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BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE (July 2018)



GRANTCHESTER PARISH CHURCH

see 251 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 **July 2018** 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>

(254) “This and That” - 29 July 2018

July’s all but gone. So too the cuckoo, *‘that simple bird that thinks two notes a song.’*

Two notes and one note

Simple or not, the cuckoo’s two notes are a song. For the first time in our five years here, the Vicarage was visited by one in June. For about half an hour the garden resounded with its song. Beautiful.

Henry Purcell, England’s finest composer, was no simpleton. Yet he wrote a fantasia on just one note. That too is beautiful. Written for five viols, one of them, the tenor, plays the same note throughout the piece. The other four weave wonders all around it. The Vicarage thrushes and blackbirds did that for the cuckoo.

It is thought that Purcell had a friend who couldn’t play the viol, but wanted to participate in a performance. Hence a fantasia on one note.

Much ado about noting

In his autobiography Bede Griffith’s writes:

One day during my last term at school I walked out alone in the evening and heard the birds singing in that full chorus of song, which can only be heard at that time of the year at dawn or at sunset. I remember now the shock of surprise with which the sound broke on my ears. It seemed to me that I had never heard the birds singing before and I wondered whether they sang like this all year round and I had never noticed it. As I walked I came upon some hawthorn trees in full bloom and again I thought that I had never seen such a sight or experienced such sweetness before. If I had been brought suddenly among the trees of the Garden of Paradise and heard a choir of angels singing I could not have been more surprised. I came then to where the sun was setting over the playing fields. A lark rose suddenly from the ground beside the tree where I was standing and poured out its song above my head, and then sank still singing to rest. Everything then grew still as the sunset faded and the veil of dusk began to cover the earth. I remember now the feeling of awe which came over me. I felt inclined to kneel on the ground, as though I had been standing in the presence of an angel; and I hardly dared to look on the face of the sky, because it seemed as though it was but a veil before the face of God.

In Elizabethan English the word “nothing” was pronounced as “noting” and so the phrase “Much ado about nothing” could just as well be “Much ado about noting”. That is what spiritual awareness is about. Noting. Noticing what merely is, for what in reality it really, really is. As with Bede Griffith in the passage above.

My naïve, simplistic theory of art derives from experiences like Griffiths. The best art, it seems to me, draws aside or twitches the veil between the ordinary and the extraordinary, the human and the divine, to reveal the “otherness” of everything. Reality as suffused with divinity. Hence the value of music, poetry and art in devotional life.

An interesting man Bede Griffith. Tutored by C S Lewis at Oxford they were lifelong correspondents and friends. By way of Anglicanism he turned to Roman Catholicism and became a Benedictine monk and then priest. He moved to India, lived in and founded ashrams and became a respected yogi and an expert on Hinduism. He was a leader in the promotion of dialogue between the two faiths.

Alleluia

There's a new Alan Bennett play at the *Bridge Theatre*. It's set in a geriatric ward. I've spent a fair amount of time in those. Attempting to shine the Gospel's light in short, pithy services. Am I destined to end my days in one?

Bennet's play, *Alleluia*, is sure to be a blend of poignancy, sharp political comment and humour. He once characterised human existence as *That awkward gap between the cradle and the grave*, and elsewhere writes: *In England age wipes the slate clean. If you live to be 90 in England and can still eat a boiled egg they think you deserve the Nobel Prize.*

(253) "This and That" - 22 July 2018

To believe in God is becoming unusual. To acknowledge belief in God by churchgoing downright kinky.

Kinky

Kinky! It comes from the Dutch for a short, twist, or curl in a rope that winds tightly back on itself. My hosepipe, much in use this summer, develops kinks all too readily. To be kinky is also to be eccentric, unconventional or peculiar.

