of his home in Wells.

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

(659) “This and That” - 5 July 2026

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



“Queen of the Night” flowering in day light

A portrait of Mary Whitehouse, naked and with five breasts, was commissioned by Sir Hugh Greene, Director-General of the BBC in the 1960s. She was a great trial to him, and he hung the portrait in his office to throw darts at. She had the last laugh because, with some relish and credence, she was able to claim credit for his resignation in 1969. The actual portrait has never been made public.

Those of us for whom the 1960s were salad days will remember her as the much-derided, self-appointed campaigner against the permissive society, particularly on television. As the ‘Queen of Clean’, she was easy to dismiss – and not without justification – as school-marmish, simplistic and unable to discern the wood for the trees. On the other hand, our present-day concerns as to the effect upon children of unlimited access to the worst of what is available on the internet suggest she might well have had a point. As a wise Australian once said: “No one would wish for a return to puritanism, but the trouble with dismantling taboos is the inevitable unintended side-effects, collateral damage.”

The rapper and the physicist

To lovers of melody, there is as little inclination to listen to the music of rap artists like Eminem as there is to the classical music of modernists like Schoenberg. Or, for that matter, to Schoenberg’s descendants, whose music sometimes finds its way into the repertoire of the fine Wells Cathedral choir. Melody to music is what the soul is to the body. Any musical genre that disdains or discards melody is as unacceptable to a thoroughgoing melody freak as is any philosophy that disdains or discards the soul to a convinced Christian.

However, rap music did come to, and hold, my attention briefly last week, though for non-musical reasons. In 2016, a Twitter scuffle broke out between a rapper known as B.o.B and an astrophysicist called Neil deGrasse Tyson. The rapper is a conspiracy theorist and member of the Flat Earth Society, whose views the astrophysicist took issue with and, indeed, refuted, though to little effect.

Unable to persuade each other to a change of mind on Twitter, they turned to rapping instead. B.o.B issued a ‘diss track’ against Tyson titled ‘Flatline’, elaborating his views about the shape of the Earth. In turn, the astrophysicist, thanks to his own rapper nephew, Stephen, responded with a ‘diss track’ titled ‘Flat to Fact’.

It was the astrophysicist who eventually concluded the public spat with a charitable final tweet to B.o.B: “*Duude — to be clear: being five centuries regressed in your reasoning doesn’t mean we all can’t still like your music.*”



St Peter ad Vincula, Tollard Royal, Wiltshire

Medieval enlightenment



Wells Cathedral viewed from the Bishops Palace moat

In that final tweet, as well as elsewhere, the astrophysicist implies that belief in a flat earth belongs to medieval times. He is dead wrong. The Middle Ages were far, far more sophisticated and enlightened than he supposes. To live within sight and earshot of the architectural triumph that is a medieval cathedral, and to visit daily its gloriously stained-glassed, star-roofed, elongated octagon of a Lady Chapel for early morning worship, is proof enough of that. To wander each week its aisles and ambulatories, talking to awed visitors and sharing in their delight and wonder, likewise. The Middle Ages were very, very far from being the Dark Ages.

Eratosthenes, librarian in Alexandria

Almost all educated medieval Europeans, Christian theologians (such as Thomas Aquinas), and Islamic scholars knew the Earth to be a sphere. So too did

sailors like Columbus, who had no fear of falling off the edge of the Earth, though they did miscalculate how large the globe actually was.

As long ago as the 6th century BC, Pythagoras and fellow Greek philosophers postulated a round Earth. In the 3rd century BC, the ancient Greek polymath and chief librarian at the ancient world's most famous library in Alexandria, Eratosthenes—a mathematician, philosopher, poet, geographer, astronomer, and music theorist—calculated the Earth's circumference with remarkable accuracy using shadows.

The influential 20th-century paleontologist and evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould reminds us, *“There never was a period of ‘flat Earth darkness’ among scholars, regardless of how the public at large may have conceptualised our planet both then and now. Greek knowledge of sphericity never faded, and all major medieval scholars accepted the Earth’s roundness as an established fact of cosmology.”* There was scarcely a Christian scholar of the Middle Ages who didn't acknowledge the Earth to be a sphere and even know its approximate circumference.

No cause for despair

It can be disheartening when our children or grandchildren turn their backs on the faith we hold so dear. We should never despair; seeds dispersed in desert places can remain dormant and ungerminated for decade after decade, until favourable conditions occur.

Present

On the flyleaf
of my confirmation present:
“To Wendy with love
from Nanna. Psalm 98”

I looked it up, eventually -
Cantate Domino.
I knew the first two verses
and skimmed the rest.

Thirty-five years afterwards,
at evensong on Day 19
the choir sings Nanna's psalm.
At last, I pay attention

to the words she chose.
O sing unto the Lord
a new song. Nanna,
it is just what I wanted.

(Wendy Cope)

[Home](#)