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## FROM BEHIND THE STAIRWELL BALUSTRADE

January to June 2025



### **The High Altar, Wells Cathedral**

The Reverend Canon Andrew Neaum retired, with much gratitude and many regrets 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>



## (607) “This and That” - 29 June 2025

*Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade*

In the early nineteen seventies, schools in Rhodesia were conservative. Students were caned for misdemeanours and stood up when “Sir” or “Miss” came into the room. Teachers, as well as students, were required to dress “respectably” and were expected to have short hair, if male.

### **Gap years of fun and frolic**

During my postgraduate teaching diploma year, still blessed with a luxuriant, radiant aureole of blond hair, I was sent for a ten week stint as a trainee teacher, to *Cranborne Boys High School* in a suburb of Salisbury (Harare). On the second day I was summoned to the headmaster’s study and told, in a strong South African accent, “if you are going to teach in this school, Mr Neaum, you are going to have to have your hair cut.” As an unsalaried, bolshie student and so still a free agent, I refused to be shorn and although the university authorities pressured me to comply, I continued to refuse. In the end I was sent to another and more accommodating school, across the racial divide, where I had a good and successful time.

A couple of years later, as a qualified teacher, I turned up in London and was employed as a “supply teacher” in the Borough of Ealing at what seemed to me to be a fairly generous daily rate. The schools in which I attempted to teach, or sometimes merely to mind, were rather less conservative than in Rhodesia and the the students a good deal less respectful. It wasn’t only the children who were difficult though. Staff rooms were often less than welcoming too and sometimes even hostile. Uncouth, colonial “supply teachers” were disdained by many English professional teachers, sometimes with good reason. Many of us were teaching merely to fund a gap year of frolic and fun rather than vocationally.



*Cranborne Boys High School - Harare*



*Wells Cathedral viewed from next door*

### **Nightdresses from Marks and Sparks**

In one Roman Catholic school things proved to be a little different. Although the staff room, as usual, seemed more to disdain than welcome me, one teacher came to sit beside and befriend me. She turned out to be a devout Roman Catholic and I was already committed to attend a selection conference for potential ordinands to the Anglican priesthood. We became good friends, although any long-term or permanent relationship, as it turned out, was doomed on religious grounds. No matter, she helped open me to social life and friends in the England into which I had been born and where I belonged. I had left at the age of six to

return to live there only for nine months, at the age of eleven. She helped half-civilize a wild colonial boy and taught him to understand and appreciate the eccentricities and weirdness of the English, for example, how eleven months of each year were spent thinking about and planning the annual holiday abroad. Her best friend was a diminutive, merry girl from Barnsley called Pam, with a strong Yorkshire accent and a great laugh, I nicknamed her Pamphylia (from the Acts of the Apostles). The



two of them bought nightdresses at Marks and Spencers to wear as long evening dresses at dances. A bunch of us holidayed together most memorably in Corfu.

My friend's surname was Laverock, the Scots word for the sky-soaring, ecstatic-voiced songbird, the Lark and these reminiscences result from an encounter with an anonymous piece of verse last week. I am deeply grateful to my Laverock, even if the last line of the verse does sum up our relationship's destiny:

### **Ode to a Lark, or Laverock**

As I was pacing in the park (or paverock).  
The air was still, when Haverock! (or Hark!)  
Above the shady trees so dark (or daverock),  
I heard a little Laverock (or Lark)

From far was borne the beagles' bark (or baverock);  
The trees stood still and staverock (or stark);  
I scanned the sky for some faint mark (or maverock)  
But could not find my laverock (or lark)

I could not find that little lark (or laverock).  
Elusive as a spaverock (or spark);  
She went like the dove from old Noah's Ark (or Averock),  
She faded like the Snaverock (or Snark)!

### **An invited interpretation**

True friends ask pertinent questions. Seventeen months after the death of Margaret, my first wife, I asked Diana to marry me. When I informed my oldest and best friend of this, he asked perceptively: "What happened to the grief?" Grief had been very evident on a previous visit.

My journal of the time tells me that his comment set me thinking about it all and of how we like to make sense of and order our existence by way of story:

*".... a child, if he breaks a window, tells the story of what happened in a way that makes sense of it to himself*

*and possibly also exonerates him from blame. If he is a good child it's an honest story, but with an invited interpretation, as is the case with so much in the Gospels. In my case it's not that grief has disappeared or was illusory or feigned, but because grief, for the most part, though not entirely, is a selfish emotion, concerned more with the self and one's own loss, than with the plight of the now dead, who are beyond pity, being in the care of a loving Creator, or to non-believers, ceasing to exist at all. So if, by grace, the self finds a reciprocated focus upon someone other than self, grief begins to diminish.... Love, regrets, deep nostalgia and even guilt remain, but not so overwhelmingly. One's focus has turned from self to another.....*

Or is this just wishful-thinking, self-exonerating story-telling?"



*St Cuthbert's Church, Wells*



## (606) “This and That” - 22 June 2025

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



*St John's, Wodonga, Victoria, Australia*

The Bishop of Ballarat, an Englishman called David Silk, rid himself of a troublesome priest, as bishops do, by throwing him, “like a dead cat over a wall,” into the neighbouring diocese of Wangaratta. The dead cat, thanks to the second of its nine lives, landed on his feet and flourished.

### **Paradisial peace.**

The scene of the resurrected cat's flourishing was the parish of St John's in the city of Wodonga, a regional metropolis on the southern banks of the river Murray, a few miles below lake Hume. To drift gently down the river from lake Hume to Wodonga

on the inner tube of a tyre, encountering platypuses face to face along the way and waterfowl of all sorts and types, is the perfection of paradisial peace.

In the parish of St John's the new Rector's flourishing was assisted by a pair of wise, elderly assistant priests. One of them he brought along with him, David Neaum, his 84 year old father, a tenor, bass or alto boon to the choir, as required, and a popular preacher, visitor and dinner-table raconteur. The other was Ed Richardson, somewhat younger than David, but also a wise and experienced priest, who some years previously had decided that he was insufficiently thick-skinned and hard-nosed to be a rector and so would fulfil his vocation more satisfactorily and happily as an assistant priest. He was a lovely, mildly and attractively eccentric man, with a splendid and supportive wife.



*Inner tubing from Hume Dam to Wodonga*

### **Like a grampus**

Ed was the first full-time and salaried assistant priest I ever had and on reflection, probably the best. At the beginning of 1999 he left us to retire and at a thanksgiving service for his ministry, he preached us a thirty minute sermon that was so good I almost managed to forgive him. Among my few introductory words at the service were the following:

*As Rector I would like to pay tribute to Ed's loyalty and gentle wisdom over the three years that I have been here. His successor is likely to be a young fellow, who will be looking for such qualities in me and finding them wanting. Ed has been a joy to work with, and I have delighted in all sorts of things about him, especially his little notes, full of arrows, asterisks, afterthoughts, forethoughts and indecipherable squiggles, as difficult to work out as a cryptic crossword puzzle. Also his raised eyebrow and suggested gentle alternatives to proposals of mine that seemed over the top to him and his entry to church each morning in winter, blowing like a grampus, sighing and soughing like a tree in a gale. Invariably it raised a quiet smile and put my spirit in the right mood for early worship. So we rejoice today in Ed and in his sweet natured, bright and wise Lyn. Give thanks to the Lord for he is good.*

### Glamorously iridescent

We delight in the regular visits to our garden feeder of new, whole families of goldfinches, green finches, coal tits and house sparrows, but only twice this year have we heard the “*simple bird that thinks two notes a song*,” the cuckoo and that was far from home. In the Rhodesia of my youth a handsome species of cuckoo sang a three note song: “*Piet my vrou*,” over and over again. The words are Afrikaans for “*Pete my wife*” and in a single season one *Piet my vrou*” can ruin the family life of as many as twenty smaller species of bird by dropping an egg in that many nests. Another smaller, but glamorously iridescent African cuckoo was the Diedrick cuckoo. Its repetitive, six syllable song can be transcribed as: “*I am a Die-de-rick*”. Diedrick is a Dutch name that means “ruler of the people.”



Secretary Bird (photo: Sumeet Moghe)

flying termite swarms, fascinated us. On a mission station forty five miles north east of Harare, the bubbling call of Burchell’s coucal, heralding rain, the ringing duets of black collared barbets, the melancholy whistle of the black-capped bush shrike and bright flashes of yellow or red bishop birds help turn my recollected childhood into a wonderland.

My first married home was a comfortable flat in Harare’s well-treed avenues. Our ‘garden’ consisted of potted African violets inside and outside a tray we attached to our sitting room window. It attracted swarms of bronze mannikins to lift our spirits. In our country town-centre, first parish, hoopoes raised their crests and strutted the lawn (they are now sometimes spotted in England), also flocks of flying, termite-gorging swifts (they breed here in Wells) swooped their way into our hearts

### Anonymous

I listen to more sermons than I preach these days. Some are bad, some are good, though few ever come near to addressing the questions that most fascinate, puzzle and intrigue me. Hence my delight in this anonymous quatrain:

*Clergyman: I’ve lost my brief-case.*

*Traveller: I pity your grief.*

*Clergyman: My sermons are in it.*

*Traveller: I pity the thief.*

### Menacing secretary birds

Particular birds are associated with every place I’ve lived for any length of time, especially so in Africa. As an 11 year old living on St Bernard’s Mission, 12 miles from Marondera, savannah stalking, menacing secretary birds are a delight to recall. Their crest feathers are deemed to be like quill pens behind the ears of Victorian secretaries. There were also tuft-crested, grey ‘go-away-birds’ who harshly and derisively sneered “*kweh, kweh*”: “*go away, go away*.” At boarding school the rainy season invasion of insectivorous Abdim’s storks, black and white migrants from their breeding grounds on savannah lands north of the equator and wheeling flocks of fork tailed yellow-billed kites, gorging on



Yellow billed Kite (photo: ‘birdforum’)



## (605) “This and That” - 15 June 2025

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade

Old age brings more than aches, pains, visits to health specialists and regrets. It brings a greater awareness of and attentiveness to what W H Auden called “the baffle of being.” What’s it all about? Why has there ever been someone I call me? What the dickens has it all meant? Auden’s “baffle of being.”

### The baffle of being

I love W H Auden. I love him for his technical virtuosity as a poet and for crystallising truth into gems of precision and beauty. I love him for being an articulate, intelligent and wise Anglican Christian. I love him for his troubled, gay love-life

and his so sharp cleverness, wit, humour and eccentricity. I love him above all for the wondrous poem “*As I Walked out One Evening*”, a favourite of favourites. In the third stanza a lover sings:



*St Michael and All Angels Coombe Bissett*

3 *I'll love you, dear, I'll love you  
Till China and Africa meet,  
And the river jumps over the mountain  
And the salmon sing in the street....*

But then, a few stanzas later.....

6 *....all the clocks in the city  
Began to whirr and chime:  
O let not Time deceive you,  
You cannot conquer Time.*

7 *In the burrows of the Nightmare  
Where Justice naked is,  
Time watches from the shadow  
And coughs when you would kiss.*

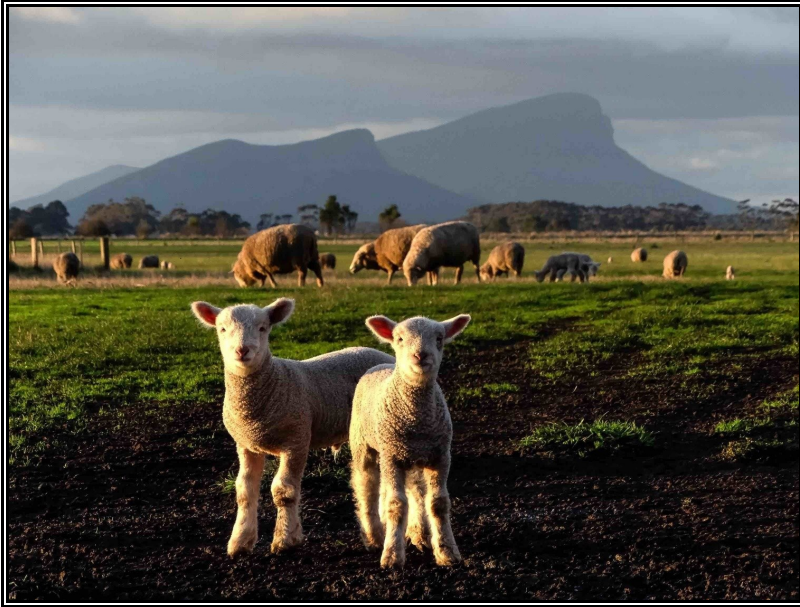
8 *'In headaches and in worry  
Vaguely life leaks away,  
And Time will have his fancy  
To-morrow or to-day.*

Yes indeed, love doesn't and can't last forever. The stanzas that follow (9-12) rub this point home memorably and mercilessly, but the poem goes on to suggest that even if time always has and must have its way, and love its end, life remains a “blessing”. We need to go on loving each other, undeterred by death, loss and disillusionment, even in our “crooked” world. Human love remains an admirable and noble undertaking, perhaps especially so, in the face of loss, abandonment and death. It's a truth that the Jesus of Nazareth story uniquely and poignantly urges upon us.

13 *'O look, look in the mirror,  
O look in your distress:  
Life remains a blessing  
Although you cannot bless.*

14 *'O stand, stand at the window  
As the tears scald and start;  
You shall love your crooked neighbour  
With your crooked heart.*

15 *It was late, late in the evening,  
The lovers they were gone;  
The clocks had ceased their chiming,  
And the deep river ran on.*



*The Western Districts of Victoria, Australia, 'Pleurisy Plains'*

## **Pleurisy Plains**

From 1975 to 1998 Australia's bishop of Ballarat was English born, New Zealand educated John Hazlewood, a likeable, eloquent, hugely talented, whisky-loving and deeply-flawed man. Serendipitously, his hospitable and delightful sister in law happens to be a fellow member of the Cathedral congregation here in Wells.

In 1985 Bishop Hazlewood offered a job, sight unseen, to the vicar of St Paul's Cathedral, on the island of St Helena, myself. He appointed me Rector of the tiny village of Skipton, on the banks of Emu Creek where

platypuses sport. It is a mere thirty three miles south west of Ballarat, on the edge of "pleurisy plains".

Winters there can be cold and in 1980s Australia church rectories were poorly insulated and primitively heated. In Skipton we relied for winter warmth upon a single wood burner in the sitting room, for which parishioners were obliged to provide eucalyptus logs which are notoriously difficult to split. My first great swipe at a monster log, using a conventional axe, trapped the axe's head so tightly it took me a quarter hour, or more, to extract it. Only later did I learn that a "Canadian splitter", not an axe, is required and that eucalyptus logs can only be "shelled", not split and with the help of wedges, for the mightiest and most recalcitrant logs.

## **Doggedly dog-collared**

Parishioners were all the more happy to participate in wood-gathering expeditions if their rector and his family joined in. We had a lot of fun doing so and it helped impress upon me the need for country parsons to dirty their hands and take on plebeian tasks, if they are to earn and keep the respect of their parishioners.

This is why, as a retired parson here in Wells, I wear a dog collar when I take on non-clerical tasks, such as "stewarding" at concerts in the Cathedral. This involves chair stacking and clearing up at the end, as well as welcoming patrons and ushering them to their seats. There being services every day of the week, the official clergy at the Cathedral are hugely busy liturgically and so are most commonly to be observed, gloriously chasubled, gliding solemnly about a sanctuary, or processing into and out of the quire, robed, scarfed, hooded and often gaudily coped. As a counter balance, it is good for the public to observe clergy otherwise engaged: dog-collared, shirt sleeves rolled and sweating it out at more plebeian tasks.

