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BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE (December 2016)



THE CATACOMB CHURCH - COOBER PEDY (Article 170 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 **December 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>

(172) “This and That” - 18 December 2016 (Crossing Australia 9)

We arrived mid-morning at *Port Augusta*, 120 easy miles south of *Woomera*. A significant moment. We had crossed the continent from the Timor Sea to the south coast's Spencer Gulf. To acknowledge the achievement we dipped a toe into the Gulf's cold waters.

We then phoned *Wilpena Pound* to book accommodation for two nights. My son had suggested *Wilpena* as a diversion worth making. No accommodation was available, so we booked a hotel in *Hawker*, 5 miles south of the *Pound*.

A stroll around *Port Augusta* revealed sufficient attractive, stone, colonial buildings to lift the place above the featureless modernity of so many Australian towns. For an annual rainfall of 8.4 inches the streets and gardens were well treed and lovely. Carolled by Australia's musical magpies we ate a chicken roll under a huge gum tree, stocked up on a few essentials and headed north to the Flinders Ranges.

The Pichi Richi Railway

The Flinders Ranges Way, from *Port Augusta* to *Quorn*, was a delight after all those hundreds of miles of flat semi-desert driving. The road twisted and turned its way to an altitude of a thousand feet, meeting, parting and crossing a railway track that climbed with us. This is the *Pichi Richi Railway*. The region was once a centre for the production of pituri, a mixture of leaves and ash chewed as a stimulant by Aborigines, hence the delightful name *Pichi Richi*.

Quorn has a population under 2000, with a surprising number of substantial and rather lovely buildings. It seemed attractive enough for us to stop for a nibble and to look over its fine railway station. The town came into being in 1878, named after *Quorndon* in Leicestershire. By 1917 it had become the most significant rail crossroads in South Australia. All north-south and east-west rail traffic passed through it and the town boomed, hence all its fine old buildings. As Australia's States began at last to standardize their rail track gauges, *Quorn* became a casualty. In the 1930's the renewed east-west line bypassed the town. In the 1950's the north-south line likewise. In the 1980's the line was closed completely.

All was not lost. There is now the enterprising *Pichi Richi Railway Preservation Society*. This volunteer organisation has a fully restored fleet of South Australian Railways, Commonwealth Railways and Western Australian Government Railways steam and diesel locomotives, as well as passenger and freight rolling stock. Tourists love it.

From *Quorn* we headed for *Hawker* where we settled ourselves into comfortable rooms and then went for a short walk. Storm clouds that had been following us were gathering and soon great drops of rain caused us to scuttle back. Though not before a significant discovery.

The Sturt Desert Pea

One of the minor disappointments of our long trip had been no sighting of the *Sturt Desert Pea*. Neither of us had ever seen this striking plant. It occurs in the arid regions of every Australian State except Victoria, where we used to live. My son on his way to meet us in *Darwin* had seen them, but we had not. To our delight we found some growing in a tub outside the *Hawker* art gallery. I had imagined the flowers to be as delicate as those of most other legumes. Not at all. They are large and fleshily, flashy. A brilliant blood red with a strange, shiny black boss. Lovely.

Their seeds have a hard, protective coat that makes them difficult to germinate in gardens. They need to be sand-papered or placed in not quite boiling water and left to soak overnight if they are to germinate. Once they have done so they quickly send down a deep taproot and have to be transplanted very soon after germination. Once established they require little and infrequent watering, and can withstand extreme heat and sunshine, as well as light frosts.

The plant is far from endangered, but Australia is so over regulated you would think it was

governed from Brussels, not Canberra. It is illegal to collect specimens of the *Sturt Desert Pea* from Crown land without a permit. From private land you need the landowner's written consent.

Australian Humour

I have a painting on my study wall of the explorer Sturt having a pee in the desert. It's title '*Sturt Desert Pea*'.

(171) "This and That" - 11 December 2016 (Crossing Australia 7)

Germany's V1 bombs and V2 rockets in World War II provoked Britain into rocket development herself. A large and sparsely populated corridor of land to test rockets was needed. They turned to Australia.

On to Woomera

So was born the *Anglo-Australian Joint Project*, a Commonwealth weapons design and test programme established in 1946. Huge tracts of land were allocated for rocket and weapons testing in both South and Western Australia. In South Australia the area chosen was appropriately named after an Aboriginal spear-throwing device, the *Woomera*. A crude but effective extension to the human arm that enables a thrown spear to travel at a greater speed. The *Woomera Range Complex* is nowadays a defence systems testing range of about 47,000 square miles, roughly the size of England.

It was to *Woomera Village* we headed from *Coober Pedy*. The terrain we passed through was more like barren steppe land than desert. Sparse of vegetation except for low, grey salt-bushes. Signs along the road informed us that we were passing though a prohibited area and that under defence force regulations travellers are not permitted to deviate. There was little to entice us to do so.

Atomic bombs

The most notorious use to which this prohibited area was ever put was the testing of nuclear weapons. Highly secretive in the nineteen fifties, the tests took place primarily at *Maralinga*. From *Woomera Village* this is 320 miles as the crow flies and 650 miles by road.

Since those less than halcyon or enlightened days, millions and millions of dollars have been spent on decontamination and clean-up attempts. First in 1967 and then in 2000. The Australian Government paid compensation of \$13.5 million to returning local aboriginal people in 1994.

