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### **BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE (June 2016)**



### **THE BEGIJNHOF - AMSTERDAM** *(See Article 144 below)*

*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 **June 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>*

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## “This and That” - 26 June 2016

Monday morning and piddling with rain. We had to waterproof ourselves for our daily walk. The patter of rain on a hooded head is sweet music to the ears. Years in arid climes, longing for droughts to break, will take a lot of washing out of my system.

The phone has been busy this morning. All to do with weddings and funerals. It promises to be a stimulating week. We go to Cambridge after casting our vote on Thursday, to celebrate the second birthday of grandson Thomas.

### **The arrogant ignorance of a musical snob**

As a university student I was editor of my father's parish magazine in Salisbury, Rhodesia. In this were published the month's hymns. My father left me to pick them and I did so with the arrogant ignorance of a musical snob.

Most Victorian tunes I dismissed as overly sentimental. So hymn tunes written after 1830 I selected only reluctantly. The long-suffering parishioners of that church knew every Orlando Gibbons, Jeremiah Clarke and Louis Bourgeois hymn tune, and a good selection of Bach's chorales, but were starved of Stainer, J.B. Dykes, S.S. Wesley and all the great Victorians. There were exceptions. I loved the tune *Sandon* to 'Lead Kindly Light' and S.S. Wesley's tune *Hereford* to 'O Thou who Camest from Above'. I also disdained most twentieth century hymns.

Fortunately ignorance and snobbery fade. I now love Victorian hymns. The more sentimental the better.

It was Professor Gerrit Bonn who began to put me right. An expert on Bach's organ music and a smoker of large cigars, he was a diminutive Dutchman, the husband of my piano teacher. In several months of recitals at the Cathedral where I was curate, he played all of Bach's organ works.

In conversation after one of his recitals he confessed to loving the sentimental musical, *The Sound of Music*. I began then to realise that musical, as well as most other forms of snobbery, arise out of ignorance and insecurity.

### **Winston Churchill's favourite hymn**

Someone quizzed me about singing *The Battle Hymn of the Republic* last Sunday. Alright for the Salvation Army, not for St John's. I disagree. I love that hymn's infectious, rollicking melody, especially when played with panache, and roared by the congregation. A favourite of Winston Churchill it was played at his funeral in 1965. Nor is there anything wrong with the Salvation Army.

When my father was a boy in Belper, Derbyshire, the Salvation Army used to meet on Sundays in a corrugated iron hut. Around this hut one Sunday, my father and his brother, fine Church of England choristers, raced round the hut holding sticks to the iron to make a din. They then ran off. They did the same on a second Sunday. On the third two Salvationists were waiting, nabbed them and took them inside. Instead of getting the thick ear they expected, or even a stern dressing down, they were asked to sit down, given a piece of cake and a drink, and gently asked to desist. Ever since, until his death, my father gave a generous annual donation to the Salvation Army. The moral of the story: Don't take offence. Make peace not war. Turn the other cheek.

I had a bishop once who, instead of taking to heart or engaging with criticism, responded by saying: "I find that offensive". Stupid. As someone wise once said: "*He who takes offence when no offence is intended is a fool, he who takes offence when offence is intended is a greater fool.*"

## Fertile minds of bored soldiers and sailors

I am not so keen on the words of *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*, but they are preferable to the hymn's many parodies. The words first set to the tune as it evolved were those of a hymn. Then of a marching song: *John Brown's Body*. Marching songs, thanks to the fertile minds of bored soldiers, are particularly prone to parody. Those that I know to *John Brown's Body* are all to do with strawberry jam being scraped off tarmac. Nowhere near as bad as the parody of *Eternal Father Strong to Save*, which must have sprung from the fertile minds of bored sailors: '*It wasn't to the family's fancy when Lord de Vere became a Nancy.....*'

## (146) "This and That" - 19June 2016

There was a baby rabbit in our rabbit-proof vegetable garden last week. It dashed away as I approached it and with a thrust, wriggle and twist squeezed through the chicken wire fence into a nearby rhododendron clump. Whereupon there was a squeak and out of the rhododendrons trotted a fox with the baby rabbit in its maw. Alfred Lord Tennyson anticipated Darwin by nine years in articulating the problem posed by biology to belief in a God of Love.

*Who trusted God was love indeed  
And love Creation's final law—  
Tho' Nature, red in tooth and claw  
With ravine, shriek'd against his creed—*

### A nature reserve

The Vicarage garden is a small game reserve. Foxes gambol on the front lawn, deer trip delicately as they browse on unappetizing looking shrubs. Squirrels, rabbits and ticks are everywhere. The bird feeders in front of the house are a fluttering hub of avian sociability. Ravens and jays, too large to perch there, cling on for brief feeds before tumbling off. Pigeons cannot manage a feed at all, but peck disconsolately at seed sprayed to the ground by wasteful blackbirds.