At a recent "Witney Houston by Candlelight" concert in the Cathedral I was put in charge of the lavatory queues during the interval. The queue for the female facilities stretched a long way back, whereas the male queue, after an initial surge, was all but non existent, thanks to the effectiveness of urinals. So I offered to chaperone any willing and desperate ladies into the male toilets to use the three cubicles there. It worked a treat, but one of the cubicles was declared "foul" by its first occupant, as indeed it was. So in I went to clean it up, successfully, though with difficulty. For a while I was a much appreciated, dogged, dog-collared, dogsbody.



## (604) “This and That” - 8 June 2025

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade

Dame Denise Rosemarie Lewis, aged six, had an auspicious win in an egg and spoon race in Wolverhampton. It foreshadowed many wins to come, including a gold medal in the heptathlon at the 2000 Sydney Olympics, aged twenty eight.

Andrew Neaum, aged six, came a rather less than auspicious second in an egg and spoon race on the rolling deck of a Cape Town bound ocean liner, the *Athlone Castle*. He won a box of crayons and went on never to come second, let alone first, in any sporting event thereafter.



*The Athlone Castle - Mossel Bay on her final voyage*

Photo: British & Commonwealth Shipping Company Register website

### Eggs, spoons and racial slurs

Dame Denise now 52 and Andrew now 79 grew up in more robust times than today. The fear of salmonella and of allergic reactions to involuntary ingestion of raw egg means that the use of uncooked eggs in egg and spoon races is banned, on health and safety grounds and to avoid punitive insurance premiums. Apparently even to call someone a ‘good egg’ is deplored by police nowadays, it has become rhyming slang for the racist insult “coon.” Presumably because the word rhymes with spoon in the phrase once known to every schoolchild: “egg and spoon”.

### A death at sea

The scene of Andrew’s near triumph with an egg and spoon, the mail ship *Athlone Castle*, was christened by Princess Alice, Countess of Athlone, at the Harland & Wolff shipyard in Belfast in 1935. Its maiden voyage from Southampton to Cape Town, in May 1936, took just under two weeks.

Sixteen years later, on the 25<sup>th</sup> of September in 1952, the ship’s voyage from Southampton to Capetown, with five Neaums aboard (bound ultimately for Tristan da Cunha) took the same amount of time. My mother’s diary reports it to have been:

*..... A glorious day. England has never looked so lovely. It seems awful to be leaving her. Golden sunshine, a blue sea with patches of green - lots of trees - autumn colourings. Before she sailed we were again besieged by reporters and photographers. Eventually, at 4pm, we sailed. Slowly we .... glided down the Sound followed by shrieking gulls. After children’s tea - we put them to bed, then dinner and a bottle of Sauterne to celebrate. We’ve met some very nice people. Early to bed and now I write this in my cabin half asleep with the ship rocking and creaking all round. A 50 tin of Players cigarettes beside me cost a mere 3 shillings!!*

The diary entry written on the the penultimate day of the voyage, reports:

*.....an exciting last day. Much milder and really sunny, though the wind is still keen. An old lady of 77 died during the night and was buried at sea at 2pm. She was an R. C., so the Mother Superior and the 9 nuns took the Service. However David and Archdeacon Mudford attended too - also the Captain and officers..... We are well among the Cape Rollers now and the ship sways strongly. However we have got our sea legs and they don’t worry us..... We had a whole bottle of Sauterne tonight with several new friends and later a very good South African liqueur..... I’m sorry this peaceful interlude is over.*

## Princess Alice, Nelson and Desmond

Princess Alice, Countess of Athlone (1883–1981), who christened the *Athlone Castle*, was the last surviving grandchild of Queen Victoria and one of the longest-lived British royals. She died at the grand old age of 97. In 1904 she married her second cousin once removed, Prince Alexander of Teck, to whom the King granted the Earldom of Athlone in 1917 and he was Governor-General of the Union of South Africa from 1924–31. The suburb of Athlone in Cape Town is named after him and a preserved Class GL Garratt steam locomotive in the Outeniqua Transport Museum is named *Princess Alice*.

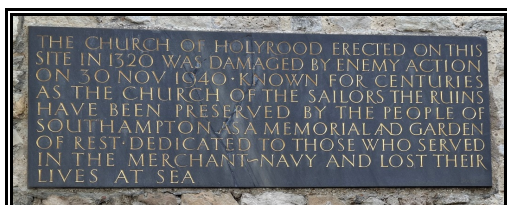
There is also a town in the Eastern Cape called Alice, after the princess, though officially these days it is named Kikeni. It is a mere sixty six miles north of St Paul's Theological College in Grahamstown, where I trained for the priesthood. The town Alice was home, in those apartheid days, to another theological college for “non-whites” and with whose students we would occasionally get together. It was also, and remains, home to Fort Hare University where many of the current political leaders in South Africa were educated, as too were the late, much lamented and admired Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu.

## Tom Bowling

Last week, between two eye appointments at Southampton Hospital, we bussed into Southampton to look over a city horrifically blitzed in World War II. We rejoiced in every little piece of the ancient city we encountered in odd corners here and there and also in “Union Castle House,” which prompted this week’s rumination.

Perhaps best of all was the blitzed shell of Holyrood Church, once

worshipped in by crusaders en route to the Holy Land, soldiers heading for Agincourt and Philip II of Spain on his way to marry Queen Mary at Winchester Cathedral. It is now a memorial to merchant navy sailors lost at sea, many of whom played a heroic part in times of war. The *Athlone Castle* was a troop carrier throughout World War II, as was the *RMS St Helena* in the Falklands War, stranding me and my family in Cape Town for three months. I was delighted by a memorial to Charles Dibdin (1745–1814), a native of Southampton, poet, dramatist and the composer and author of over 600 songs, many of them sea songs, including the poignant, elegiac *Tom Bowling*, (“the sailor’s epitaph”). It was inspired by the death of his older brother and father figure, who died at sea when his ship was struck by lightning off the Cape of Good Hope. The song, arranged by Benjamin Britten, often features at the last night of the Proms.



*Union Castle House today, now apartments*



*Holyrood Church: Memorial to Merchant Seamen*



## (603) “This and That” - 1 June 2025

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade

To marry at a ripe old age, be it for the first, second or third time, isn't always greeted with widespread enthusiasm and joy by relatives, friends and acquaintances.

### Sexual dalliance and the aged

George Crabbe (1754-1832), yet another of those priests who was also a fine poet, published in 1807 a 2,000 line narrative poem called “*The Parish Register*”. It uses his church's record of births, deaths and marriages as the inspiration for a three part, realistic and often moving depiction of life in a rural community. “*Part II: Marriages*” contains the following unforgettable passage:



*Twice had old Lodge been tied, and twice the dame;  
Tottering they came and toying, (odious scene!)  
And fond and simple, as they'd always been.*

*Children from wedlock we by laws restrain;  
Why not prevent them when they're such again?  
Why not forbid the doting souls to prove  
Th' indecent fondling of preposterous love?*

*In spite of prudence, uncontroll'd by shame,  
The amorous senior woos the toothless dame,  
Relating idly, at the closing eve,  
The youthful follies he disdains to leave;  
Till youthful follies wake a transient fire,  
When arm in arm they totter and retire.*

*So a fond pair of solemn birds, all day  
Blink in their seat and doze the hours away;  
Then by the moon awaken'd, forth they move,  
And fright the songsters with their cheerless love;*

*So two sere trees, dry, stunted, and unsound,  
Each other catch, when dropping to the ground:  
Entwine their withered arms 'gainst wind and weather,  
And shake their leafless heads and drop together.....*

*A far from “odious scene!” back in 2010*

This piece, with its curled lip disdain for sexual dalliance in old people, is such a male's perspective. It assumes the essence of marriage to lie in sexual activity which, though vital and utterly glorious such activity can be, it does not.

After all, when viewed dispassionately, clinically, cynically and lovelessly, any sexual activity, be it ancient or youthful, appears “*preposterous*” because, from just such a jaundiced perspective, how bizarre, daft and crazy it is.

Marriages that endure, mature and fulfil their potential have as much to do with affection, companionableness, friendship, trust, respect and awe as sexual activity.

Last week, Diana and I attended the wedding, in glorious weather, of a fine and youngish couple in Devon. In our congratulatory card we pasted a particularly fine poem by a female poet, Elizabeth Jennings (1926-2001). Quite unintentionally, she comes far, far closer than Crabbe to the essence of marriage by extolling friendship:



*Pull out pew extensions: St Peter's Catcott*



## Friendship

1. *Such love I cannot analyse;  
It does not rest in lips or eyes,  
Neither in kisses nor caress.  
Partly, I know, it's gentleness*
2. *And understanding in one word  
Or in brief letters. It's preserved  
By trust and by respect and awe.  
These are the words I'm feeling for.*
3. *Two people, yes, two lasting friends.  
The giving comes, the taking ends  
There is no measure for such things.  
For this all Nature slows and sings.*

## A lordly bastard



*Victorian buttresses on ancient St Mary's Witham Friary*

The founder of Wells Cathedral, Reginald de Bohun (1174-1191), was a bastard. He was the illegitimate son of Joscelyn de Bohun who was ordained priest in 1142 in order to be consecrated as the Bishop of Salisbury immediately thereafter. He remained Bishop of Salisbury until his death 42 years later.

His son Reginald was on the staff of Thomas a Beckett for several years, but changed his allegiance to Henry II as the dispute between the king and his Archbishop of Canterbury dragged on and worsened. After Beckett's death the king appointed Reginald bishop of Bath. He proved a capable, active and enlightened one and it was he who initiated the building of the present Wells Cathedral.

He was also indirectly responsible for Lincoln Cathedral, in its present form, because as part of King Henry's punishment for the death of Becket, he was required to build three Carthusian monasteries in England, one not far from Wells, at Witham. Reginald persuaded a saintly Carthusian monk, Hugh of Avalon, to leave holy seclusion to finish the task, when it had stalled, at Witham. After this, Hugh, as Bishop of Lincoln, began to rebuild that Cathedral into the Gothic wonder it is today.

Diana and I visited St Mary's in the village of *Witham Friary* recently. Hugh of Avalon's ancient church there, though much altered by the Victorians, is still overwhelmingly Norman and austere inside, true to the spirit of the Carthusians.

It reminded me of a visit I made, in the mid 1960's, to the ancient and austere Cistercian Abbey, *Le Thoronet* in the South of France. I was a callow young man back then, staying at the villa of an old and eccentric friend of my father's. There I was introduced, for the very first time, to garlic, ratatouille, wine from his vineyard that was so *ordinaire* it was diluted with blackberry cordial and despicable French chasseurs, dispensing bangs not bells on Sundays by shooting songbirds for the table.



*Austere interior: St Mary's Witham Friary*



## (602) “This and That” - 25 May 2025

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade

Wells Cathedral offers sustenance to the body as well as to the soul. Its very own “Loft Café” is open daily from 10.00am to 4.00pm, offering good, reasonably priced food, as well as excellent company and lovely views of the Cathedral’s West Front and over the Bishop’s Palace moat. Volunteer “Day Chaplains”, such as myself, are given a luncheon voucher in the Café, as a reward for our four hour long stints of amiably ambulatory duty.

### Loft Café fish chowder

Perhaps as good as anything to delight the belly there is a fine, piping-hot, fish chowder. In the north transept of the Cathedral, on the hour and in front of the wondrous medieval clock, when “Quarter Jack” has kicked the chimes and hammered out the hours and when the jousting knights have ceased their jousting, the Day Chaplain calls everyone to silence for a brief prayer. I myself always conclude with the Lord’s



*The medieval clock*

Prayer and then, if I am heading off for a fish chowder, I remind any listeners that Jesus of Nazareth, as well as being down to earth enough to be concerned about our daily bread, also had a way with fish, and that to go to the Café and appreciate a fish chowder is to be in sync with him.

### Quahog clams

I have a yen, yet to be realised, to taste an authentic, American clam chowder of which, it seems, there are many variants. In the States the smallest legally harvestable clams are called “countnecks” or “peanuts”, then come “littlenecks”, “topnecks”, “cherrystones” and finally, largest of all and most commonly used in clam chowders, are “quahogs.”

The most justifiably famous ocean quahog clam was given the name “Ming” in the press, because it was spawned way, way back at the time of the Ming dynasty in China. It lived from round about 1498–2006, was dredged off the coast of Iceland and 3.4 by



*The clock’s Quarter Jack*

2.9 inches in size. Its great age was calculated by counting the annual growth lines in its shell. An anonymous, rhyming couplet remarks upon this, “*the oldest individual (non-clonal) animal ever discovered whose age could be precisely determined:*”

*An ocean quahog clam was nicknamed “Ming”*

*When dead at 507. Now there’s a thing!*

### Heroic couplets

I love rhyming couplets. They can so satisfyingly and concisely crystallise or encapsulate a truth. They reached their apogee in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century iambic pentameter “heroic couplets” of Dryden and Pope:

*’Tis education forms the common mind,  
Just as the twig is bent, the tree’s inclined.*

*Alexander Pope*

*Love works a different way in different minds,  
the fool it enlightens and the wise it blinds.*

*John Dryden*

*Hope springs eternal in the human breast:  
Man never is, but always to be blest.*

*Alexander Pope*

### **Rediscovering the sacred**

Some years ago I came across a couplet by W H Auden that bowled me over. It was quoted in an article by Andrew Lambirth about the artist and poet David Jones: "*His was a sacramental vision of celebration and praise, based on an understanding that transient natural beauty was but a reflection of eternal things. As Auden wrote of William Blake, he:*

*'heard inside each mortal thing  
Its holy emanation sing'.*

*In his art, David Jones proceeded from the known to the unknown, rediscovering the sacred in the ordinary."*

### **Innocent auguries**

It bowled me over because it crystallises perfectly my own understanding of religious experience, my own understanding of how we apprehend or see the Divine and my own understanding of what Art is all about. It is all to do with perspective, God is to be seen, if at all, in the ordinary. Art, at its best, certainly for the likes of me, is an attempt, in the words of William Blake at the beginning of his "Auguries of Innocence":

*To see a world in a grain of sand,  
And a heaven in a wild flower,  
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,  
And eternity in an hour.*



*A touch of Australia in our English garden*

I am glad to enjoy light verse as much, if not more, than 'heavy' verse:

### **Rhyme Builder**

*Robert Service 1874-1958*

*I envy not those gay galoots  
Who count on dying in their boots;  
For that, to tell the sober truth  
Should be the privilege of youth;  
But aged bones are better sped  
To heaven from a downy bed.*

*So prop me up with pillows two,  
And serve me with the barley brew;  
And put a pencil in my hand,  
A copy book at my command;  
And let my final effort be  
To ring a rhyme of homely glee.*

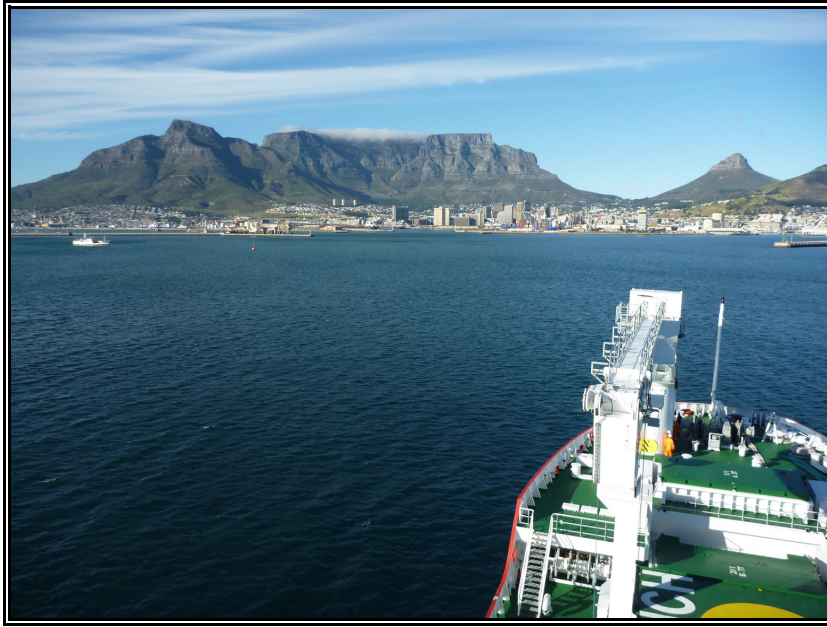
*For since I've loved it oh so long,  
Let my last labour be in song;  
And when my pencil falters down,  
Oh may a final couplet crown  
The years of striving I have made  
To justify the jinglers trade.*

*Let me surrender with a rhyme  
My long and lovely lease of time;  
Let me be grateful for the gift  
To couple words in lyric lift;  
Let me song-build with humble hod,  
My last brick dedicate to God.*



## (601) “This and That” - 18 May 2025

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



*Approaching Cape Town*

There were a good number of Afrikaner pupils in Rhodesian schools during the nineteen fifties and sixties and the study of Afrikaans was offered as an alternative to French in all government secondary schools. My parents, thoroughgoing *rooineks*, directed me to choose French for my O-levels, not Afrikaans, but children with surnames like Kloppers, Grobbelaar, Van Tonder, Engelbrecht, Oosthuizen and Bezuidenhout salted my vocabulary with a goodly smattering of Afrikaans words and expletives that remain with me to this day.