Since the mid twentieth century it bears particular reference to unconventional sexual behaviour. This has been wittily contrasted with more acceptable eroticism thus: *Erotic is when you do something sensitive and imaginative with a feather. Kinky is when you use the whole chicken.*

The dull parsonic drone

To go to church is to step out and away from the ordinary and hum drum. From reality as framed by an electronic screen and defined by overpaid commentators, to enter instead peace perfect peace. To be beyond the reach of platitudinous tweets, and the incessant, insistent fatuities of whatsapp, facebook and instagram. It is to revel in the murmurous, mesmerising beatitude of corporate prayer saying and dry parsonic droning. To sing music, not merely listen to it. It's to hear an ancient story told, re-enacted and retold, that recalls timeless truths: the primacy of love, the beauty of forgiveness, the balm of compassion the joy of gratitude, and the love of God manifest in the intriguing life, death and resurrection of the radical Jesus of Nazareth.

If worship is boring then boredom's a blessing. I love going to church. There's time to think, time to relax, time to take stock, time to be. There's time for God. Memories, both happy and sad surface. A hymn last heard at a parent's or spouse's funeral evokes cathartic tears. The bonus of old architecture and a good organist gladdens the heart. Sermons challenge and stimulate or send the mind wandering peacefully in pastures green.

Believers reluctant to go to church know not what they miss. Deny themselves the chance to grow into the practice. It's an acquired taste that becomes a deep thirst. Churchgoing has little to do with piety. It's simply being with God and neighbour in a loving context. Beautiful.

Happy to be a burden

"I feel so useless" say elderly housebound people. "I hate being a burden to my loved ones."

The best response to such sentiments is not a flirtation with euthanasia. It is to realise that eliciting love in fellow human beings is more useful and beneficial to them than almost anything else we can give them. To be a loving carer of someone infirm, elderly or terminally ill is noble and lovely. To elicit that love, by being infirm, elderly or terminally ill, is to be supremely useful.

Such thoughts came to mind on reading the following short poem by W H Davies:

Beggar's Song

Good people keep their holy day,
They rest from labour on a Sunday;
But we keep holy every day,
And rest from Monday until Monday.

And yet the noblest work on earth
Is done when beggars do their part:
They work, dear ladies, on the soft
And tender feelings in your heart.

Beggars too, by encouraging us to generosity, can be more a source of grace than annoyance.

Wake up

On Monday we held our final adult Confirmation Class. They have been a great joy. Four thoughtful, voluble, entertaining and thoroughly fine young women (certainly young compared to me). Every session overran its hour. Never were they anything but stimulating. I looked forward to them. It has not always been so. I once had to give several catch-up classes to a lad who had missed some through illness. It was winter and the room was warm. During one session I woke up to hear him crying, "Wake up Father, wake up. You're asleep."

(252) "This and That" - 15 July 2018

Of all the people I've visited as a priest, the creepiest was a man soon to be convicted of paedophilia. The most tragic: a psychotic caught up in mad occultism, soon to take her own life. The oddest: an obese, transgender would-be priest, soon to be ambulated off the street to a maternity home, loudly claiming to be pregnant. The loveliest:they're too innumerable even to begin to catalogue.

Visits from the parson

Casual visiting by the clergy is almost a thing of the past. Parsons these days are taught to be wary of being compromised. Not without reason. They also claim to be too busy. With far less reason. Teams of 'pastoral visitors' are gathered and trained to fill the gap. They do an excellent job. Yet most church folk still prefer a visit from the Vicar, even if infrequently. It's good to know your clergy care, and in conversation to find out a little about them.

Writing this weekly article is conversational. It doesn't take much perspicacity to garner from between the lines the sort of a priest you have. There's material enough to engage, or to take issue with, when and if I do eventually visit or am encountered round and about.

Selling her false teeth

Diana and I are giving the poems of R S Thomas a break. Our daily verse comes now from an anthology of 'Georgian' Poets. The following, by W.H. Davies, brings to mind some of the old biddies I've visited over the years.

