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BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE (March 2020)



New born lamb - Warborne Farm - New Forest

*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 **March 2020** 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>

(341) “This and That” - 29 March 2020

Nero certainly killed and persecuted Christians, but he didn't fiddle while Rome burned. The fiddle had not then been invented. This eases my conscience. Because these weekly articles are not going to be dolefully dominated by the dread coronavirus. Their scope will remain as broad, serendipitous, and wayward as usual. I shall continue fiddling furiously in defiance of dismal doom-mongering.

Bollocks

To those of us with faith the faithless can sometimes seem amusing. Such as their assumption of a faintly furtive and apologetic air whenever they find themselves admitting to doing or feeling anything remotely religious.

A delightful woman recently admitted to me that she reads *The Bridge*. “For community news not religious” she quickly added. She also confessed to listening to *Thought for the Day*, “for moral, not religious wisdom” she insisted.

She went on to tell me that when her father died she didn't lose him for ages. He often returned to her vividly and regularly in dreams, enjoyably so. In one dream the old fellow appeared to her in a sort of threadbare angel-suit and said: “We always thought it was a load of bollocks, but it isn't you know!”

This observation from the land of Nod didn't convince her of life beyond the grave, she hastened to add, though it did comfort her. When her mother died and did not turn up in her dreams with the same frequency and intensity she was disappointed.

It's a good funeral story that. The word ‘bollocks’ can be a good word too. I've only once dared use it in a sermon, and that was at a funeral. It sent a ripple of surprise and interest through a congregation expecting no more than platitudinous, pie-in-the-sky, parsonic pap. A preacher needs carefully to gauge his congregation before daring to use such a word.

Sooner jigsaws than toilet rolls

As the nation begins to hunker down it might be more profitable to stock up on jigsaws than toilet rolls. They were invented rudimentarily in 1760 by a cartographer called John Spilsbury. He pasted maps onto sheets of wood and then, using a marquetry saw, cut out each country to create the first puzzles. He called them “dissected maps” and they were used educationally. He created these puzzles on eight themes: the World, Europe, Asia, Africa, America, England and Wales, Ireland, and Scotland.

They came to be called jigsaws in the 1880's. Oddly, because they are made not with a jigsaw but a fretsaw.

It was in the Great Depression that they blossomed into wide popularity as a cheap, long-lasting, recyclable form of entertainment. This should render them invaluable today as the dread virus restricts normal life ever more and more. A welcome relief from ubiquitous, all consuming, electronic, thumb-numbing tiny screens.

No queueing to visit the jigsaw doctor

There are hugely complicated jigsaws available these days. Three dimensional ones for example and specimens that can be enjoyed and completed on a computer, negating one of their chief attractions. The largest conventional jigsaw commercially available depicts a collage of animals. About 150 square feet in area it is made up of 52,110 pieces. Its cost, as I write, nearly £300.

To come to the end of a large, and complicated jigsaw only to discover a piece missing is as horrendous as coming to the end of one's life only to find the key to the pearly gates missing. No cause for despair in either case though. There's always Jesus to wake up St Peter with the key. At no charge, Jesus having met the cost. And there's the Jigsaw Doctor for the puzzle. He'll recreate any missing piece. At a price starting at £10.99. (www.jigsawdoctor.com).

A daily poem

Diana and I read a randomly chosen poem each day after matins to our delight or disgust, depending on the choice. I send a copy to our next door neighbour, usually with a single sentence comment. We seem to agree on what delights and disgusts. She's a discriminating lady. If you'd like to join us, it's easy to add a name to the list.

(340) "This and That" - 22 March 2020

Eek, aargh, ouch. Gripe, grumble, groan. I'm disturbed, disorientated discombobulated. No public worship in the Church of England. Sunday's *raison d'être* stolen from me. No church-filled celebration and trumpeting of the Resurrection on Easter Day. A palmless and donkeyless Palm Sunday. No mothers, posies or simnel came on Mothering Sunday. Eek, aargh, ouch. Gripe, grumble, groan.

Ambush at the merry board

For months, no public worship likely. It might be the right decision, a wise decision, the only decision, but Sunday's *raison d'être* is my own *raison d'être*.