### **A wind mill flying plane**

Afrikaans language that appeals, in particular the dry-gargle “g” sound (as in “ch” in the word *loch*) and the colourful, almost naive and yet strangely poetic way of describing things. A chameleon is a *verkleurmannetjie* (a colourful little man), candy floss, at least sometimes, is *spookasem* (ghost breath), gloves are *handskoene* (hand shoes) a magnifying glass is *vergrootglas* (a make big glass) and a helicopter is a *windmeulvliegtuig* (a wind mill flying plane).

I still use the word *bliksem* as a mild swear word. It means “a bolt of lightning,” literally, but is now so prevalent as an expletive the alternative word, *weerlig*, is more favoured. If attacked by wasps, horse flies, mosquitoes or unfriendly dogs, I am still likely to shout *voetsak* (get lost) and I recall with amusement the sign in railway carriages back then: *moenie spoeg nie* (refrain from spitting).

### **What a Boytjie**

Every now and then I find myself, for no obvious reason, saying the word *boytjie* (pronounced ‘boykie’) and it took me a while to find its trigger which, I am sorry to admit, happens to be a burp. This is probably onomatopoeic, for my burps do sometimes have a sort of “oik” sound to them. *Boytjie* is a hybrid term, the Afrikaans diminutive word-ending “...tjies” has been added to the English word “boy” to make an affectionate term for a young boy or man.

There is a rollicking Afrikaans song called “*What a Boytjie*” sung by an engaging *boytjie* called *Refentse Morake*. He comes from *Vereeniging*, an industrial town on the Vaal River, which gave its name to the treaty that ended the bloody Boer War: the “*Peace of Vereeniging*.” As a Vereeniging teenager, Refentse was strumming his guitar and singing outside his house when a passing stranger, “Tannie Kleintjie”, happened to pass by. She so liked what she heard, she recorded a couple of songs on her phone, uploaded them to Facebook and so fame came his way.

The lyrics of the song “*What a Boytjie*” make little sense, but are fun to listen to even without understanding them. The strange music of the Afrikaans language forcibly strikes home. (In the YouTube search box type: “*Refentse: What a Boytjie*”)

### **Sermons con brio**

We celebrated the Fourth Sunday of Easter at St Peter’s, North Wootton, four miles from our home in Wells. It’s an attractive, small, medieval church at the centre of a leafy village in the green foothills to the Mendips. Although we love Cathedral worship it’s good, now and then, to get back to rural churches and mingle with salt-of-the-earth country worshippers and to deliver a sermon con brio, instead of having to fight my tendency to fall asleep as a listener to more gently soporific ones.



After the service we walked up a nearby hill, past a little wood mill and along a signposted path that soon forgot that it existed, leaving us to find our own way along elusive, bifurcating paths that at times turned into heavily brambled creek beds. The undergrowth of the combe up which we scrambled camouflaged several humpy-like dwellings which we assumed to be the make-shift homes of impecunious squatters. The sort, we assumed, for whom nearby Glastonbury is a wacky, new-age Mecca. We met one such, a tattooed, amiable fellow who told us he'd just returned from Sicily, with his cat. In all likelihood on a magic carpet.

### **Worminster Sleight**

The next door hill we looked across to, but didn't scramble up, is called *Worminster Sleight*. The name commemorates a fearsome, 13th century dragon that terrorised the nearby village of Dinder until Jocelyn, the Bishop of Wells, rode out to behead it single-handedly. Needless to say there were no witnesses to the event, but the names of Worminster (a nearby hamlet) and Worminster Sleight refer to the dragon and its slaying. The Old English word for a dragon happens to be a "wyrn".

### **Fat cows of Bashan close me in on every side**



*Facing off the cows of Bashan*

We headed for the hedge on the right, the cows following us on their side of the electric fence. The hedge was impenetrable. When we walked to the other side of the field, accompanied by the herd, we noticed that the electric fence ran alongside the hedge, leaving a yard-wide gap for us to walk down to the gate. This we did, as the cows looked gravely on, some wandering alongside us, others madly mooing.

Before required to make a final dash for the field's gate, a farmhand flung it open and all the bulging-uddered beasts streamed through it, as if we no longer existed. Fat, fickle cows of Bashan.



*St Peter's North Wootton*

On our way back down the hill, by a different route, we crossed a stile into a paddock divided in two by a single-wire electric fence. The upper half was lushly and deeply grassed, the second well grazed by a large herd of dairy cows. As we waded our way across the top half, the hundreds of cows noticed us and began to head our way, ominously, incessantly and frenziedly mooing with their heads back and eye balls starting. On reaching the electric fence we stood face to face with 300 sombre-eyed, faintly minatory, mirthlessly mooing, heavily uddered cows.

To attempt to walk through them, like Moses through the Red Sea, seemed unwise.



## (600) “This and That” - 11 May 2025

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



Wells Cathedral view, from Milton Lodge garden

Great artists are gifted with an ability to intuit and perceive more to reality than meets the eye. So too, I like to think, are people of genuine faith, to whom the Divine is perceived as a compelling and heart-stopping aspect of reality.

### The literal is rarely true

There follow one line and then three stanzas of a four stanza poem by a Canadian poet, Patricia Kathleen Page (1916-2010) in which she wittily depicts the ambivalent nature of reality. Her poem is inspired by a much longer, complex and more famous poem by Wallace Stevens four lines of which she uses to preface her poem:

### The Blue Guitar

*They said, ‘You have a blue guitar,  
You do not play things as they are.’  
The man replied, ‘Things as they are  
are changed upon the blue guitar.’*

— *The Man with the Blue Guitar* (Wallace Stevens)

...They said, “You have a blue guitar.”

“I have,” the man replied, “it’s true.  
The instrument I strum is blue  
I strum my joy, I strum my pain  
I strum the sun, I strum the rain.  
But tell me, what is that to you?  
You see things as you think they are.  
Remove the mote within your ear  
then talk to me of what you hear.”  
They said, “Go smoke a blue cigar!  
You do not play things as they are.”

“Things as they are? Above? Below?  
In hell or heaven? Fast or slow ...?”  
They silenced him. “It’s not about  
philosophy, so cut it out.

We want the truth and not what you  
are playing on the blue guitar.  
So start again and play it straight  
don’t improvise, prevaricate.  
Just play things as they really are.”  
The man replied, “Things as they are  
are not the same as things that were  
or will be in another year.  
The literal is rarely true  
for truth is old and truth is new  
and faceted – a metaphor  
for something higher than we are.  
I play the truth of Everyman  
I play the truth as best I can.  
The things I play are better far  
when changed upon the blue guitar.”

### Mangwanani.

It is not only bells that ring out from the towers of Wells Cathedral. Three times a day, during the months of May, June and July, sixteen new “sound-enhanced” swift boxes, in the North West Tower, send out recordings of the thrilling scream of swifts. They inform returning migrant birds of available, exclusive nesting sites within.

Swift numbers in England have declined over the years. This, in part, is because access to their favoured nesting sites in churches, barns and house roofs and soffits has become more and more difficult, thanks to house renovations and more thorough insulation techniques these days.

When I used to be Rector of a town that used to be called Gatooma in a country that used to be called Rhodesia, one of the most thrilling spectacles, after summer's first few falls of rain, was the large number of low flying, screeching swifts zooming around the church and town centre, gorging on flying termites. Little did I then realise that they might well make their way to nest, during the northern hemisphere's summer, in my future home town of Wells in Somerset.

The swifts we observe gracing the sky over the Cathedral green these days, could well be descendants of those I admired and loved as the red bearded rector of my first parish, in the heart of Africa. As we walk each morning to daily worship, here in Wells, I might well shout to them in Shona: *Mangwanani*. (Good morning.) *Marara sei?* (How did you sleep?) Any returning scream I can take to be the lovely, standard Shona response: *Ndarara kana mararawo*. (I slept well if you slept well.)

### Ecstasy on the wing

Swifts (*Apus apus*) are remarkable creatures. At level flight they're the fastest of all birds, 69 miles per hour and they only touch down to nest. They eat, drink, bath, sleep and mate on the wing. During their lifetime they fly an estimated two to four million miles, roughly the equivalent of flying to the moon and back eight times. Their scientific name *Apus* is derived from the Greek for 'no feet', because the ancients considered them to be a type of swallow with neither legs or feet, so rarely are either in evidence. The legs are very short and not used for walking, but rather to cling to vertical surfaces (hence their name in German means "wall-glider")

### Only connect

We attended a Roman Catholic Requiem Mass, followed by the funeral and burial of an old friend of Diana's two weeks ago, in Stamford Hill, north east London. The service was taken with casual, matter of fact confidence and ease, by a pair of antiquated Jesuits, one of them eight years younger than I am.

At the pub "wake" afterwards he was wearing a "Jesuit jacket", a term I invented years ago for the cheap, crumpled, pseudo-linen jackets worn by two fellow students who were Jesuits at university with me in Rhodesia in the 1960s. Needless to say, he was well acquainted with both, one of them in his dotage, the other deceased. We had a good, genial gossip about them, as well as possible popes.

Also at the funeral was a talkative Sikh who happened to have been in Easton, Somerset, on the Sunday before, where I happened to be officiating at a Eucharist in the local church. Cathedral towers, swifts, Africa, termites, Somerset, Jesuits, Sikhs, the village of Easton and blue guitars, all linked, all connected. Lovely.



*St Ignatius, Stamford Hill*



## (599) “This and That” - 4 May 2025

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



*Milton Lodge Orchard, the daily walk*

Certitude fuels fanaticism. Dogmatism won't do. No matter how certain a reasonable person might be, about almost anything, he is more than likely to have come round, eventually, to modifying his opinion or changing his mind entirely. "Human knowledge is an unending adventure at the edge of uncertainty," asserted Jacob Bronowski in the remarkable TV series *The Ascent of Man*.

### **Emotionalism and emoting**

Uncertainty allows there to be another side to things, opening the door to dialogue, exploration, adaptation, growth and change.

I myself, for example, have

had to modify my views on reticence in relation to emotionalism. For years I have over admired reticence and denigrated "emotional incontinence", which embarrasses and offends me. One of my favourite and much quoted pieces of verse is by the Australian poet Mary Gilmore (1865-1962):

### **Never Admit the Pain**

|                        |                            |
|------------------------|----------------------------|
| Never Admit The Pain   | Cover the wound, fold down |
| Bury it deep.          | Its curtained place.       |
| Only the weak complain | Silence is still a crown   |
| Complaint is cheap     | Courage a grace.           |

I still value reticence, but now acknowledge that emotional repression can be more a blight than a blessing. Another Australian poet, James McAuley (1917-76), helps makes the point in a fine, twelve stanza, autobiographical poem:

### **Because**

*Stanza 1*      My father and my mother never quarrelled.  
They were united in a kind of love  
As daily as the Sydney Morning Herald,  
Rather than like the eagle or the dove.

*Stanza 5*      Small things can pit the memory like a cyst:  
Having seen other fathers greet their sons,  
I put my childish face up to be kissed  
After an absence. The rebuff still stuns

*Stanza 6*      My blood. The poor man's curt embarrassment  
At such a delicate proffer of affection  
Cut like a saw. But home the lesson went:  
My tenderness thenceforth escaped detection.



*'Little Entry Lane', the daily walk*

## **The married state**

Diana and I stroll the streets of Wells and tramp the lanes of Somerset almost invariably arm in arm. It is not emotional reticence that prompts me to qualify that statement by adding that we do so more for practical than emotional reasons. Not so much to flaunt our undoubted affection for each other as to ensure we remain in step and abreast. We're a loquacious pair, we need to be well within earshot of each other.

During the Covid restrictions, people stopped their cars several times to tell us how reassuring it was, in such troubled and worrisome times, to observe us day by day and arm in arm, walking the lanes around the church and village.

To walk arm in arm is more an elderly married couple's preferred way of expressing their mutual love and affection than a young couple's, who more usually hold hands. There is surely a good little poem to be written about the whys and wherefores of the difference. Lionel Shriver, in a wise and lovely recent Spectator article extolling the married state, tells us....

*.... I like being married. I like the clarity; one side of my life is resolved. I like going away alone and coming home to company. I like solitude while my husband goes away, and I like it when he comes back. I like spending all day ignoring him, and I like getting reacquainted when I finally notice there's someone else in the house. If one of us ever leaves the other, it will be in a box. We are extremely different. Had I been born to a generation that shops for men online like socks, I'd surely have searched for someone just like me – which would have been a disaster.*

*Mind you, my husband drives me insane. I announce with regularity: "I have no idea why I married you." Fortunately, I drive him insane right back. Sometimes we do effuse about having the best marriage in the history of the universe – but in private, and it's a joke.*

To finish a short, sentimental, but all the more lovely for that, hymn/prayer from the poet Daniel Henderson 1880–1955:

## **Hymn for a Household**

Lord Christ, beneath thy starry dome  
We light this flickering lamp of home,  
And where bewildering shadows throng  
Uplift our prayer and evensong.  
Dost thou, with heaven in thy ken  
Seek still a dwelling-place with men,  
Wandering the world in ceaseless quest?  
O Man of Nazareth, be our guest!

Lord Christ, the bird his nest has found,  
The fox is sheltered in his ground,  
But dost thou still this dark earth tread  
And have no place to lay thy head?  
Shepherd of mortals, here behold  
A little flock, a wayside fold  
That wait thy presence to be blest —  
O Man of Nazareth, be our guest!



## (598) “This and That” - 27 April 2025

*Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade*



*The Easter Vigil ceremonies begin, Wells Cathedral*

“The powers that be are ordained of God.....” says St Paul in the Authorised Version of the world’s most intriguing and influential book. He advises us to subject ourselves to them. However, those in authority, “the powers that be”, all too readily surround themselves with “yes men” and excuse themselves by citing the desirability and necessity for “loyalty” and “team players” if power and authority are to be exercised effectively.

They have point, but the most valuable and admirable form of loyalty tells unwelcome as well as welcome truths to power. The truly and deeply loyal are as much “no men” as “yes men”.

