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FROM BEHIND THE STAIRWELL BALUSTRADE

November to December 2026



The Nave, Wells Cathedral

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>

(676) “This and That” - 1 November 2026

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



The World Helicopter Speed Record

One of the most memorable flights of my life was a couple of minutes and took Diana and myself off the polar research vessel S.A. Agulhas II, to deposit us on the green turf of the island of Tristan da Cunha's settlement plateau. It was the realisation of a long-harboured yearning to return to a perceived childhood paradise and memory-treasured island that I had not seen or visited since leaving it in 1956 as an eleven-year-old boy.

Arriving on the island in 1952 was a more primitive affair than in 2012. My family and I departed HMS Actaeon, a Royal Navy sloop turned frigate, by clambering down a ladder into an island longboat made of painted canvas stretched over a wooden frame. We were then rowed over a choppy sea and deposited on the black volcanic sand of “Big Beach”, nowadays covered with lava from a 1961 volcanic eruption.



Landing on Tristan da Cunha 2012

On our way home from taking a service at Chilton Polden recently, we stopped for a cup of hot chocolate, a little north of the Somerset Levels village of Westhay, at what appeared to be a memorial beside the road. It turned out to be a plaque on a large lump of hamstone, marking the absolute world speed record for a helicopter.

Helicopters galore

Why there, we wondered? Because it marks the exact centre point of a 15-kilometre straight course flown on 11 August 1986 by a boosted and modified Westland Lynx helicopter. When the speed of the flight east and then of a return flight back were averaged out, to eliminate the wind variable, the official final speed was logged at 249.09 mph. It is the official record for a conventional helicopter, and remains unbroken forty years later. The helicopter that actually broke the record is on display in the helicopter Museum at Weston-super-Mare, which holds the world's largest collection of helicopters.

Helicopter or longboat

made by helicopter in 2012. It lasted only a



The World's fastest Helicopter

Return to St Helena

This year, on 18 November, Diana and I are booked to fly to Johannesburg to meet up with my daughter Elizabeth, and then fly to the island of St Helena for a couple of weeks. She was born there, but left when only a year old. She wishes to visit the island of her birth, to be shown around by us, before Diana and I ‘drop off the twig’.

I first arrived there in 1982 by ship, with Margaret, my first wife, and our two boys. Diana arrived in 1984, also by ship, with Michael, her husband, and their boy and girl. As with Tristan in 2012, we'll arrive this time from the sky, not the sea, as there is now an airport. It is the last of the parishes in which I've been brought up or have worked, to which I have not yet returned. To a chronic nostalgic, it will be deeply satisfying.

British blackcurrants

When a speech-writer was first chosen by Prince Charles in 1978, The Daily Telegraph reported laconically: 'The Prince of Wales has appointed as speech writer Mr Byron Rogers, a colourful Welshman.'

They were not wrong. Until he died, Rogers (1942–2025) was a favourite columnist and author of mine, not least because of his delight in, and propensity to search out and dryly celebrate, the eccentric, quirky, long-forgotten, or downright bizarre. That he remained the Prince of Wales's speech-writer from 1978 to 1983 says a lot for the character and sense of humour of our present King.



Landed on Tristan da Cunha

His memoir, on my Kindle, is called *'Me: The Official Biography'*, and it tells of his surprise on hearing for the first time his very own lines being spoken by the Prince. As it happened, it was in a speech to a Farmers' Club: *'I don't think it is generally known that Britain is self-sufficient in blackcurrants. In fact, we lead the world in the production of blackcurrants. No imports disturb our trade figures, no foreign price rises threaten our economy. Every year the wind blows through ten thousand acres of British blackcurrants...'*

Learning to become an Englishman

Of a working-class background, his father being a carpenter and occasional undertaker, Rogers was born in Carmarthenshire and spoke only Welsh until he was five years old. Success at grammar school and Aberystwyth University took him on to Oxford, primarily 'to learn how to become an Englishman'. Candid about his origins, he claims to have been born into 'a family noted for two things: one was illegitimacy, the other was farting'. We learn, though, that his mother was obsessively respectable, proudly declaring in her old age: 'Passion, that's something no one's ever been able to accuse me of.'

Conquering gravity

Roger's prize-winning book, *'The Man Who Went into the West'*, is a biography of the Welsh nationalist, Anglican priest, poet, and coldly unsociable curmudgeon, R. S. Thomas, and a sheer delight and masterpiece. It is commended by Rowan Williams as a *'lively and affectionate biography... unexpectedly, even riotously, funny'*.

In another book, *'An Audience with an Elephant: And Other Encounters on the Eccentric Side'*, Rogers tells of tracking down an octogenarian who, while clambering around the high, medieval rafters of his local parish church, lost his footing and plummeted forty-five feet to land flat on the ancient church floor. When the horrified vicar and locals rushed inside expecting the worst, they found the old man casually dusting off his trousers. Not only had he survived, he stood up and walked away completely uninjured. Instead of predictably goggling at an apparent miracle, Rogers, with his characteristic sidelong



*St Helena Airport
from the air*

way of looking at things, marvels instead at how a single, bizarre event instantly transformed a commonplace, local senior citizen into 'heroic myth'. For decades thereafter, the man couldn't buy a pint in the local pub without someone pointing at him and telling of the day he conquered gravity.

In an interview with Mick Jagger, Rogers, as was his wont, ignored the predictable in favour of the bizarre and odd. He tells us that this strutting, idolised, taboo-breaking wild man of a rock star was almost always late for appointments because he insisted on sitting in the back of cabs waiting for his taxi driver to write out an official paper receipt.

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