My Old Acquaintance

*Working her toothless gums till her sharp chin
Could almost reach her sharper nose,
These are the words my old acquaintance said:
"I have four children, all alive and well;*

*My eldest girl was seventy years in March,
 And though when she was born her body was
 Covered all over with black hair, and long
 Which when I saw at first made me cry out,
 'Take it away, it is a monkey - ugh!'
 Yet she's as smooth and fair as any, now.
 And I, who sit for hours in this green space
 That has seven currents of good air, and pray
 At night to Jesus and his Mother, live
 In hopes to reach my ninetieth year in June.
 But ere it pleases God to take my soul,
 I'll sell my fine false teeth, which cost five pounds,
 Preserved in water now for twenty years,
 For well I know those girls will fight for them
 As soon as I am near my death; before
 My skin's too cold to feel the feet of flies.
 God bless you and good day - I wish you well.
 For me, I cannot relish food, or sleep
 Till God sees fit to hold the Kaiser fast,
 Stabbed, shot, or hanged - and his black soul
 Sent into hell, to bubble, burn and squeal;
 Think of the price of fish - and look at bacon!"*

We loved “before my skin’s too cold to feel the feet of flies.” And the non sequitur price of fish and bacon after so robust a damning of the Kaiser.

The hobo poet

Davies was born in 1871 in South Wales. He was three when his father died. A wild lad, brought up by his grandparents and convicted of shop-lifting at the age of fifteen. From his early twenties he worked his way back and forth across the Atlantic at least seven times. In the USA, a hobo and drifter, he begged, took seasonal work and in winter arranged periods in warm gaols. Back home he was a tramp.

Jumping a train on his way to the Klondike goldfields in 1899 he slipped. His foot was crushed, requiring amputation. This he says knocked a lot of the wildness out of him.

Much of his early poetry was composed mentally in doss houses to be written down only after other inmates were asleep. It contributes to their apparent simplicity and directness. His most famous poem is “*Leisure*”

*What is this life if, full of care,
 We have no time to stand and stare.....*

Indeed. Especially if struggling through it on a wooden leg.

(251) “This and That” - 8 July 2018

Last week in Cambridge graduation ceremonies abounded. Diana and I were there, celebrating grandson Thomas’ fourth birthday. Also, on my part, officiating at St Catharine’s College *Eve of Graduation Evensong*.

Bald, desiccated and doomed

What a jubilant Evensong. What a choir. *Stanford in A* for the Mag and Nunc. The anthem:

Parry's *I was glad when they said unto me: we will go into the house of the Lord*. My part was minimal, my enjoyment huge. I too was glad to be in that fine house of the Lord that beamed with happy achievement and resonated glorious music.

My only creative part in the service was a few words of welcome. Even for these my son provided me with the bare bones of a witticism: "*Welcome to this Eve of Graduation Evensong. As you anticipate with eagerness the future that lies before you, behold before your eyes your poor Chaplain's sad future: ME! His ancient, bald, desiccated, doomed father*".

I have no memory of my own graduation ceremony. I doubt I even attended it. How euphonious though the title of my alma mater: *The University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland*. For Africa to lose the four syllable music of *Nyasaland* for the poor, three syllable replacement *Malawi* is an impoverishment.

Revisiting the past

Our recent Scottish trip ended with a couple of nights in the Vicarage at Invergowrie, a village just outside Dundee. For me a homecoming. Eighteen years previously Margaret (my first wife) and I, with our two youngest children, Elizabeth and Rachel, lived there for three months.

It was a parish swap. We took over the local priest's duties, house and car, he ours, in Australia. We loved it, he loved it. So much so, I vowed that should ever I return to Britain it would be to Scotland. That I've ended up almost as far from there as possible is an example of life's sweet unpredictability. So many roads not taken. Thank heavens.

It is good to revisit happy places. All Saints Church, Invergowrie is as lovely as I remembered it. The Vicarage likewise. New to me on this visit, though the same, were the priest and his wife. We had never met. As our plane landed at Edinburgh eighteen years ago, they and their family were taking off for Australia. We knew them to be a fine pair from the testimony of our Australian parishioners though.

It was good to meet them in the flesh at last. A fine pair indeed. Gentle, intelligent, thoughtful and kind Christians. Ashley, a full time teacher now, looks after the small parish in his spare time. We talked much, visited Ashley's mother and sister in nearby Kincaple and visited old haunts and new. At Kellie Castle we bought some raspberry canes which are doing well in sub-tropical Boldre. A lovely visit. It took us 11 hours to drive 508 miles home.