### **The inner circle**

My father, a fine parish priest, didn’t always sit easily under episcopal authority and nor did I. The interests of a parish and of its diocese don’t always coincide, especially when it comes to money. On occasions devoted parish priests are called upon to do battle with bishops and archdeacons on behalf of their parish. It is no way to gain preferment though.

Only once was I ever a member of my bishop’s “inner circle”, and that was on the Island of St Helena. There were only four priests from whom to select an inner circle and one of them resided 700 miles of ocean away. All of us on that blessed isle were “inner circle” priests willy nilly, except for the distant one. I even found myself an archdeacon for a year and a half.

It was different once I went to Australia. For much of my time there I was an outsider, at odds with my diocese, bishop and many colleagues on a variety of issues, some of them serious. When a particular and inadequate *bête noire* was appointed as my archdeacon, I took an ironic swipe at the appointment in verse:

### **Rumbling from the Ranks**

In growing older as a priest,  
Of all my problems, not the least  
Is how, without the merest trace  
Of anger, to accept with grace  
The rise of men of little sense  
To eminence and prominence

The dullest dogs are made archdeacon,  
The dim of wit, the feeblest beacon,  
The egotist and own drum’s drummer,  
Tweedle Dumb and Tweedle Dumber,  
The Venerable Father Clod,  
The execrable Father Plod.

How hard to honour and defer  
To twerps whom Bishops much prefer  
To brilliant, wise, successful me!  
Could Jesus mean in his decree  
Of first as last and last as first,  
That worst be best and best be worst?

The true heroes of the Church are not those who swan around Cathedrals in copes, add red piping to their cassocks or who wear purple shirts and live in palaces. The real heroes are those labouring to keep parish churches open and alive with only tiny congregations, as the diocese shortsightedly flogs off their vicarages and amalgamates them into ever more impossible units to manage.

### Pew sitter heroism

Heroism of the sort I happened to encounter in a random parish visit mentioned in my journal of more than twenty years ago: a woman “.....*lovingly caring for her husband suffering from extreme but benevolent dementia, who wanders around the house saying loudly, ‘One two three four five, five, five, five, five.’ and occasionally ‘Bye, bye, bye, bye, bye....’ over and over again, though quieting down now and then to eat or fiddle with a little toy. She has to do everything for him except feed him, he is incontinent.....*”

In conversation she revealed that their son, many years before, as a sixteen year old, had fallen foul of an abusive young curate in the parish who, when she reported this to the diocese, was summarily passed on to a far distant diocese with a promise that he would never be offered a place in her diocese again.

She had been surprised, recently, she told me, to read in the diocesan monthly journal, that this now late middle-aged priest had just been made a Canon of our Diocese, though only with an academic and non-residentiary role to play. When I suggested to her that I should report this to the bishop, she would have none of it, content, she said, to let things be, feeling much better and relieved from simply talking about it to someone for the first time since it had all occurred. I did report it to the bishop and the man lost his appointment, though not, I suspect, his canonry.



*St Martin's Church, Fifield Bavant, Wiltshire*

rectangular box of a building, much of it original to the period, though its small bell turret was added only in 1909 and there are other more modern additions. It appears to be a well loved and active part of the Diocese of Salisbury with monthly Sunday Evensongs.

The Holy Spirit appears to be breezily active during worship, judging from the extreme guttering of the altar's candles. More of us than realise may be acquainted with the village, because it features in the 2005 film, *Pride and Prejudice*.

*Altar Candles,  
St Martin's, Fifield Bavant,  
Wiltshire*

### Pride and Prejudice in Wiltshire

Last Wednesday, on our way back from Southampton, we each ate a quarter of a home grown spinach quiche, with a mug of soup, sitting on a bench outside the smallest church in Wiltshire. It overlooks the river Ebbel and is a vital part of what must be one of the smallest of all villages in England, *Fifield Bavant*. It consists these days of only 12 houses: the Manor Farm House, a former rectory and 10 farm cottages. The bulk of the farm buildings are let as stables and there were horses grazing in small paddocks all around the church, which is dedicated to St Martin of Tours. Built in the 13th Century, it is a simple





## (597) “This and That” - 20 April 2025

*Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade*

The foundation stone of what was eventually to become the present *University of Zimbabwe* was laid by Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother in 1953. Her tour of Southern Rhodesia, with Princess



*The University of Zimbabwe's Library in 2010*

Margaret, replaced a tour originally scheduled for Princess Elizabeth who, due to the death in 1952 of her father King George VI, was otherwise engaged.

The British government formally adopted *The University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland* in 1955, by Royal Charter, and it was granted a special relationship to the University of London. Eight years later, a gauche, blond, alumni of a school in the Rhodesian bush, Guinea Fowl Boys High, made his way to the University campus in a black, under-powered, elderly Morris Minor, to begin studying for a degree in English Literature. His name was Andrew.

### **Lancaster University**

The foundation stone of Lancaster University, one of seven “plate glass universities” founded in the late 1950s and 1960s in England, was laid by HRH Princess Alexandra in 1964. She became its first Chancellor, from 1964 until 2004, the longest serving Chancellor of any university in Britain. Two years later, in 1966, a vivacious and very far from gauche brunette alumni of Mary Datchelor Grammar School for girls, in Camberwell, arrived by train to begin studying Environmental Sciences. Her name was Diana.

Other than Diana, Terry Eagleton, a couple of years older even than I am, is the only other person with a close association to Lancaster University I admire. For many years he has been a “Distinguished Professor of English Literature” there.

I admire him for his writing on religion and literature more than his politics which, though fascinating, are radical left. I once travelled all the way from Boldre to St Catharine’s College, Cambridge to hear him preach at Evensong. My son happened to be Chaplain to the College at the time and had invited him to preach and me to listen. As is the way with sermons, although I liked what I heard, I cannot now remember anything of what he said. However, I do remember that he crossed himself at the service’s final Benediction, which I took to mean that he is indeed one of the Christian family. He was also a fine and amusing conversationalist at the dinner that followed, though humble enough to take even what I said seriously.

### **To Cape Town with Rowan and Terry**

In October 2010 I flew from Heathrow to Cape Town via Frankfurt and Johannesburg with two books to read en route. One was a biography of Rowan Williams and the other was Terry Eagleton’s “On Evil”. Those were the days when my eyes were good and my mind curious enough to prefer reading on long flights to watching films.

Both books deeply interested me. Eagleton is a fine polemicist, as well as a trenchant thinker and accomplished stylist. He delighted me with his dismissal of Jean Paul Sartre’s much quoted line: “Hell is other people.” Dead wrong, claims Eagleton: “it is exactly the opposite. It is being stuck for all eternity with the most dreary, unspeakably monotonous company of all: oneself.” Indeed.

## **Purgatory and Hell**

Better still was his account of Purgatory and Hell which I found sufficiently compelling to record in my journal:

*“Purgatory is not an ante-room in which morally mediocre types sit around performing various degrading penances until their number is called and they shuffle shamefacedly forward into paradise. For Christian theology, it is the moment of death itself, when you discover whether you have enough love inside you to be able to give yourself away with only a tolerable amount of struggle. This is why martyrs - those who actively embrace their deaths in the service of others - traditionally go straight to heaven...there can be no life in hell, which is a state of pure annihilation. There could no more be ‘in’ hell than there could be anyone in a material location called debt or love or despair. For traditional theology, to be in hell is to fall out of the hands of God by deliberately spurning his love, if such a condition is actually thinkable. In this sense, hell is the most florid compliment to human freedom one could imagine. If one can even reject the blandishments of one’s Creator, one must be powerful indeed. But since there can be no life outside God, who is the source of all vitality, the finality of hell is a matter of extinction, not perpetuity. If there is such a thing as hellfire, it could only be the fire of God's ruthless love, which burns up those who cannot bear it....”*

## **Palm Sunday**

I write at the beginning of Holy Week. Here in Wells, it began outside the Cathedral’s open, great west door, last Sunday, with the blessing of palms, wind-whisked holy smoke and the Vicars Choral in good, strong voice. One of their number, secreted behind and high up the great West Front’s elaborate stone facade, sang a solo through an ancient, purpose-built aperture. We then processed right round the Cathedral’s interior, belting out All Glory Laud and Honour and Ride on Ride on in Majesty. The long recitation of St John’s version of the Passion was beautifully sung, the Evangelist’s part by a light tenor, the other parts more dramatically by a variety of choir soloists and the crowd’s part by the full choir in beautiful harmony to an arrangement of music by the 16<sup>th</sup> century Tomás Luis de Victoria. The profound emotional truth of the St John’s Gospel narrative all but overwhelmed me. It was wondrous, wondrous.



*The West Front - Wells Cathedral*



## (596) “This and That” - 13 April 2025

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade

There are over 16,000 church buildings in the care of the Church of England and 12,500 of them are listed by ‘Historic England’. Most are ancient and beautiful, the very best of places to stop for a picnic lunch and stroll, while en route from somewhere to anywhere, “*far from the madding crowd’s ignoble strife*”.

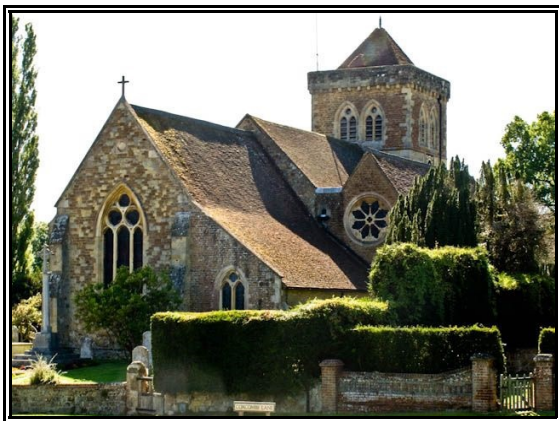
### Ghostly silt

If the weather’s fine there’s usually a bench outside from which to commune with primroses, daffodils, celandines and tombstones, as Thomas Gray’s *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* inevitably comes to mind, even if the poem’s elm trees, like the “*rude forefathers of the hamlet*”, are no more:

*Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree’s shade,  
Where heaves the turf in many a mould’ring heap,  
Each in his narrow cell for ever laid,  
The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep.*

If the weather is foul and the church open, a pew inside, preferably towards the back, more than compensates. The distant altar, beyond a surviving rood screen if you’re lucky, as well as effigied tombs, sainted stained-glass windows and centuries of “*ghostly silt*” readily sacramentalise your sandwich.

Philip Larkin, though an atheist, was an avid visitor of country churches:



St Mary’s Chiddingfold, Surrey

*Once I am sure there’s nothing going on  
I step inside, letting the door thud shut.  
.....a tense, musty, unignorable silence,  
Brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I take off  
My cycle-clips in awkward reverence....*

Such churches, he suggests, are unlikely ever to become wholly obsolete,

*Since someone will forever be surprising  
A hunger in himself to be more serious,  
And gravitating with it to this ground,  
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,  
If only that so many dead lie round.*

### Laden with pollen

Such stopover visits leave you with something worthwhile to take home, perhaps of the sort talked of by the poet R S Thomas in his poem “*Somewhere*”:

*..... As has been said,  
the point of travelling is not  
to arrive, but to return home  
laden with pollen you shall work up  
into the honey the mind feeds on.*



St Nicholas’ Long Parish, Hampshire

## The next Archbishop of Canterbury

According to Quentin Letts the Crown Nominations Commission is asking parliamentarians what qualities Justin Welby's successor as Archbishop of Canterbury should possess. He goes on to list his own:

- 1) *Withdraw bishops from the House of Lords. Being in parliament has done the C of E little good in recent years.*
- 2) *Urge most clergy to stop preaching. Sermons demand eloquence, imagination, learning. Many priests are prosaic bores. My organist wife was playing an away match the other day when the scruff in the pulpit told congregants they would not progress to Heaven unless they denounced the Balfour Declaration.*
- 3) *Scrap mitres. They make bishops look fools.*
- 4) *No more talk of slavery reparations. At our church we have not had a single newcomer say: 'I want to be confirmed because I like Lambeth Palace's stance on slavery.' We have, though, had visitors refuse to give money because they think the Church will waste it.*
- 5) *Stop apologising. Think the best of people. Send those race advisers and safeguarding consultants packing, as Jesus did with the moneylenders.*
- 6) *After a service, offer the punters a bucket of sherry instead of dreary coffee. Supermarket amontillado doubled the gate at our monthly matins.*
- 7) *A parson in every pub. Instead of sending vicars to conferences and on management courses, urge them to visit the local boozer in their dog collars. Pastoral care is more important than 'continual professional development'.*

## Inadvertent pilgrimage



*The West Front, St Andrew's Cathedral, Wells, Somerset*

Well attended Lent talks at the Cathedral this year were on the subject of Pilgrimage and thought provoking. I myself have visited notable places of pilgrimage: Lourdes in France, Walsingham in Norfolk and the Shrine of Bernard Mizeki in Zimbabwe, but only as a visitor, not a pilgrim. However, the Lent talks persuaded me that I had indeed made one true pilgrimage in my life, but inadvertently. My goal was not God but a girl. The girl I lost, God I found.

Early in 1971, I left my vicarage home, family, friends, life and employment in Rhodesia to fly to Spain and on to London,

challenged to do so by a beautiful and sparkling girlfriend. The relationship came to naught, but the misery of loneliness and friendlessness in a wintry, postal-strike stricken London and new perspectives and evaluations of home, church and faith granted by detachment and distance, as well as choral Evensong in Westminster Abbey, brought me back full face to God. In a year and a half I returned home to Africa to train as a priest;

*the end of all our exploring will be  
to arrive where we started  
and know the place for the first time.*

*(T S Eliot)*



## (595) “This and That” - 6 April 2025

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



*Wall Flowers in Wells*

In America a billion is a mere one thousand million (1,000,000,000), for which, strictly, a more correct term is a “milliard”. In Britain a billion used to be a million million (1,000,000,000,000). The Americans seem to have prevailed and their footling billion has been adopted worldwide, rendering the term “milliard” all but obsolete.

### **Kumbel Kumbell**

A Danish poet, scientist, mathematician and inventor, Piet Hein (1905-1996), invented a short rhyming, aphoristic poem he called a “grook” during World War II. He produced them as a form of passive

resistance to the Nazis when Denmark was invaded by Germany in 1940. He was president of the *Anti-Nazi Union* and he published his Grooks in the daily newspaper “Politiken” under the pseudonym “Kumbel Kumbell” (Kumbel is old Norse for tombstone). His Grooks tended to be passed by the censors, who didn’t or couldn’t understand their satirical irony and wit. They began to appear as graffiti all over the place. From the 1940s, until many, many years after the war, he produced and published as many as 10,000 of them. They are characterised by a precise use of language, brevity, irony, paradox, and sophisticated rhythms and rhymes.

### **Grooks**

#### **Atomyriades**

*Nature, it seems is the popular name  
for milliards and milliards and milliards  
of particles playing their infinite game  
of billiards and billiards and billiards.*

#### **Circumscription**

*As Pastor X steps out of bed  
he slips a neat disguise on:  
that halo round his priestly head  
is really his horizon.*

### **Cubes and superellipse curves**

Piet Hein was a creative and ingenious polymath. He invented a perpetual Astro Calendar and a variety of games: Hex, Tangloids, Tower, Polytaire, TacTix, Nimbi, Crazy Qube, Pyramystery, and also the Soma Cube and when he was approached by architects, dissatisfied with rectangular buildings, but daunted by circular ones, he proposed what became the hallmark of Scandinavian architecture, furniture and design, the superellipse curve.