We arrived at the *Woomera Village* as darkness fell. It seemed an odd place. Even in the gloom we divined it to be a military establishment, not an ordinary Australian small town. Ordered, regimented, closed and uptight looking. After a quick drive round we found our way to *Woomera Traveller's Village and Caravan Park*, where we had booked ahead. This is reasonably priced, a mere \$95 for the two of us in an en-suite room, part of an unlovely block that was once an officers mess and barracks. Less than luxurious it was more than adequate.

Pizza and Guinness

Nearby was the *Cudgee Bar* constructed from what in the gloom appeared to be a shipping container. Cosy and cheerful inside it had a handful of welcoming habitues. Umbrella shaded tables outside promised warmer weather than we experienced while there. Another container-like building was a Pizza restaurant. Its amiable chef, glad for a pair of customers before closing on none, gave us the finest of pizzas, laden with a pleasing profusion of delicacies. My portion, washed down with a Guinness and now recollected on Pillee hill, still smile-creases my face and waters my mouth.

Woomera Village, is 305 miles north of Adelaide. At the height of its life as a base for the *Anglo-Australian Joint Project* it had a population of thousands. Today, a Defence owned and operated facility that includes the *RAAF Woomera Aerodrome*, 4 miles north, which is not open to the public, its population is a mere 136 permanent residents. The number of actual residents ebbs and flows with the passage in and out of personnel taking part in a range of military trials and activities.

Aerospace and Missile Park

The main attraction for tourists is *The National Aerospace and Missile Park* in the village centre. It features missiles and rockets developed and tested at *Woomera* over the last 60 years, as well as aircraft used in trials there. We walked all round this before we left for *Port Augusta* in the morning. Next door is a museum featuring a range of artifacts and displays that demonstrate the activities and people who lived and worked at *Woomera* in the early years. This is located in one of four former churches that existed in a more populous *Woomera*. I hate to see churches used for purposes other than that for which they were built.

(170) “This and That” - 4 December 2016

(Crossing Australia 7)

Having dallied reverently around Australia’s navel (Uluru), we returned to Erldunda in the dark. Wary of straying cattle and witless kangaroos we encountered none.

Old man salt bush

The next morning we headed for South Australia. There the landscape began to give way to salt bush scrub. The many varieties of this grey, hardy plant were once considered as good for little or nothing. Nowadays the variety ‘Old Man Saltbush’ (*Atriplex nummularia*) is more favourably regarded. Thick leaved and hardy it is well adapted to saline soils and arid conditions, its dust-like pollen spread by the wind. Although difficult to cultivate and establish, it has been exported to marginal areas all over the world. Domestic animals can subsist on it. Enterprising Australian farmers market ‘saltbush lamb’ as a particular delicacy.

The country through which we sped is part of the million plus square kilometre Lake Eyre Basin (the size of France, Germany and Italy combined). It includes the Tirari, Strzelecki and Sturt Stony Deserts and is the southern hemisphere's largest source of airborne dust. Lake Eyre itself is 52 feet below sea level. Intermittently flowing rivers wend their way towards the lake, to flood it only in very wet years. Whereupon there’s a brief burgeoning of life. Long-dormant marine creatures rise from their near death and large flocks of waterfowl arrive to feed and breed while the waters last.

The longest fence in the world

Outside Coober Pedy we crossed the longest fence in the world. The Dingo Fence stretches 3,488 miles from the north Darling Downs in Queensland to the coastal cliffs of the Nullabor Plain in South Australia. Completed in 1885 its purpose was to keep dingoes out of the relatively fertile south-eastern part of the continent where they had largely been exterminated, and to protect the sheep flocks of southern Queensland. It is still maintained and reasonably effective. Donald Trump please note, however, that feral camels smash it down regularly and kangaroos, rabbits and emus increase when not preyed upon. They then compete with livestock for fodder. Solve one problem to create another.

The small mining town of Coober Pedy is set in a harsh desert landscape and littered with dazzling white slag heaps. Known as “*the Opal capital of the world*” we thought it unlovely. The

first opal was discovered in 1915. By 1999 there were more than 250,000 mine shaft entrances. Large scale mining was discouraged and so small time enthusiasts flooded in to acquire small, 165-square-foot claims. A lovely old doctor in my last Australian parish spent most of his holidays in Coober Pedy digging his claim for opals.

The town is notable for underground residences called “dugouts”. A three-bedroom “dugout” with lounge, kitchen, and bathroom is excavated from hillside sandstone for much the same cost as a similar sized house on the surface. Underground dwellings remain at a constant temperature and don’t need air conditioning during the harsh summers when outside temperatures often exceed 40 °C. About sixty five percent of town residents live underground.

Our approach to Coober Pedy was like encountering an encamped medieval army. An array of brilliant white conical “tents” began to appear in the distance. They turned out to be the tiny conical slag heaps of innumerable small mines.

After a brief walk round we visited the underground Anglican Church, next door to which was an underground five-bedroom Rectory. The church was lovely with an informative minder who answered our questions and pointed out interesting features. We learned that the priest had just renewed his contract and that his parish stretched to the Northern Territory and Western Australian borders. The congregation consists of about thirty, including children.

Hypodermic needle proboscises

We then visited the Serbian Orthodox church carved down deep into the sandstone. It was most worshipful and beautiful. Unlike in the Anglican church there were no plastic chairs, or even pews. They must stand to worship.

We were driven from our picnic lunch outside by voracious mosquitoes with hypodermic needle proboscises.

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