In Grantchester in Grantchester

While in Cambridge last week we walked, as is our wont, to Grantchester. There, in the lovely church, we said matins together, seated in the choir pews.

We then read out loud all of Rupert Brooke's "*The Old Vicarage, Grantchester*". Its light-heartedness unable fully to overcome the poet's aching nostalgia for England, while in Germany. Last time we were there and also read the poem through, the lilacs that begin it were in bloom in the village gardens. This time, in the hedgerows on the walk over, there blew 'unkempt' the 'English unofficial rose', the dog rose. Contrasted in the poem with the Continents tulips *growing as they're told*. And although now no longer

*....do the elm-clumps greatly stand
Still guardians of that holy land....*

Yet still, overspreading the path on our way,

*The chestnuts shade, in reverend dream,
The yet unacademic stream.*

In Australia we had a fine chestnut tree in our garden. Cockatoos, left-footed birds, loved its unripe nuts. They always stood on their right foot to hold with and eat the nuts from, their left.

The penalty shoot out

I have just watched England's penalty shoot out win against Columbia. It means all of Pilley and Boldre, instead of attending our fete, will be watching the match against Sweden. A pity. Yet I'm still pleased they won.

(250) "This and That" - 1 July 2018

It is generally accepted that the worst poet in English is Dundee's William McGonagall. Having myself lived near Dundee for three happy months, he's an old neighbourhood friend. Though not exemplar.

The second worst poet in English

The columnist Anthony Daniels claims the second worst poet in English to be Bournemouth's Cumberland Clark. Just down the road again. So another old neighbourhood friend. Clark extols Bournemouth as risibly as does McGonagall, Dundee:

Do you know the West Overcliff Drive?
If you don't, there's no doubt you ought to.
With interest always alive,
It's a place everyone should be brought to.

And:

The boarding houses met with in this splendid seaside town,
Are mainly very excellent, deserving their renown.
The residents form usually congenial society,
Although among so many you meet types in great variety.

He seems to have been a learned and estimable fellow, well read and knowledgeable about English literature. No poet though. In 1941, at the age of eighty, he was killed in his flat in an air raid.

A local craftsman

I myself am a mere versifier not a poet. A craftsman not an artist. A purveyor of light verse bagatelles. Mercifully then, I can't qualify as the third worst poet in English.

Versatile versifiers can versify anything. A society to which C S Lewis once belonged kept all its minutes in rhyming couplets.

Asked to write something for our Fete Programme I disdained yet another article to craft instead the following. To be at all effective it's read out loud, with a beer to hand.

The St John's and Pilley Village Pas de Deux

Toe to toe and eye to eye,
St John's and Pilley in July
Embrace each other on a date
At the Church and Village Fete.
With zing and zest, perzzaz and pep,
Hand in hand and well in step,
Every year, come what may,
We dance a pas de deux all day.

Sip Pimms together with good cheer,
Or like the Vicar guzzle beer

And relish well-charred burger meat,
Until contented and replete,
We grow so generous and kind
We'll buy the first thing we can find
Upon the many well stocked stalls.
Stuff that once we're home, appals,

And so return to next year's fete
For other fools to take as bait.
Backwards forwards, there and back
Year by year moves bric a brac.
But also there is much to please:
Jams and bottles, cakes and teas.
Plants, ice creams and books and games,
And pooches judged by Mr James

Then after ambling all around
We park ourselves upon the ground,
To watch poor Judy, Punch's wife,
Embroided in mock domestic strife.
And William Gilpin children shine
As round the Maypole they entwine
Coloured ribbons as they prance
Frolic, caper, romp and dance.

Then an end that few ignore,
The calling of our monster Draw
Thirty prizes lost or won,
Whereupon our Fete is done.
Once more with zing, perzazz and pep
Hand in hand and well in step,
We've joined together, come what may,
To dance a pas de deux all day.

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