### **More Grooks**

#### **Prescription**

*A bit  
of virtue  
will never  
hurt you*

#### **The Road to Wisdom**

*The road to wisdom?—Well, it’s  
plain and simple to express:  
Err and err and err again,  
but less and less and less.*

#### **Timing Toast**

*There’s an art of knowing when.  
Never try to guess.  
Toast until it smokes and then  
twenty seconds less.*

### **Returning to heaven unopened**

A memorable word or phrase can stop the heart. One such came our way a while ago in an email from a doughty worshipper at St John's Boldre:

*“We have a splendid very disabled neighbour, I visit daily with cake and chat. An old lesbian, aged 90 and now without her beloved Maureen. She told me the other day that she will be ‘returned to heaven unopened’.”*

Those four words from an old lady did indeed stop my heart. They say so much in so little. There's a whole poem in them. Diana and I dwelt upon and talked them over in delight, and our hearts went out to the old girl. She has since died and is now indeed with her beloved Maureen.

### **I love and hate**

I love the psalms, though some of them are appalling. The Jewish poet Alicia Ostriker (born in 1937), struggling with the need for God and the violence of the biblical God, has written what she calls "anti-Psalms" that address the "God who deals cruelly with us and demands our praise."

### **Psalm**

|                                 |                                           |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| <i>I am not lyric any more</i>  | <i>like wine</i>                          |
| <i>I will not play the harp</i> | <i>so I dully repeat</i>                  |
| <i>for your pleasure</i>        | <i>you hurt me</i>                        |
| <i>I will not make a joyful</i> | <i>I hate you</i>                         |
| <i>noise to you, neither</i>    | <i>I pull my eyes away from the hills</i> |
| <i>will I lament</i>            | <i>I will not kill for you</i>            |
|                                 | <i>I will never love you again</i>        |
| <i>for I know you drink</i>     |                                           |
| <i>lamentation, too,</i>        | <i>unless you ask me</i>                  |

That last line strikes a chord with all of us who love God with a degree of unease that has nothing at all to do with unbelief. Ostriker writes: "*The Psalms are glorious. No, the Psalms are terrible. No, the Psalms are both glorious and terrible, both attractive and repulsive to me emotionally and theologically. I read as a poet and a woman, a literary critic and a left-wing Jew who happens to be obsessed with the Bible. And when I read these poems, I experience a split-screen effect: wildly contradictory responses. As Catullus says: 'I love and hate'. And it is excruciating.*

*The Psalms are overwhelmingly beautiful as poems. They represent the human spirit, my own spirit, in its intimate yearning for a connection with the divine Being who is the source of all being, the energy that creates and sustains the universe. Unlike the portions of the Bible that lay down rules and regulations (I skip these), and unlike the narratives that tell compelling tales of patriarchs and matriarchs, judges, warriors and kings, but don't tell how they feel, what they think, what it all means to them—the Psalms are love poems to God. Since the course of true love never does run smooth, the Psalms are poems of emotional turbulence."*



*St Mary's Church, Easton, river Itchen Valley*



## (594) “This and That” - 30 March 2025

*Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade*

In his remarkable ‘Love Song,’ the procrastinating, indecisive, dithering, J. Alfred Prufrock tells us:

*“I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker  
And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker.”*



*St Paul's Cathedral: Island of St Helena, South Atlantic Ocean*

### **A Cathedral Musical Director**

My own moment of greatness flickered for just two and a half years on the Island of St Helena. If ever I am tempted to boast of this in the City of Wells and at its Cathedral, it won't be the “eternal Footman” who snickers, it will be everyone within earshot.

For two and a half years I was the musical director and choirmaster of a cathedral. Now there's a thing. In a manner of speaking, I was right up there with the superbly qualified and hugely talented musical director of Wells Cathedral.

On the spectacular island of St Helena the church of which I was the Vicar, not the Dean, was indeed a Cathedral and on arriving to take up the post I discovered I was expected to be its musical director and choirmaster. My qualifications and talents for the task were far less than those of the musical director of Wells Cathedral. I could read music, tootle with some dexterity on a treble and tenor recorder, had learned the piano for a couple of years as a university student, with little to no success, and for a few years had sung bass in a Zimbabwean parish church choir. That was that. I had never before been a choirmaster.

What fun we had. There was a four part choir made up of lovely, dedicated folk more notable for their enthusiasm than their expertise, but with one or two experienced singers able to guide me as I felt my way into the role. It was a little like my last couple of years as a boarder at Guinea Fowl Boys High, in Rhodesia. When I became a school prefect and head of my house, I was automatically promoted to sergeant in the cadet corps and had to rely on amiable and more experienced fellows in my platoon to tell me what orders to bark at them when on the march.

### **Not with a bang but a simper**

The Cathedral choir's repertoire on St Helena was largely Victorian and the copies available to us were sufficiently tattered, torn and faded to suggest that they too were of the same vintage. Several of the choir's favourite anthems were composed by a largely forgotten Victorian with the risibile name, Caleb Simper (1856-1942). He was a prolific composer of unsophisticated Anglican music, aimed primarily at small parish choirs and unskilled organists. Though derided by the critics Simper's anthems were hugely popular in country parishes and over five million copies of them had been sold by the 1920s. His publisher touted them with the slogan “Sung throughout the civilized world”, as indeed they were, even on the island of St Helena. One of his Easter anthems began with a fortissimo, repeated and dramatic “He is Risen!” and ended with a similar fortissimo bang (no whimper in Simper), but in the middle was a sentimental, melodic piece that I thought very lovely.

In his “*Short History of English Church Music*” Erik Routley is dismissive of Caleb Simper, as well as a contemporary called John Maunder and others of their ilk. He quotes Vaughan Williams' comment on them as ‘composers with ridiculous names’ and goes on to say that “their names are about the one thing these composers couldn't help; other aspects of their activities are less innocent.”

## Keith Richards, music and God

If, like me, music takes you closer to the gates of heaven than any argument, lecture, dissertation or sermon, then Wells is the best of places to be. It is a musical city. Fine choirs abound and even the congregations sing lustily, filled as they are with retired choristers. When the Cathedral Choir is on holiday there are plenty of excellent choirs to fill in for them and the Cathedral School is one of the most notable musical educational establishments in Europe. It fields many superb instrumental and vocal soloists as well as choirs small and great, a variety of chamber ensembles and a full symphony orchestra.



*Lot's Wife: Island of St Helena, South Atlantic Ocean*

Music and God are closely related and you don't need to be a lover of only highbrow music to receive intimations of this. Frank Lawton, in a review of David Remnick's *"Holding the Note: Writing on Music"* quotes the Rolling Stone's Keith Richards: "If you're working the right chord you can hear this other chord going on behind it, which actually you're not playing. It's there. It defies logic." Lawton then comments, "Music speaks to what we know but do not understand. One way to talk about music, then, is to talk about God."

AN Wilson, in his 2009 book: *Return to Faith*, writes: "When I think about atheist friends, including my father, they seem to me like people who have no ear for music, or who have never been in love. It is not that (as they believe) they have rumbled the tremendous fraud of religion - prophets do that in every generation. Rather, these unbelievers are simply missing out on something that is not difficult to grasp. Perhaps it is too obvious to understand; obvious, as lovers feel it was obvious that they should have come together, or obvious as the final resolution of a fugue."

## Bliss in ignorance

I was emboldened by my stint at St Paul's Cathedral on St Helena and became choirmaster in every parish of which I was Rector in Australia for 28 years. In ignorant bliss I composed descants and psalm chants, fitted the melodies of secular songs to sacred verse and tinkered with tunes and verse metres. I managed to gather good sized choirs of reasonably voiced choristers with always one or two exceptional voices for ambitious solos. It was time consuming, all absorbing and huge fun. There really is bliss to be found in ignorance.



*Spearey Island:  
viewed from  
St Helena Island,  
South Atlantic*



## (593) “This and That” - 23 March 2025

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade

The Greek god of artisans, blacksmiths, carpenters, craftsmen, fire, metallurgy, metalworking, sculpture and volcanoes was Haephestus. He had a daughter called Eupheme, a lesser deity and the ‘daemon’ or guiding spirit of praise, acclamation and shouts of triumph. The word *euphemism* is indirectly related to her name.

### Spanker Lane

She came to mind when we passed through the village of Evercreech on the way to our dentist in Wincanton last week. The road alongside the fine, 14<sup>th</sup> century church of St Peter, with its impressive 93 feet high tower, is narrow and requires slow and careful driving. As we passed by we noticed a narrow lane with an interesting nameplate: “*Church View, formerly Twaddle Alley.*”

“*Church View*” is a plodding, unimaginative euphemism for the four syllabled, musical lilt of *Twaddle Alley*. As we pressed on, we speculated as to the origin of such a dull swap and supposed it to have been to appease an over sensitive, long-winded, twaddle-talking vicar of St Peter’s church, distressed at the all too obvious appropriateness of an alley so named, alongside his church.

Diana and I live in an ancient street with a similarly euphemised odonym, its nameplate reads: “*Union Street, formerly Grope Street*”. The word “*Grope*” suggests a neighbourhood more lurid and less salubrious than today.

Not all interesting or embarrassing street names in our land have been euphemised. There remains *Titty Ho* in Raunds, Northamptonshire; *Butthole Lane* in Shepshed, Leicestershire; *Spanker Lane* in Belper, Derbyshire; *Slag Lane*, in Merseyside, Lancashire; *Back Passage* in the City of London, and more, and worse.

### Mary my child’s lovely

Last Sunday, while shaving, I listened to the second of Radio Four’s series of *Lent Talks*, all of which are based on the Nicene Creed, as this year is the creed’s 17<sup>th</sup> centenary. The talk was by Frances Young, far from young these days, older even than I am, but her talk was rivetting, beautifully delivered and both intellectually and emotionally moving. She’s a Methodist minister and an outstanding academic and theologian. The snippets that follow don’t do her talk justice, but impart the gist.

*“.....In 1967 my first, much wanted, baby was born, a son we called Arthur. But before he was nine months old it was clear things were not right with him. The diagnosis....was ‘placental insufficiency’. He never walked, he never talked, he had no self-help skills, never learned to feed himself, was never toilet trained. He needed total care and for the entire 54 years of his life, his understanding and responses were those of a child of about 13 months. He did eventually smile, he did come to recognise people and places, he did giggle....and he had a profound response to music. He also had a significant impact on the lives of a number of people, and after my ordination in mid-life, he became part of my ministry. Or rather, I would now boldly affirm that he had his own vocation, and say that God’s purposes were fulfilled in him. Does that mean almighty God intended him to have such a damaged life? Or was it just a prenatal accident and accidents happen in this world?”*



*St Peter’s Church, Evercreech*

*“For years I really struggled with those “Why” questions, but gradually, over time, I received key moments of insight. There was that poem that came into my head as I pushed Arthur in his buggy up the road from the local convent..... In that Roman Catholic Chapel I, unusually, found myself right close to a huge statue of Mary. As we went home, these words just came to me.*

*Mary my child’s lovely, is yours lovely too?  
Little hands, little feet, curly hair, smiles sweet.  
Mary, my child’s broken, is yours broken too?  
Crushed by affliction, hurt by rejection,  
Disfigured, stricken, silent submission.  
Mary, my heart’s bursting, is yours bursting too,  
Bursting with labour, travail and pain,  
Bursting with agony, ecstasy, gain,  
Bursting with sympathy, anger, compassion,  
Bursting with praising, love’s transfiguration,  
Mary, my heart’s joyful, is yours joyful too?*

*“Slowly I began to see that the Christian answer to the “Why” questions is Jesus Christ, the one who took upon himself all the gone-wrongness of the world and transformed it.....someone once said to me, ‘Arthur is your gateway to God’. ‘Almighty God’, we pray, acknowledging our creatureliness and dependence, yet the God known in Jesus is not an omnipotent, triumphant fixer, but a hidden, elusive, loving & redeeming presence, gently transforming everything through sheer grace.”*

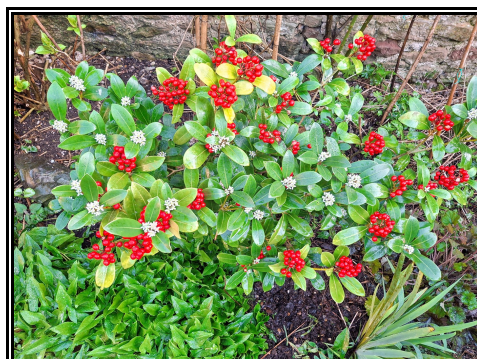
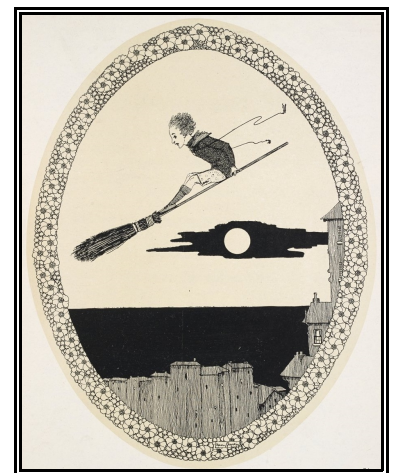
She’s especially illuminating on the French mystic Simone Weil’s: ‘Creation was an act of abandonment.’ “What she seems to have meant is something like this: if anything other than the infinite God was to exist at all, or be its true self, God had to withdraw, to get out of the way, so to speak. God took a risk and allowed the freedom of things to develop, to evolve, so accidents happen and people are free to go their own way, to live for themselves, to take control and ignore God, even to do the most terrible things to one another.” If you didn’t hear the talk, go to BBC Sounds for Sunday 16 March at 5.45am, or paste into Google: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m0028tnv>.

### **Soft red anemones**

Last week I came across this simple verse by *Patrick R Chalmers*,  
1872-1942 and loved it:

#### **If I had a Broomstick**

If I had a broomstick, and knew how to ride it,  
I’d fly through the windows when Jane goes to tea,  
And over the tops of the chimneys I’d guide it,  
To lands where no children are cripples like me;  
I’d run on the rocks with the crabs and the sea,  
Where soft red anemones close when you touch;  
If I had a broomstick, and knew how to ride it,  
If I had a broomstick instead of a crutch!



*Skimmia japonica*



## (592) “This and That” - 16 March 2025

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



*The first camelia*

To be shriven, forgiven and reconciled with God and neighbour rarely comes easily and at no cost. To be able to put behind and transcend past nastinesses, selfishnesses and sins, calls for effort, penance and willing reparation. Though to dwell upon such matters too enthusiastically can be, in itself, morally perilous:

### **Vanity**

Once in a saintly passion  
I cried with desperate grief,  
O Lord, my heart is black with guile,  
Of sinners I am chief.  
Then stooped my guardian angel  
And whispered from behind,  
“Vanity, my little man,  
You're nothing of the kind.”

*James Thompson 1834-82*

### **Flipping the script**

At the beginning of Lent, pious Christians turn to the clergy for God’s shriving, cleansing and forgiveness. However, at the Cathedral this year, two of the clergy flipped the script and turned to the laity, in the person of Diana, for cleansing.

At the 10.30am Ash Wednesday liturgy, the building heaved with humanity. The Cathedral school and its splendid choir was in attendance and the packed nave buzzed and pulsed with life. To “ash” the forehead of all and sundry with confident and well ordered aplomb, required calm and cool dexterity on the part of the priestly dispensers of ash and a confident marshalling of the crowd by the stewards.

As is usual in the Cathedral all went beautifully well, except that the ash had been over olive-oiled into rather too fluid viscosity. *Quelle horreur!* The brilliant white albs of two of the clergy were inadvertently besmirched and despoiled by dribblets of oily black ash. As an experienced priest I was asked how best to remove what might become a permanent stain and I responded wisely: “ask Diana”. She, with the aid of a discarded tooth brush, a variety of soapy substances and gentle patient, clockwise and anti clockwise rubbing, encouraged all traces of evil gradually to dissolve. The two clergy concerned can now alb up as white and radiant as angels.