I turn for solace to music and poetry. To the utterly inexplicable, mysterious beauty of the adagio from a Haydn piano trio. It reassures me of God's presence in my life and world. To a poem dredged from the depths of memory that reminds me that this is not the first time that Jesus has been denied the tenancy of a Sunday altar. That he remains about us and with us even if unregarded, unconsecrated, unbidden.

.....*In field, in village, and in town
He hides an unregarded head;*

*Waits in the corn-lands far and near,
Bright in His sun, dark in His frost,
Sweet in the vine, ripe in the ear—
Lonely unconsecrated Host.*

*In ambush at the merry board
The Victim lurks unsacrificed;
The mill conceals the harvest's Lord,
The wine-press holds the unbidden Christ.*

Bold Boldreites

Perhaps we should meet for worship outside. I could declaim, proclaim, praise, absolve and intercede from the top of St John's tower. There would be a lichened pulpit parapet to thump, and tombs and tombstones far below to support Boldre's bold, self-isolating worshippers.

St John's has offered local folk solace and inspiration for a thousand years. It will continue to do so in the face of this insidiously vile virus. Prayers will continue to be prayed there by your priest at all service times.

Incantations, prayers and incense

Nor should we despair. Humankind will rise to the occasion. I was friendly with a gerontologist in one of my Australian parishes, a bright and lovely Hindu. His wife and family were vibrant, highly educated Christian churchgoers.

When they built and moved into a new house I was asked to give it a Christian blessing. This I happily did, with holy smoke and holy water galore. There followed a Hindu blessing. It entailed the lighting of a fire by a Hare Krishna priest in the adjoining garage. There were incantations, prayers and incense of a far eastern rather than middle eastern aroma. Lovely.

I asked him once if he found dealing with people of a great age depressing. “Most emphatically not,” he replied. Most of those he dealt with, he went on, had lived through difficult and even terrible times. Many were immigrants or refugees from central Europe after the Second World War. Others, Australians by birth, had been combatants in the War, or were members of families supporting and sacrificing for the war effort while dreading news of fatalities.

It’s good to be human

Adversity had helped render them stoical, filled them with fortitude and depth of character and made many of them fascinating and inspiring to know. He went on to wonder if he’d be able to say the same of subsequent generations as they weathered into old age, softened into selfishness by ever increasing affluence. Might they not be fearful, querulous and demandingly self-obsessive?

Any adversity imposed by the present viral crisis could well be to our good then. Human beings are adaptable. We’ll soon learn to cope with shortages, restrictions and limitations to our freedom. Fear, complaining and hoarding, even at this early stage, are far from universal. Locally they’re more than offset by astonishingly generous compassion and care for the elderly, isolated and vulnerable in so many good folk round and about. It’s good to be human.

(339) “This and That” - 15 March 2020

We betray our origin and background unwittingly, often simply by how we speak.

Publicly or privately educated

Listen carefully to my accent and there’s an occasional “Ja” instead of “Yes”. Evidence of twenty six years as a school boy and young adult in Rhodesia and then Zimbabwe. The word “pass” used sometimes as if to rhyme with “ass”, betrays my birth and first six years of life in Staffordshire, as well as my admired father’s mild Derbyshire accent. Twenty eight years in Australia are to be detected more by a smattering of robust antipodean adjectives than by accent.

Back in England the choice of hymns for weddings seems as revealing of background as accent. The repertoire of state school educated brides and grooms rarely stretches beyond *Lord of the Dance*, *All things bright and beautiful* and *One more step along the world I go*. That of the privately educated, while a bit wider, is almost always built upon and around *Jerusalem* and *I vow to thee my Country*.

At William Gilpin School assemblies the “songs” the children sing are rarely known to me. Hymns appear out of favour. Ditties are in. Some are good and catchy, others dully didactic. The same can be said of hymns. It would be a pity though if hymns, especially in Church of England schools, were totally abandoned.

Timothy Rice’s galloping galliards

To be real favourites hymns require excellent words as well as a beautiful melody. I dearly love Charles Wesley’s *O Thou who camest from above*. So long as it’s sung to the tune *Hereford* by Samuel Sebastian Wesley, the grandson of Charles. The words make a lovely private prayer as the tune floats in the mind’s ear.

S.S. Wesley was organist of Winchester Cathedral for years. There’s a memorial to him there. He was the co-inventor of what is now the standard concave, radiating organ pedalboard. Up and down one of these the nimble feet of Timothy Rice gallop galliards each Sunday morning.