Woodpeckers monopolise the peanuts. They stab away for ages, their young now in attendance. Nut hatches are next in line, they too lunge and prod, insensitive to an impatient crowd of great tits and other smaller birds lined up awaiting their moment. From the kitchen we watch robins and blackbirds feed their young. No badgers yet, nor hedgehogs, but constant delight.

We visited a nature reserve in Holland. The 13,750 acre Hoge Veluwe National Park. It is a mixture of forest, heath, sand dunes and lakes. Not at all typical Holland. The sandy soils were formed during the Ice Age. In the south and east are moraines standing nearly 100 metres high. The parts we saw were mostly forested and lovely. The only animals we spotted were wild pig and lots of piglets.

The park was once the hunting estate of Anton Kröller and his wife Helene Kröller-Müller. Helene collected art and in 1935 left her large collection to the state. It is housed in the park's Kröller-Müller museum which we visited. It contains the second largest collection of Van Goghs in the world and so we enjoyed these and much more.

### Sculpture, turbines and polders

There is also a Sculpture Garden. I love music and literature inordinately and painting after my fashion. When it comes to sculpture I am a derisive philistine.



The garden setting for these sculptures was glorious. A few of the pieces were interesting even to me, all were mystifying and some ugly and pointless. I photographed many of them including a rubbish bin, to make a point.

On our last day in Holland we visited a polder. Our friend Ellie drove us to the Noordoostpolder. There we visited the little town of Urk. It used to be an island in the salt water Zuiderzee. Now joined to polder land it remains a fishing town, but on the coast of the freshwater IJsselmeer with no easy access to the North Sea for traditional fishing.

As farm land the Noordoostpolder is impressive. Intensively and neatly farmed the soil looks rich and the produce bountiful. We stopped at one farm to ask about a particular crop. It was an organic enterprise growing vegetables.

There are hundreds of wind turbines, not to regulate water levels but to generate electricity. The building of the great 20 mile long, 30 foot wide Afsluitdijk (Closure dyke) to a height above sea level of nearly 24 feet, with complicated locks and sluices between 1927 and 1932, has been called one of the seven wonders of the modern world.

Once the dangerous, shallow Zuiderzee had been tamed into the freshwater IJsselmeer by this great dike, four extensive polders were eventually created. Maintaining them is highly complicated. We toured the largest still operational steam-powered pumping station in the world. Dating from 1920 it is beautifully maintained, but used nowadays only a few days each year to supplement existing pumping capacity in cases of exceptionally high water levels in Friesland. "God created the world, but the Dutch created Holland".

## (145) "This and That" - 12 June 2016

In Holland there are 2,200 wind turbines and 13,000,000 bicycles. We saw a good proportion of both during our five day visit.

Bicycles are everywhere. Nor are they at all stylish. Most folk ride bolt upright on sturdy utility bikes. Solidly constructed these bikes are decidedly retro and heavy. They are also easy to maintain, good for carrying heavy loads in baskets and panniers and relatively cheap. The ladies' version is called an *Omafiet* ("grandma's bike") and in Frisia a *Widdofyt* (Frisian for "widow's bike"). Most cities appear to put the needs and welfare of cyclists and pedestrians above those of motorists. Much trouble is taken to make the huge mileage of cycle lanes and tracks independent of the road system, with the help of tunnels and bridges.

### Amersfoort and Boldre

We stayed with a family friend of Diana's in Amersfoort. Its population is about 160,000 and it has a nickname that links it tenuously to Boldre. It is called *Keistad* (Boulder City). In the seventeenth century a nine tonne boulder was dragged from the moors into the city by 400 people to settle a bet between two landowners. Later, in 1672, embarrassed by the name *Keientrekker* (boulder-draggers), the citizens buried the boulder. In 1903 it was found again and prominently displayed as a monument. Boulders are rare in the Netherlands, worthy of celebration.



On our first day, instead of heading for Amsterdam and the coast we headed east into the country. The minor roads are beautifully kept and well surfaced, unlike around Pilley. There is usually a shared, red bike track along both road edges. Only near the end of the day did I have a concentration lapse and tackle a roundabout the wrong way.

The countryside is lush and green. Although the wayside flowers and trees are familiar, much is different from Hampshire. There are no hedgerows or hills. New thatch on some of the houses, the colour of Donald Trump's wig, appears to be half as thick as is usual in England and is meticulously and obsessively perfect.

### **Pleaching**

Pleached trees abound in both country and town gardens. I had thought that pleaching was a word that applied only to the ancient and skilful practice of hedge-laying. An art regrettably superseded by mechanical and crude hedge-trimming around Boldre. Not so. Pleaching in Holland, as in many large formal gardens in Britain, is all to do with training trees into screens and shapes. In Holland, the most favoured for this are lime and plane trees. Guided along wires they form thin, leafy walls once spring and summer have filled in all the spaces with new branch growth and foliage.