### **The little sign of the cross**

One of my favourite hymns is Prudentius’ “*Servant of God, remember*” it is a perfect prayer for insomniacs and its second verse goes:

When kindly slumber calls thee,  
Upon thy bed reclining,  
Trace thou the Cross of Jesus,  
Thy heart and forehead signing.

The heart and forehead signing is what is known as the “lesser,” “small” or “little” sign of the cross, a variant of the more usual and expansive one. In AD 204, the Church Father,

Tertullian, wrote: “*In all our actions, when we come in or go out, when we dress, when we wash, at our meals, before retiring to sleep, we form on our foreheads the sign of the cross. This small, lovely “gesture-prayer” is made with the thumb of the right hand on the forehead, lips, and heart. It*



*Narcissus poeticus*



*Spring lambs, Warborne Farm, Pilley*

is most commonly made, by both the celebrant and the worshippers before the reading of the Gospel at the Eucharist and it is this “lesser sign of the cross” that is made on the forehead on Ash Wednesdays, as well as during the rites of baptism and when anointing the sick.

The Cathedral’s final Ash Wednesday liturgy, at 5.15pm, took place in the numinous gloom of the Quire and I was transported by its beauty and peace. The choir was in

perfect voice and the music wholly to my liking: *Byrd, Allegri, plainsong* and *Tallis*. The singing of *Allegri*’s renowned ‘Miserere’ was heart-stopping perfection. Two treble soloists discreetly departed the quire to sing the ethereal, stratospheric solos alternately from the retro quire. I was awestruck and transfixed with wonder and gratitude.

### **Stale respectability**

It is the historical Jesus of Nazareth, insofar as he can be seen, perceived or known at all, that most intrigues and fascinates me about our faith. It is his likeness to us, rather than his difference from us, that I look for and most respond to.

As is to be expected in a Christian priest, I wholly believe in the Incarnation, but incarnation it has to be and must be, that is, an unutterable, unimaginable and total one-of-usness. Hence, perhaps, my pleasure in this little ditty by *Edith Brown Mirick* (1883-1972) which I happened upon recently:

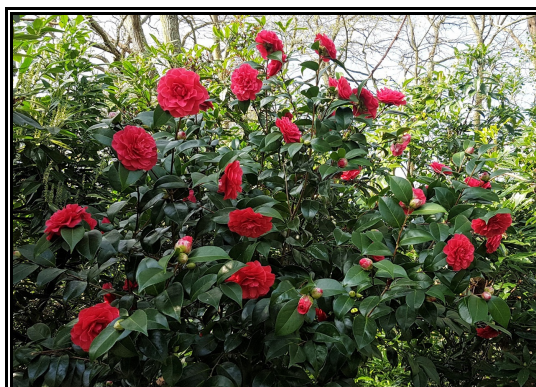
### **Black Sheep**

There may perhaps be something to be said for black sheep!  
Full many a man has had a son he could not seem to keep  
In stale respectability at any kind of work  
And so the boy is painted black and branded as a shirk.

But what is one man’s poison is another man’s meat;  
What tastes to one tongue sour, to another tongue tastes sweet.

I do not doubt that Mary sat of evenings with a frown  
And wondered why young Jesus ran about from town to town;  
Why he ran about a-preaching and a-setting folks on fire.  
What one man thinks is useless is another man’s desire.

What one man casts away as dross another man may keep...  
There may perhaps be something to be said for black sheep.



*Camelias*



## (591) “This and That” - 9 March 2025

*Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade*

Thank God for bolt-holes. We all need refuges, retreats, places to be entirely and completely alone and away from everyone, a private place, a privy.

### **The white-tiled cabin**

In 1965 W H Auden published a book of verse called “About the House”. It contains a sequence of poems about his house in Kirchstetten, Austria and there’s a witty, punning, scatological, ten stanza, poem about the lavatory. As you might expect, from a thoughtful Christian like Auden, it doesn’t disdain theological comment. Here are just three of its more acceptable stanzas:

### **Geography of the House.**

- |                                                                                                                                                                                                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Seated after breakfast<br>In this white-tiled cabin<br>Arabs call the House where<br>Everybody goes,<br>Even melancholics<br>Raise a cheer to Mrs.<br>Nature for the primal<br>Pleasure She bestows. | 4. Revelation came to<br>Luther in a privy<br>(Crosswords have been solved there)<br>Rodin was no fool<br>When he cast his Thinker,<br>Cogitating deeply,<br>Crouched in the position<br>Of a man at stool. |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

9. (Orthodoxy ought to  
Bless our modern plumbing:  
Swift and St. Augustine  
Lived in centuries  
When a stench of sewage  
Made a strong debating  
Point for Manichees.

*The Manichees: a heretical sect who insisted  
that all matters to do with the flesh were corrupt.*



*Msasa trees in spring, Zimbabwe  
(Copyright: Frankie Kay)*

### **Musing in a msasa tree**

For a boy who shared a bedroom with his brother and was a school boarder from the age of eleven, bolt holes were all the more precious for being hard to come by. On our mission station in Rhodesia my favourite was a comfortable branch, high in a large msasa tree near our house. I liked to sit there on my own and muse, joined occasionally by a faintly surprised Cape turtle dove settling on nearby twig with a contented croon. At boarding school privacy was all but impossible to find, except behind a lavatory door or at night in a bed which, during summer, was turned into a solo tent by its mosquito net.

As a parish priest my bolt hole was never my study, with its insistent phone, doorbell and frequent invasions from four, usually welcome, lively offspring. Instead my retreat to privacy was next door, my prayer desk in the church.

I dearly loved the cream walled, green tin-roofed church of my first parish in Gatooma, Rhodesia. It was a few yards from the rectory, across a lawn upon which we sometimes deposited



*All Saints Church and Chapel, Gatooma*

There I sat or knelt at my desk with the shaded glass windows open in summer to the calls of swooping swifts, hooping hoopoes, crooning doves and the frenzied humming of bees in a great eucalyptus tree. As the day's heat increased, cicadas added a monotonous, mesmeric descant to our praise.

From then on church chapel bolt-holes became essential to my life as a priest, wondrous corners, cubbies, nooks, hideaways and refuges in which to be devout or to scheme, sad or happy, vengeful or forgiving, anxious or at peace. I was on my own, away from it all with my Maker, sometimes acknowledged, sometimes not.

### Hair ice

My daughter's house, on the Hampshire/Surrey border, is 610 feet above sea level and more liable to winter snowfalls than Wells. Nearby is *Waggoners Lane*, alongside *Ludshott Common*, leading down to beautiful, well wooded *Waggoner's Wells* about 480 feet above sea level. Last week, early on a frosty morning, I walked around the small lakes at *Waggoners Wells* with my son and Phoebe his dog. We witnessed an astonishing, natural phenomenon never before seen or even heard of. On some of the rotting branches and twigs, at rest on the leaf litter beneath the trees, was a fleece of bright, white wool, two or three inches thick, composed of fine, fine filaments of soft ice.

Research reveals this to be what is known as *hair ice*, sometimes called *ice wool* or *frost beard*. It is a relatively rare phenomenon that appears to occur only between latitudes 45 and 55°N, in broadleaf forests and woods.



*Hair Ice, Waggoners Wells, Surrey* fungus shapes the ice into fine hairs through an uncertain mechanism and appears to stabilize it by providing a recrystallization inhibitor similar to antifreeze proteins. Wondrous, wondrous, and very lovely.

The fleece forms on moist, rotting wood when temperatures are slightly under 0 °C and the air is humid. Its hairs appear to root at the mouth of wood rays (never on the bark), and their thickness is similar to the diameter of the wood ray channels. Any piece of wood that produces hair ice once is likely to continue to produce it over several years. Each of the smooth, silken hairs has a diameter of about 0.02 mm and a length of up to 20 cm. and the hairs take the shape of curls and waves and maintain their shape for hours and sometimes days.

It was only in 2015 that scientists identified the fungus *Exidiopsis effusa* as key to the formation of *hair ice*. The

fungus shapes the ice into fine hairs through an uncertain mechanism and appears to stabilize it by providing a recrystallization inhibitor similar to antifreeze proteins. Wondrous,



*Hair Ice, Waggoners Wells*

chameleons to allow our little boys to see them shoot out their long, tacky tongues to catch and gobble grasshoppers. To begin with there was no lovely chapel in which to place my bolt-hole of a desk, with all its comforting bric a brac: a rosary, a crucifix, icons, poetry anthologies, prayer books and notepad. For a year or two I had to make do with a gloomy, windowless alcove, until we added an airy chapel to the building.



## (590) “This and That” - 2 March 2025

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



*Healthy Boldre Vicarage potatoes*

Potatoes under extreme stress, like many human beings, can turn bitter, nasty and poisonous. Eat an excess of light-exposed, insect-violated, green-about-the-gills spuds and you might well find yourself suffering from nausea, diarrhoea, vomiting, stomach cramps, burning of the throat, cardiac dysrhythmia, nightmares, headaches, dizziness, itching, eczema, thyroid problems and pain in the joints.

### **Rotten potatoes**

In the mid 1960s, during long, summer, university vacations, I worked on a Rhodesian farm that produced potatoes, maize, tobacco, strawberries, eggs and broiler chickens. Among my several responsibilities was the supervision of a band of hugely likeable but extremely coarse and ribald potato reapers. The unearthed potatoes were plump and healthy but, like English men and women, if left too long in the hot African sun, they tended to blister. If the blisters burst when the potatoes were heaped in a barn, they would begin to fester and turn the potatoes rotten. The smell of rotting potatoes is among the foulest of all stench.

Many years later, in Australia, I got to know and became friendly with a remarkable Anglican priest called Ivan Head. An articulate and highly intelligent academic and poet he conducted a priests' retreat in my Diocese. In an irresistible little poem, he turns his attention to potatoes:

### **A Prior Potato Sermon**

*The Churchyard wall by the copse  
divides two crops  
into Potatoes one side  
and corpses the other.  
One day there will be  
a clearer distinction between the two,  
a difference in lumpish density  
as Aquinas put it,  
long before the potato reached Europe.  
One will still be food for frying.  
The other, though tangible,  
may become bright, clear, radiant, agile and undying.  
Most of the time I think I would prefer  
to be harvested by an angel,  
But for now I really feel like a chip.*

In the two Australian country dioceses I served in, all practising clergy were required to attend an annual diocesan retreat and I, for one, was more than happy to do so. We spent four of five days in a monastery, college or resort of some kind, usually in a lovely location and were well wined and dined. We were expected to attend daily church services, a series of talks and to be silent. Otherwise we were left alone to walk, read, think, pray and rest. I fondly recall my solicitous wife popping a block or two of chocolate into my suitcase before I left, and realising that she was looking forward to a few days of quiet, on her own, as much as I was looking forward to my few days of peace away.

Of all the retreats I attended Ivan Head's were among the very best. He is a gentle, well read, subtle, witty and inclusive Christian thinker. My journal records one of the points he made in his talks, ".....*The disciples were not queuing up at the tomb waiting for the resurrection - it was a surprise, and this is a good first principle for interpreting the Gospels, all those predictions of what was to happen were written after the fact.....*"

### **Sombreros**

There are many reasons for remaining happily within the Christian fold and one of them is made, if somewhat obliquely, by the highly intellectual poet Wallace Stevens (1879-1955). The last of his *Six Significant Landscapes* (he himself converted to the faith only on his death bed) goes as follows:

*Rationalists, wearing square hats,  
Think, in square rooms,  
Looking at the floor;  
Looking at the ceiling.  
They confine themselves  
To right-angled triangles.  
If they tried rhomboids,  
Cones, waving lines, ellipses -  
As, for example, the ellipse of the half-moon -  
Rationalists would wear sombreros.*

### **Interesting sinners, boring saints**

Theodore Dalrymple writes:

*"It is more difficult to write interestingly of good people than of bad; villains are generally more memorable than heroes. A newspaper that reported only acts of kindness and generosity would be insufferably boring and would go bankrupt even faster than those that relay only disaster caused by defalcation..... To adapt very slightly Tolstoy's famous aphorism, good people are all good in the same way, but bad people are all bad in their own way.*

### **Impertinence**

In 2006 I developed a real rapport with the son in law of a rough diamond whose funeral I was asked to take. I was delighted by the son in law's impertinent start to the eulogy: "*His first smoke was at age 7, he first got drunk at 12, his first sexual experience was at 14.... but that's enough of talking about Father Andrew.....*"



*St Cuthbert's Church - Wells City Church*



## (589) “This and That” - 23 February 2025

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade

“Purple pigface” is the name of a widespread, ground-creeping, succulent plant that is common to Australian gardens and far beyond.



*Purple Pigface - (Garden Express Australia)*

### Defenestrated bishops

It has profuse, brightly coloured, purple flowers, fleshy, triangular shaped leaves and usefully, is sandy-soil-binding and drought resistant. It is also invasive and therefore common, these days, throughout the Mediterranean basin. In the middle of a bleak English February I recall it's sun-loving cheeriness fondly, “purple pigface”(carpobrotus modestus). It's a name more applicable to a boozy, rubicund faced bishop than to sunny, antipodean flowers. I've known one or two such bishops.

To be a bishop can bring little joy these days. Since coming to England in 2013, I've witnessed two of them deposed. The bishop of my own diocese of Winchester, Tim Dakin, was squeezed out in 2022. The same fate has now befallen Archbishop Justin Welby. Justified or not, their defenestration points to the grave difficulties and problems that come with holding episcopal office in times like these.

In the affluent developed world, the Church is in steep decline. To manage and negotiate this is a depressing and difficult business. It is still possible to be a successful parish priest, to build up a congregation and set a parish humming, but for a bishop to be as successful with a diocese is out of the question. His task is all to do with managing contraction and decline. We pray regularly during church services for our bishops. They need and deserve those prayers.

### An onerous honour

There are priests who still aspire to the onerous honour of a bishopric though, who fancy placing a great spinnaker on their head, dressing in bright purple and rising above their level of competence. In times only marginally less dire than now, I wrote a disgraceful piece of verse to aid those of my colleagues with such lofty aspirations, here are a few of its less embarrassing lines:

### How to become a bishop

*Let me open wide the door  
To purple pleasures by the score.  
To crosier, mitre, ring, chimere,  
Rochet, gaiter, haughty sneer  
And best of all, by all adored,  
The appellation grand, “My Lord.”  
Firstly, never give offence,  
The mitre's lost in recompense.  
Avoid the merest hint of strife,  
And cultivate your bishop's wife.*

*Be blancmangey-bland, not bold,  
And never strong opinions hold.  
Keep well abreast of every fashion,  
Support what's new with cautious passion.  
Liturgically be safe and sound,  
Feet firmly on progressive ground.  
With condescension smug and snide,  
“Sixteen sixty two” deride.  
Acquire a second class degree,  
And then a Yankee Ph.D.....*

We are about to enter a period of speculation, consultation and “discernment” prior to the appointment of a new Archbishop of Canterbury. It is unlikely to be hurried. That is not how the

Church of England operates. Rowan Williams resigned as Archbishop in March 2012, Justin Welby, his successor, was not enthroned until March 2013.

### **Suddenly disinclined to decline**

I once served on an “Electoral Commission” to find a bishop for a deeply divided diocese in Australia. I was one of twelve: six clergy and six laity. It was a fraught and difficult process, but with a few comical moments. For example, four of the six clergy on the Commission were themselves nominated for the vacancy we were attempting to fill (I wonder why I was not of them, hem hem!) At our first meeting, the four who were nominated began, one by one, to decline nomination with seemingly modesty. The last of the four, however, decided that he would let his name, “at this stage”, go forward. Immediately one of those who had declined nomination became, all of a sudden, disinclined to decline. He decided to remain on the list of hopefuls after all, futilely, as it turned out. His sudden change of heart was very funny. Though not necessarily in technicolour, the visions of some clerics are most certainly purple.