Lost in the abyss of wonder

Another favourite with both lovely words and tune is *The duteous day now closeth*. The words are by Germany’s most famous hymn writer, Paul Gerhardt (1607-76), translated by Robert Bridges. The two middle of four verses go:

*Now all the heavenly splendour
breaks forth in starlight tender
from myriad worlds unknown;
and man, the marvel seeing,*

*forgets his selfish being,
for joy of beauty not his own.*

*His care he drowneth yonder,
lost in the abyss of wonder;
to heaven his soul doth steal;
this life he disesteemeth,
the day it is that dreameth,
that doth from truth his vision seal.*

How I love it. Likewise its tune *Innsbruck*, used by J S Bach to great effect in his cantatas and passions. It's the tune of a secular Renaissance song composed by Henrich Isaac (1447-1517). Its words are about having to go to a foreign country leaving a loved one behind in Innsbruck.

“I sing the sofa.....”

An utterly unbearable hymn, thanks to its too graphic imagery, is yet by an excellent poet, William Cowper: *There is a fountain filled with blood, drawn from Emmanuel's veins*. Horrible. Three YouTube versions are followed by a long list of appreciative comments from devout evangelicals. One man's meat is another man's *poisson*. Cowper also wrote the lovely *O for a closer walk with God*.

His most acclaimed poem, greatly admired by Jane Austen and Bobby Burns is the 5000 line: *The Task*. It begins with a couple of hundred lines on the origins of the sofa (this being the eponymous 'task' he'd been challenged to undertake), but then he wanders ruminatively on to other things and is especially lovely on the English countryside. I've read though only the first of its 6 books, just 774 lines.

(338) “This and That” - 8 March 2020

On our daily walk, hawthorn bushes begin to unfold glossy, bright, new leaves and the blackthorn blossom.

Bishop's lace

Green, feathery tops of *wild carrot*, (*daucus carota*) push vigorously and healthily through the roadside verge's sodden leaves to gladden our hearts. Also known as *bird's nest* and *bishop's lace*, my favoured name for the plant is *Queen Anne's Lace*. This name, to my surprise, originates in North America to where seeds of the plant were transported with wheat grain and then naturalised, not all that long after colonisation. The name refers either to our own Queen Anne or her great grandmother, Queen Anne of Denmark. The reddish-purple dot, right in the centre of the lacy flower, is taken to represent a blood droplet where the Queen pricked herself with a needle when making the lace. Incidentally as well as probably coincidentally, Saint Anne, the mother of Jesus' mother Mary, is the patron saint of lace makers.

I wish I loved the human Race

Beneath the hedgerows along our daily walk rabbits are frenziedly active. Burrows are being cleaned, widened and deepened, scrapes and scratches proliferate. Also along the way are discarded bottles, tins, fast-food cartons and plastic bags. To parody Professor Sir Walter Alexander Raleigh (1861-1922):

*I wish I loved the Human Race;
I wish I loved its leering face
I wish I liked its tweets and twitters,
And all it stuffs up, fouls and litters,
And when I'm introduced to one,
It's just as well I have no gun.*

On Ash Wednesday Diana, looking like a synthetic daffodil in her high visibility jacket, took along the route of our daily walk a wheelbarrow as her companion, instead of me. With the help of a rake, fork, tongs and sharp eye she gathered up all the litter she could find. Most of it along Burnt House Lane.

The most disturbing book ever read

It is difficult to be optimistic about human nature. Those who insist that humankind is essentially good and getting better are unconvincing. It is not litter louts though that sour optimism into pessimism. They're but footling reminders of a far, far deeper darkness.

I read a review recently by Sir Anthony Beevor of a book I don't think I could bear to read. As most of us will be well aware, Sir Anthony is a hugely distinguished historian, particularly of the Second World War. So he's no stranger to mankind's inhumanity to man. His "*Stalingrad*" and "*Berlin: The Downfall 1945*" reveal the dark side of human nature almost unbearably.

His review, in The Spectator of Christina Lamb's "*Our Bodies Their Battlefield: What War Does to Women*" begins:

I had assumed after 40 years of researching and writing about war in the 20th century, that I was prepared for just about any horror. But Christina Lamb's research, into the mass rape of women and young girls in more recent wars and ethnic cleansing shook me to the core. This is the most powerful and disturbing book I have ever read, and it raises important questions...