Neatness and control seem a feature of the Dutch character. Perhaps from centuries of having to control the sea and great rivers from drowning the country. Merely to exist in Holland requires a degree of control freakiness.

Along many of the roads are miles and miles of closely planted trees. They are mature and beautiful, but not ancient. Most I would guess to have been planted after the war. They are close to each other and to the road. Dangerously so by safety-obsessed Australian standards. A would-be suicide would be spoiled for choice of trees to run into at speed. Many of them are surprisingly straight oak tree, presumably a different sort from the elbowed and twisted English variety. There are also great avenues of beech and lime. Farming on dark, rich soil is as intensive as it is on the reclaimed land of the polders.

### **Wise Queen Wilhelmina**

We eventually headed for the beautifully symmetrical Baroque Palace, *Het Loo* (The Woods). Built between 1684 and 1686 for William III and Mary II of England. It was the residence of the House of Orange-Nassau from the 17th century until the death of Queen Wilhelmina in 1962. She bequeathed it to the nation with the stipulation that it be returned to the family should the monarchy ever be abolished. It is now a state museum open to the general public. We wandered around its lovely surroundings, but did not go in, daunted by its size and thwarted by limited time.

## **(144) "This and That" - 5 June 2016**

We were in Holland for most of last week. Although much travelled, it is the first time that I have ever had to drive on the right hand side of the road. Most disorientating. Like being a Christian in modern day Britain.

### **Cold Calvinism and red light districts**

We spent a day wandering canalled and fascinating Amsterdam. Sadly its two greatest churches, the Nieuwe Kerk and the Oude Kerk, are no longer used as places of regular worship. Too few believers. So neither of them emanate any prayer-warmth. Perhaps the Reformation chilled them into so cold a Calvinism that their present day deadness can be seen as inevitable.

There is life and warmth of a rather different sort around the Oude Kerk. It is in the red light district. Small glass-fronted cells contain not pious hermits, but cold-eyed, cash-hungry prostitutes. The god Mammon has replaced the Blessed Trinity. A bronze statue named *Belle* honours all the world's prostitutes. Like the priest and Levite we passed by on the other side of the street..

The glass fronted cubicles of the prostitutes reminded us of the glass doored mausoleums in the great cemetery of Punta Arenas in Chile. There we did not pass by on the other side of the street. We lingered. Extravagantly decorated and flower-bedecked coffins symbolise love and hope and faith. The skimpily decked bodies of whores represent love's absence and the worship of Mammon.

### **Beguinages**

Eventually we stumbled upon a warmer form of Christianity. Looking for '*The English Church*' we wandered into a peaceful, grassed and ancient courtyard. Elegant eighteenth century facades disguised houses dating from the middle ages. Called *The Begijnhof* this is one of the oldest inner courts in Amsterdam. Originally it housed *beguines*.

In Europe during the 12th century, groups of unmarried women chose to live communal lives, but less rigorous and constricted than in a nunnery. Hence the emergence of '*beguinages*'. Sometimes just a single house containing several women or *beguines* these, more usually were whole courtyards of houses, walled with gates closed at night. They often contained a church and infirmary. The one we visited was a '*court beguinage*', in Dutch a *begijnhof*.

*Beguines* were not nuns. They took no vows and were free to return to the world and get married if they chose. Nor did they renounce their property. Those without means supported themselves by manual labour or teaching. The wealthier kept servants. All were required to serve a form of novitiate. For this they lived with 'the Grand Mistress' of their cloister. Thereafter they usually kept a home of their own. They were bound to their fellow *beguines* by similar goals in life, kindred pursuits and common worship.

### **A clandestine church**

In 1578 Amsterdam came under Calvinist rule. The *Begijnhof* was the only Roman Catholic institution allowed to remain in existence. Probably because the houses were the *beguines*' private property. But their fine chapel was closed. It lay empty for about thirty years and then was given to the English Presbyterians. It is now an active English Reformed Church. Sadly it was locked when we visited it.

Opposite, a few metres away, was an open chapel. We entered. The rosary was being chanted by a lady with a singsong, Filipino accent. A dozen women were worshipping with her. Banks of flickering devotional candles hinted at a steady stream of devout visitors. We sat there quietly at peace until the end. Our thoughts on Katie Morris and Robyn Lines, both recently deceased and lovely persons.

This chapel is dedicated to Saints John and Ursula, the patron saints of *The Begijnhof*. In 1671 two homes opposite the confiscated Church were converted into this 'clandestine church'. After the Reformation such churches were sometimes permitted by officialdom for religious minorities. So long as they were discreet, and well away from the public eye. The first stirrings of religious toleration in an intolerant age. Our favourite spot in Amsterdam

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