### **I remember him at Eton**

*Here, slightly edited, is the historian Paul Johnson’s account of the casual, but altogether satisfactory appointment to the bishopric of Bath and Wells of George Kennion, Bishop of Adelaide in South Australia:* “In 1894 the prime minister of England was Lord Rosebery, a sumptuous millionaire not inclined to spend his days worrying about clerical appointments. A colonial bishop, George Kennion of Adelaide, was on leave. At his club an acquaintance, as a joke, asked him, ‘Have you called on the PM yet?’ The bishop: ‘No, why should I?’ The friend: ‘My dear sir, surely you must know that all colonial bishops are expected to see the PM and tell him, fairly briefly of course, what is going on in their diocese. If you don’t call, it is sure to be noticed and remarked upon.’ Credulous and by now thoroughly flustered, the bishop put on his best clothes and hastened to see him but was told that Rosebery was at Epsom it being Derby Day. So he left his card. As it happened, Rosebery’s horse, *Laidas*, won the Derby. When he returned in triumph to his sumptuous home in Berkeley Square, a vast crowd of successful punters came to cheer. He appeared on the balcony and saluted them, a glass of champagne in hand. The delighted PM was in due course handed the bishop’s card. ‘Decent of him to call. I remember him at Eton. Wasted in the colonies.’ He turned to his secretary. ‘Have we anything coming up?’ ‘The see of Bath and Wells, my Lord.’ ‘Right - it’s his.’ So the glorious palace next to Wells Cathedral, with its moat and its enchanting garden, was handed to the unknown cleric, who continued to occupy it for a quarter of a century, to the complete satisfaction of the diocese.....”

*St John’s Boldre  
in Spring*





## (588) “This and That” - 16 February 2025

*Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade*

“Life is so flat,” said Philip Larkin, “you can see your own tombstone at the other end.” Hence the appeal of England’s winding country lanes and of this verse by Edith Merick (1883-1972):

### **Crooked Roads**

*I am afraid of straight roads  
That stretch into the sun.  
I would walk a crooked road,  
A stumbling rutted one.*

*I would walk a crooked road  
Winding among trees;  
If it has an end it is  
One that no one sees.*

*I would walk a crooked road  
And wonder at each bend.  
I am afraid of straight roads  
With their certain end.*



*Traffic on the Nullarbor Plain - Australia*

In 2018 Diana and I drove 3,400 miles across Australia from Perth to Tamworth in New South Wales, by way of Port Augusta and Broken Hill. On the Eyre Highway, across the Nullarbor Plain, between the undistinguished roadhouse communities of Balladonia and Caiguna, there occurs “the ninety mile straight”, without a single curve or bend. Although too far to see a skyscraper at its other end, let alone a tombstone, if either of us had fallen asleep at the wheel, or been daft enough to drive at dusk and hit a kangaroo, wombat, emu or camel, a tombstone to mark the end of our lives might well have been achieved sooner than anticipated.

The journey across the Nullarbor was by no means boring, there is something mesmerically beautiful about sameness. It grants to every little pimple of oddity, peculiarity or difference an unexpected and notable significance, be it in the landscape, skyscape, conversation or on the radio. A roadside patch of brightly coloured Sturt desert peas, in full flower, called for instant braking, a turn round and a delighted inspection of them, with a mug of coffee and biscuit in hand.

On Highway 85 in Saudi Arabia there’s a straight stretch of 510 miles. In Paraguay there’s one of 128 miles and another in the USA of 121 miles. Australia is not quite in the first league.

### **Learning to drive on strip roads**

I love driving and learned to do so in Rhodesia, in an elderly short-wheel-drive landrover, on dirt and “strip roads”. At the time we lived about 40 miles north east of Harare on a bush mission station. It was situated a few miles down a dirt road that turned off the 147 mile long road from Harare to Nyampanda on the Mocambique border. In those days that main road was a “strip road”, that is, a dirt road with two narrow, parallel strips of tarmac, one for each wheel. When a vehicle from the opposite direction approached, you were expected to move to the left, leaving only the right hand wheels of your car on a strip, while the other vehicle passed. If you were wise you closed your windows to prevent clouds of dust flowing in to settle on your glasses and choke you. There was often a rain eroded six inch or more step down off the strip to the dirt. The two wheels that remained on tarmac helped prevent dangerous skids in loose sand. It made for exciting and eventful driving.



*Strip road remnant - Zimbabwe 2015 (Photo “Mike”)*

Strip roads were a relatively inexpensive way of opening up what was then Southern Rhodesia for development. By 1945 there were well over 2,000 miles of them in that country, though now almost all have been replaced by full width or half width tarmac roads, except in a few very remote areas.

### Returning to Eden

Though many of us try to do so, it's unsatisfactory and often disillusioning to return to the Garden of Eden,

..... *that idyl of a long ago*

*When love, unmarred by wisdom, walled the earth.*

I made an attempt to do so in 2012. Diana and I boarded the South African polar research vessel, the S A Agulhas II, for a voyage back to Tristan da Cunha, where, in the nineteen fifties, from the age of seven to eleven and enveloped in familial love and scenic sublimity, my later self tells me I had indeed dwelt in Eden.



*Approaching the Settlement: Tristan da Cunha*

After six days at sea, early in the morning, we made our way to the ship's observation deck for one of the most memorable experiences of my long and varied life. There before me, drawing nearer in dawn sunshine and a stiff, cold breeze, was the island's tiny and only settlement, a cluster of small, bright bungalows, defying the sublime vastness of a great mountain and wild ocean. I was beholding, for the first time with adult eyes, my personal narrative's Garden of Eden: an isolated, utterly unique, seriously strange island, the enchanted, haunting pivot of my parents' and siblings lives and my own

happily remembered Edenic paradise.

We spent three wonderful weeks there, living in the tiny vicarage, taking church services, visiting and reminiscing with fellow school pupils of more than half a century before, exploring old haunts and walking the settlement plateau from east to west and back again and again. We visited too, for the first time, Nightingale Island, 25 miles away, to delight in nesting albatrosses and petrels. Wonderful.

However, an adult's eyes are not a child's. They disenchant Eden. Although we loved the island, gloried in its beauty and in memories revisited, revived and coloured, there were problems, unhappinesses and difficulties aplenty all too evident as well. Eden exists in retrospect not prospect, it belongs to beginnings not ends. The poet Edith Mirick concludes a remarkable poem called *Return to Eden*, as follows:

*Autumn lies over Eden. We have come  
Seeking a far enchanted Spring, to find  
That garden sunk in ruin, fallen dumb,  
Which long has choired in coverts of the mind,  
From all the fruit of whose remembered flowers,  
Love, and her wisdom, only, have been ours.*



*Sturt Desert Peas - Nullarbor Plain - Australia*



## (587) “This and That” - 9 February 2025

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



St Francis' Church, Stawell, Somerset

A ten mile long range of hills called *Polden Ridge*, never more than 400 feet above sea level, bisects the low-lying, sometimes inundated and intriguing *Somerset Levels*. The colonialist Romans built a road along the ridge's top, before the winds of change wafted them back to Rome.

### The murder of Jeering John

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century an incident at Marshall's Elm pub, at the south east end of the ridge, inspired a characteristically gloomy, long narrative poem by Thomas Hardy called “*A Trampwoman's Tragedy*.”

.....Full twenty miles we jaunted on,  
We jaunted on, —  
My fancy-man, and jeering John,  
And Mother Lee, and I.  
And, as the sun drew down to west,  
We climbed the toilsome Polden crest,  
And saw, of landscape sights the best,  
The inn that beamed thereby.

.... Polden top at last we won,  
At last we won,  
And gained the inn at sink of sun  
Far-famed as 'Marshal's Elm'.  
Beneath us figured tor and lea,  
From Mendip to the western sea —  
I doubt if any finer sight there be  
Within this royal realm.

The poem tells of a pregnant “trampwoman” and three companions: her “fancy man”, an older woman called “Mother Lee” and “jeering John”, walking the Somerset roads and lanes together. Merely to tease her “fancy man”, the trampwoman flirts so outrageously with “jeering John” it provokes her lover to stab the man to death in a rage.

As it that's not gloomy enough, “Mother Lee” dies and on the day of her lover's execution, the trampwoman miscarries. When visited by her executed lover's ghost and asked if her miscarried child was his or not, she reassures him that it was indeed his. The ghost departs with a smile leaving the trampwoman to wander alone, “haunting the Western Moor”.

Hardy considered this sad tale his most successful poem. It formed the basis of a ballet called *The Vagabonds*, choreographed by Anthony Burke, to the music of John Ireland, and premiered at Sadler's Wells in 1946 ”

### A tale of two Stawells

Diana and I travelled along Polden Ridge for a while last Sunday, before turning south on a narrow lane down the scarp to the tiny village of *Stawell*. There, in a small, chapel-like, thirteenth century church, I officiated at the Eucharist and preached. *Stawell* is an interesting village on the way to nowhere and so relatively unvisited and unknown.

From 1991-96 I was rector of the pleasing Australian town of *Ararat*. 20 miles to the north west lies another substantial Australian country town called *Stawell*. I assumed it to be named after Somerset's *Stawell*, because nostalgic English immigrants to Australia named many a patch of dry antipodean dirt after the fondly remembered, lush, green vales of home.

This was not the case with Australia's *Stawell*. The town is named after Sir William Stawell (1815–89), an Irish born lawyer who emigrated to Australia in search of fame and fortune. On arriving at Port Philip, then still a part of New South Wales, he began working as a barrister and soon

built up a considerable practice. He was imposing of physique, a daunting figure in the courtroom, a frequenter of racecourses and a participant in amateur steeplechases. He led a fairly wild and dissolute life until, in 1848, he happened to hear a fiery sermon from Bishop Charles Perry which caused him to change direction and become and remain a devout Anglican. He was Victoria's first Attorney General and played a leading role in setting the fledgling state on the road to prosperity and success.

### Cacophonous corellas and “big things”



*The Giant Koala, near Stawell, Australia*

There are excellent wineries around Ararat and Stawell, one of which provided my Ararat church with fine communion wine. At that winery, on a perfect day in early May, beneath the outstretched, benedictory branches of great gum trees, I blessed the year's new wine. The vines were in striking autumnal colour as a chorus of dazzling white corellas remained reverentially silent while our parish choir, in dazzling white surplices, sang but were derisively cacophonous once I began speaking.

Nineteen miles north west of *Stawell* is the “Giant Koala” a fine example of one of Australia's very, very many “big things”. These are tourist traps placed alongside highways to entice travellers to stop and explore the locality. Though considered a uniquely Australian form of “folk art”, they developed and evolved more or less contemporaneously in the USA, with a similar, gung ho, proud lack of taste.

Some demonstrate admirable wit and architectural ingenuity and a few are significant sculptures. On our road trip from Darwin to the Great Australian Bight in 2016, we passed the mighty *Anmatjere*



*Anmatjere man* (photo: Jarrod Walkabout)

*Man*, (also known as the big Aboriginal hunter) an impressive sculpture that took its artist Mark Egan a year to construct in 2005. Some years later he decided the mighty man needed a family and so there is now *Anmatjere Woman and child*, plus a goanna, all hugely impressive.

### Completing the big lap

Retired Australians who take to the road in motor homes or caravans for extended periods of time are called “grey nomads”. To circumnavigate the continent by road is to complete “the big lap”. Part of the fun could be to visit as many as possible of the 1,075 “big things” that litter the landscape:

there's a koala, a lobster, a cockroach, a galah, a shark, a guitar, a dingo, a mosquito, a merino, a kookaburra, a magpie, a bush turkey, a stubby, a bunyip, an owl, a bull ant, an avocado, an axe, a banana, a bull, a cow, a whale, a mango, a Murray cod, a trout, a prawn, a barrel .....



*Anmatjere woman, child and goanna*  
(photo M E Gutsell)



*Giant mango, Bowen, Queensland* (photo: Amos T Fairchild)



## (586) “This and That” - 2 February 2025

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



Wells Cathedral High Altar, flood lit

Adam Smith (1723–90) famously wrote: *“It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest.”* By which he means, I presume, that the motive of the butcher for butchering, the brewer for brewing, the baker for baking and of anyone for anything, is essentially self-interest.

### Positive or negative

It’s a cynical observation at first glance, but on reflection tells us that virtue is its own reward. That virtues, such as benevolence, bring rewards, reap benefits, pay dividends. That cheating, grumpy, greedy butchers, bakers and brewers are more likely to go bust than benevolent ones. Is that a positive or negative observation?

If it persuades us that all altruism is essentially selfish, then it is a negative one. If it helps reinforce the significance of two parallel and acute aphorisms, then it’s a positive one:

- 1) *We are not punished for our sins, but by them.*
- 2) *We are not rewarded for our virtues, but by them.*

The first of the two comes from a collection of epigrams

by an eccentric and intriguing American writer, publisher, artist and philosopher called Elbert Green Hubbard (1856–1915). They are dear to me because, if they are taken to heart, they give the lie to the all too common accusation that we are Christian merely from fear of divine punishment and hope of divine reward which I, for one, am not.

Insofar as I am ever, all too rarely, selflessly good, the most important of my admittedly mixed motives, is not to curry divine favour, but a commitment to goodness for its own sake. Insofar as I am ever selfishly bad, my remorse is sparked not by fear of divine retribution, but by the all too evident damage done to self, those I love and others.

Hell means nothing to me. Nor am I much interested in heaven. I trust that God, the “ground of all being,” whom I believe to have revealed sacrificing love, in Jesus of Nazareth, to be life’s *raison d’être* and of His very essence, will grant me in eternity whatever love dictates as most to my good, be it annihilation, unending bliss or whatever.

### Going down with the Titanic

Elbert H Hubbard classified himself as an anarchist and it is unlikely that he was a believer at all, though God does stray into his writing in less than totally dismissive ways now and then. He is an altogether fascinating and paradoxical figure.