I am too squeamish to read such a book. An all too vivid imagination and a substantial review suffice. T S Eliot in *The Four Quartets* might as well be talking of me in his famous phrase *Humankind cannot bear very much reality*.

What gives pause for thought though, given the propensity for appalling evil in humankind, is the ameliorating effect on human character of Christian conversion. Evangelicals are widely deprecated and disdained as naïve, yet their conversions often turn wicked people right round. As in the case of the slaver John Newton, who wrote *Amazing Grace*. Are conversions to atheism or humanism as fruitful? Liberating sometimes certainly - but to rectitude, righteousness and radical love? Rarely I suspect.

Overhead in the Red Lion

A priest, a rabbit and a minister walked into the Red Lion. The rabbit said, "I think I might be a typo."

(337) "This and That" - 1 March 2020

The climax of a good holiday is the return home. To kick off your shoes, don your slippers, turn up the heating, turn on the kettle, scan the post and slip into the regular routines of domestic life is unutterable bliss. Then next morning a scalding hot shower, disgracefully profligate of flow, generates a sense of well being, magnanimity and gratitude sufficient to turn a vicarage into paradise.

Home sweet home

To be happy at home, said Samuel Johnson, is the ultimate result of all ambition, the end to which every enterprise and labour tends, and of which every desire prompts the prosecution. At home, he says, a man shrinks to his natural dimensions, and throws aside the ornaments or disguises, which he feels in privacy to be useless encumbrances.....

In East Finchley Cemetery is the grave of Sir Henry Rowley Bishop, an English composer sixteen years younger than Beethoven, eleven older than Schubert. He is remembered now for only two songs: *Home sweet home* and *Lo, here the gentle lark*, which has a dazzling flute accompaniment. I love them both.

Home sweet home will be familiar to those of us old enough to remember singing around the piano at home, before wireless and television began to displace such domestic pastimes.

Sweetly sentimental, the song became a popular parlour ballad. So redolent is it of hearth and home it was banned from being played in Union Army camps during the American Civil War. It incited desertion.

The words are by John Howard Payne, an American actor and dramatist. Though trite, the universality of their sentiments and a melodic, if sentimental, tune renders the song irresistible. The first verse and chorus are as follows:

*Mid pleasures and palaces though we may roam
Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home
A charm from the skies seems to hallow us there
Which seek thro' the world, is ne'er met elsewhere
Home! Home! Sweet, sweet home!
There's no place like home! There's no place like home!*

Oikophobia

The poet Robert Southey's second marriage took place in St John's Boldre to a Lymington woman called Caroline Bowles. It was he who coined the word *oikophobia*, literally "hatred of home". Southey used the word to describe the wealthy Englishman's desire to leave home to wander wild landscapes, relax in spa towns and view the art and architecture of European cities. An early nineteenth century writer put it like this: *the love of locomotion is so natural to an Englishman that nothing can chain him home, but the absolute impossibility of living abroad.*

In 2004 Roger Scruton, in his book *England and the Need for Nations*, reintroduced the word *oikophobia*, but adapted it to mean the repudiation and denigration of the customs, culture and institutions of one's homeland in preference to those of foreign or alien peoples and nations. So defined, *oikophobia* is all too prevalent among the elites of the western world. Hence a widespread disdain for and repudiation of Christianity is more evident and gleeful in our society than for other faiths. Just because Christianity is foundational to European culture and civilization.

The English are best

As a Christian I love the Church of England while all too aware of and saddened by its faults. So too, as an Englishman, I love England while all too aware of its many failings. This makes me a patriot not a nationalist, an oikophiliac not a xenophobe or oikophobe. I am also glad that Flanders and Swan peaked between 1956 and 1967 and so were able to get away with lyrics they'd be prosecuted for today:

*The English, the English, the English are best
I wouldn't give tuppence for all of the rest.
The rottenest bits of these islands of ours
We've left in the hands of three unfriendly powers*

*Examine the Irishman, Welshman or Scot
You'll find he's a stinker, as likely as not.
The Scotsman is mean, as we're all well aware
And bony and blotchy and covered with hair*

*He eats salty porridge, he works all the day
And he hasn't got bishops to show him the way....*

*The English, the English, the English are best
So up with the English and down with the rest.
It's not that they're wicked or naturally bad
It's knowing they're foreign that makes them so mad!*

Home