In writing up the sinking of the Titanic in 1912, he focussed upon a woman called Ida Straus who, because she was a woman, was allocated a place on a lifeboat in precedence to the men. She refused to take her place and leave her husband. Hubbard writes:

*“Mr. and Mrs. Straus, I envy you that legacy of love and loyalty left to your children and grandchildren. The calm courage that was yours all your long and useful career was your possession in death. You knew how to do three great things—you knew how to live, how to love and how to die. One thing is sure, there are just two respectable ways to die. One is of old age, and the other is by accident. All disease is indecent. Suicide is atrocious. But to pass out as did Mr. and Mrs. Isidor Straus is glorious. Few have such a privilege. Happy lovers, both. In life they were never separated and in death they are not divided.”*

A mere three years after the sinking of the Titanic, Hubbard and his second wife Alice boarded the Lusitania in New York. On 7 May 1915, eleven miles from the coast of Ireland, the ship was sunk by a single torpedo from a German U-boat. He appears to have met his end much as the Mrs. Straus he had so admired. A survivor of the tragedy, in a letter to Hubbard’s son wrote:

*I cannot say specifically where your father and Mrs. Hubbard were when the torpedoes hit, but I can tell you just what happened after that. They emerged from their room, which was on the port side of the vessel, and came on to the boat-deck. Neither appeared perturbed in the least. Your father and Mrs. Hubbard linked arms—the fashion in which they always walked the deck—and stood apparently wondering what to do. I passed him with a baby which I was taking to a lifeboat when he said, “Well, Jack, they have got us. They are a damn sight worse than I ever thought they were.”*

*They did not move very far away from where they originally stood. As I moved to the other side of the ship, in preparation for a jump when the right moment came, I called to him, “What are you going to do?” and he just shook his head, while Mrs. Hubbard smiled and said, “There does not seem to be anything to do.” The expression seemed to produce action on the part of your father, for then he did one of the most dramatic things I ever saw done. He simply turned with Mrs. Hubbard and entered a room on the top deck, the door of which was open, and closed it behind him. It was apparent that his idea was that they should die together, and not risk being parted on going into the water.*

### **Dylan Thomas**

Last week we finished watching “Wolf Hall”, brilliant and compelling. What a vile monster was Henry VIII. Absolute, or near absolute power, does terrible things to human beings. It gives us Stalins, Hitlers, Lukashenkos, Pol Pots, Kim Jong Uns, Putins and their like. Bismarck once said that ‘*anyone who has ever looked into the glazed eyes of a soldier dying on the battlefield will think hard before starting a war.*’ Really? Here are the first and last stanzas of a poem by Dylan Thomas that are more realistic:

### **The Hand that Signed the Paper**

|                                                        |                                                        |
|--------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>The hand that signed the paper felled a city;</i>   | <i>The five kings count the dead but do not soften</i> |
| <i>Five sovereign fingers taxed the breath,</i>        | <i>The crusted wound nor pat the brow;</i>             |
| <i>Doubled the globe of dead and halved a country;</i> | <i>A hand rules pity as a hand rules heaven;</i>       |
| <i>These five kings did a king to death.</i>           | <i>Hands have no tears to flow.</i>                    |

### **Douse the glim**

On January 15 I heard the first black bird song of the year. Last week a great tit was lustily singing its see-saw song and heart out. Snowdrops and early daffodils are blooming and days are lengthening. Blood begins to flow, January is done. In a few weeks winter will dither into spring. Much is probable, anything possible and soon, soon, it will be time....

*to make love, douse the glim;  
As fireflies twinkle and dim;  
And stars lean together  
Like birds of a feather,  
And the loin lies down with the limb.*

(Conrad Aiken 1889-1973)

Wells Cathedral Lady Chapel  
‘Lux Muralis’ display





# (585) “This and That” - 26 January 2025

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



*Crossing the Pacific*

The first mention of “*the seven seas*” occurs in an ancient Sumerian hymn from around 2,300 BC. Why seven? In ancient cultures, the number “seven” is used figuratively, in a variety of contexts, for “many” or “a great quantity” or “all”.

## **The Seven Seas**

*The seven seas*, to the ancient Greeks, were the *Persian Gulf* and the *Adriatic*, *Aegean*, *Black*, *Caspian*, *Mediterranean* and *Red seas*. The Romans used the term far more locally. To them the “*septem maria*” referred to a series of sandbank-separated lagoons at the mouth of the Po river in the *Adriatic*.

To the Arabs of the early middle ages *the seven seas* were rather more exotic. One of their authors writes: “*Whoever wants to go to China must cross seven seas, each one with its own colour and wind and fish and breeze, completely unlike the sea that lies beside it.....*” he identifies the seven as the *Persian Gulf*, *Arabian Sea*, *Bay of Bengal*, *Strait of Malacca*, *Singapore Strait*, *Gulf of Thailand* and *South China Sea*.

In British colonial times, the longest trade journey in the world was the clipper ship “Tea Route,” from China to England. That too passed through “*seven seas*”, all near to the Dutch East Indies and also of an exotic sounding sort: *the Banda*, *the Celebes*, *the Flores*, *the Java*, *the South China*, *the Sulu*, and *the Timor seas*.

Today “*the seven seas*” are taken to be the world’s seven oceans: *the Arctic*, *North Atlantic*, *South Atlantic*, *Indian*, *North Pacific*, *South Pacific* and *Southern (or Antarctic) Oceans*. Over the years I have “sailed” on five of these and when crossing the Magellan Straits to Tierra del Fuego in 2015, Diana and I imagined that we were sailing across a byway of the great Southern Ocean itself, to bring the number of oceans sailed to six. It was not so, the Magellan Straits are only 53.59° South. The Southern Ocean is generally regarded as being below 60.00° South.

## **The devil’s a weasel**

I’ve sailed the North and South Atlantic a good number of times. Twice from Southampton to Cape Town and back, on passenger/cargo/mail vessels. From Cape Town to Tristan da Cunha and back twice, first on a Royal Navy Frigate to get there and on a BP tanker to depart and the second time on a polar research vessel both there and back. From Cape Town to St Helena once, on a tiny converted munitions carrier and from St Helena to Avonmouth, on a passenger/cargo/mail boat. The Indian Ocean I’ve sailed on only once, for the final 1,862 miles of a voyage from Trieste, down the Adriatic, across the Mediterranean and round the Cape of Good Hope to Beira in Mocambique, again on a passenger/cargo vessel. The South and North Pacific likewise I’ve sailed only once, from Melbourne through the Panama canal to Philadelphia on a container vessel and from Philadelphia to Antwerp on a general cargo ship.

To categorise these voyages as ‘sailing’ is to claim too much though. As St Peter reminds us, in Charles Causley’s poem “*Mevagissey*”, the vessels I sailed the oceans on were powered by the wrong fuel. True sailors, real sailors, are propelled by sweetly silent, gently whispering, exhilaratingly roaring *pneuma*, *ruach*, *breeze*, *wind*, *gale*, *spirit*, not dirty, devilish, vile, viscous, shipping diesel:

*The devil’s a weasel and travels on diesel  
But I burn the Holy Ghost!.....*



*Crossing the Atlantic*

In the late 1960’s the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland had a sailing club with a handful of Enterprise dinghies on a dam then called “Lake Mcllwaine”, 23 miles south east of



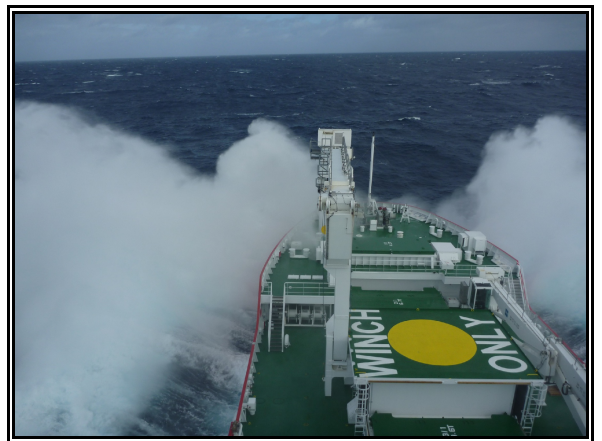
*Leaving St Helena*

Salisbury (now Harare). It's a balmy inland sea, 4,474 feet above actual sea level, with a surface area of 10 square miles. There I learned something of the sheer beauty and exhilaration of sailing, albeit in a landlocked country with the nearest ocean two and a half hundred miles away in another country.

Until then my only time spent on real sailing vessels was as a boy on Tristan da Cunha. The island 'longboats' were powered by sail and once, after a mighty storm, a broken masted yacht limped into the lee of the island, grounded itself and was abandoned on the easternmost beach of the settlement plateau. As children we played on it, pretending to be sailors. It remained there until 1961, after we had left when, like the crayfish canning factory, it disappeared under a lava flow and was no more.

### **British reticence and reserve**

A few weeks ago Diana and I attended a 70<sup>th</sup> birthday bash at the Royal Ocean Racing Club in St James' Place, London. We stayed with my nephew, in Docklands, the best of company, made our way in good time to Westminster and then sauntered up Whitehall to Trafalgar Square and along Pall Mall in the dark, enjoying the crowds and opulent buildings that are far too self-assured to blazon why or what they are there for. Long gone British reticence and reserve preserved these days only in stone. It was an excellent party, champagne, wit and wisdom abounded. For the meal I composed a grace that so successfully pretended to be familiar with the joys of sailing, several authentic yachtsman assumed me to be genuinely one of their number.



*Travelling to Tristan da Cunha*

### **Thomas Siskin's Seventieth Birthday Bash**

*For yachts and schooners, sloops and yawls;  
For roaring winds and sudden squalls;  
For oceans wild and oceans calm;  
For storms survived without a qualm;  
For sizzling speed's exhilaration,  
Its frisson, thrill and exultation;  
For halyard, hawser, hank and helm;  
For starlit nights that overwhelm;  
For bulkheads, battens, booms and backstays;  
For bays and channels, straits and byways;  
For cables, cam cleats, clews and chocks;  
For charts that keep yachts off the rocks;  
For rudders, tillers, pintles, gudgeons,  
For paradisaal tropic sojourns;  
For pulpits, pushpits, P F Ds,  
For safety in the wildest seas;  
For mooring lines and mooring balls;  
For whale fluke smacks and seabird calls;*

*But best of all, the boyish boat,  
Still buoyant, trim and well afloat,  
Still lively, sparkling, far from beached  
Who three score years and ten has reached,  
The "Thomas Siskin"! Doughty friend,  
Whose youthful looks the years transcend,  
A guide and help to those in need,  
To vicars too, a friend indeed;  
For him, for wit, for celebration;  
For feisty feast and jubilation;  
For sparkling liquor, lovely food;  
For happy atmosphere and mood;  
For jokes and sailing yarns galore;  
For wit and laughter, more and more;  
For all these blessings by the score,  
Both in the past with more in store,  
So wantonly upon us poured,  
We thank you, good and gracious Lord. Amen*



## (584) “This and That” - 19 January 2025

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



Christ Church: The Isle of Dogs

We went to church on *The Isle of Dogs* last Sunday. It is not an isle, it's a peninsular. It's surrounded on three sides by a great looping meander in the river Thames. So, why an "Isle" and why "Dogs"?

### A terrible mouth and a parboiled face

In Elizabethan times there was a small mud island offshore, known as "The Isle of Dogges" and the peninsula has been associated with the hunting dogs of both Edward III and Henry the VIII. However, my favourite of the many origins to the term on offer, is the one that claims it to have been borrowed from the title of a satirical play called "*The Isle of Dogs*", written by Ben Jonson and Thomas Nashe in 1597. It was reported to the authorities as a "*lewd plaie*" full of seditious and "*slandorous matter*", but because it was immediately suppressed no copy of it now exists, though its title appears to refer to the whole of Britain as "*The Isle of Dogs*".

Jonson was imprisoned for a year, Nashe avoided arrest only by fleeing the area. I have long cherished a description of Ben Jonson from a biography on my Kindle: "...a bruiser, intellectually and physically. He was poet, soldier and brickie. That was when poets were hard. He once walked to Edinburgh and back for a bet. He put his own shoulder to the wheel when scenery needed rotating for his masques. Towards the end of his life he weighed 20 stone. Ugly bugger, too; he was described by his sometime associate Thomas Dekker as 'a staring Leviathan' with 'a terrible mouth' and 'a parboiled face ... punched full of oilet holes, like the cover of a warming pan'."

### An island of dogs

The whole of Britain these days is very much, an "Isle of Dogs". Our canine friends are ubiquitous, are welcomed gladly into pubs, shops, and sometimes even restaurants and hotels, as well as at public gatherings of almost any sort and in church. As a "day chaplain", wandering Wells Cathedral in a cassock, I spend almost as much time engaging with and befriending dogs as their owners. I've even observed a pooch cocking a surreptitious leg against the mighty pillars of the nave. There are two dogs who attend the morning liturgy with us, both admirably behaved and pious of demeanor. As we receive the sacrament, they receive a priestly blessing. During the Sunday sung Eucharist, an occasional dog's bark is to be heard. It is possibly in protest at too long a sermon, tempting a bark of sympathetic agreement from me.

The ubiquity of dogs and their widespread acceptance in our land is one of many notable changes that have occurred over my lifetime. It is a remarkable change, but not a deplorable one. I am fond of dogs.

### Enthusiastic rhapsodists

Henry Francis Lyte 1793-1847 an accomplished poet and parson talked memorably of change. His biographer, B. G. Skinner, tells us that he was tall and "*unusually handsome...slightly eccentric but of great personal charm..... noted for his wit and human understanding, a born poet and able scholar.*" He was also an accomplished flute player, spoke Latin, Greek, and French and was something of an expert on wild flowers. He was ordained a priest in 1815, but with only a very vague sense of vocation. Then, in 1816, he underwent a profound conversion and began to preach fervent, evangelical sermons, similar to those of his colleagues he had previously dismissed as "*enthusiastic rhapsodists*". He married a keen Methodist seven years older than him who in no way could "*match her husband's good looks and personal charm*", but it was a successful and very happy marriage.

For several years they lived in Sway, just up the road from Lymington and only a couple of miles from our beloved Boldre. Diana and I attended Evensong at Sway, once a month, when we first settled in Boldre and the two parishes were linked.

### **Change and decay**

Lyte's most famous poem is the hymn "*Abide with Me*". It was sung for the first time at his own funeral, though probably written as early as 1820, inspired by the words of a dying friend to whom he was attending and who kept repeating to him the phrase, "Abide with me..." It also recalls St Luke's wondrous account of the two disciples who meet the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus and ask him to "*abide*" with them "*for it is toward evening and the day is far spent*".

Although a conservative Evangelical, Lyte began to express High Church sympathies later in life, causing a good number of his congregation to depart and join non conformist sects, like the Plymouth Brethren. Almost his entire choir left in 1846 and one chorister suggested that the line from his hymn that goes: "*When other helpers fail and comforts flee,*" refers to these choir members.

The words from the hymn that most frequently come to my mind are prompted by how much things have changed over the years of my life:

*Change and decay in all around I see.*

*O thou who changest not, abide with me.*

Mutability, transience, ephemerality, impermanence are a part of all our lives, though the words "*change*" and "*decay*" are not necessarily easy or natural bed-fellows. Change is positive as well as negative, life-giving as well as death dealing.

### **Vive la difference**

One of the reasons we are so happily settled in Wells is because of its beautiful, well-ordered and brilliantly musical liturgy. However, we do enjoy an occasional change and the visit to Christ Church, on the Isle of Dogs, was one such. It was a relaxed, friendly, laid-back, anglo-catholic service, with a sizeable Sunday School to be welcomed and to greet us at the start. The congregation was more diverse than the Cathedral's, both in age and ethnicity and the sanctuary was very far less crowded. A bearded, well-spoken, gently and just slightly fumbling priest officiated, assisted by an accomplished, multi-tasking maestro who fulfilled the role of deacon, sub-deacon, boat-boy, thurifer, master of ceremonies and sanctuary bell tinkler with impassive aplomb, aided by a whole library of books, stacked on the altar.



*Christ Church Isle of Dogs (interior)*



*Aerial view of Isle of Dogs (photo by 'Froglegs 71')*

An unrobed, enthusiastic choir was directed by a pianist and organist of unusual but impressive virtuosity. In silken, lilac trousers and a gaudy shirt, he dazzled our ears as well as our eyes with improvised piano riffs, cadenzas and glissandos, likely to be as welcome in a pub as in this remarkable church. It was a refreshing shift in key from orthodox brilliance in Wells to unorthodox brilliance on the Isle of Dogges.



## (583) “This and That” - 12 January 2025

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



Entrance to Bishop's Palace, Wells, Somerset

On the eighth of November 1999, the rector of Wodonga, in Australia, cooked for dinner, pork chops with sage and onion stuffing, grilled tomatoes, fried mushrooms, potatoes, young broad beans (picked from the garden and cooked for only five minutes), broccoli and gravy. It was followed by a South African ‘milk tert’, made by his two teenage daughters, Elisabeth and Rachel. Afterwards he read to them all 1,690 lines of John Masefield’s remarkable narrative poem “*The Everlasting Mercy*”, before they went to bed.

### Getting the whole world out of bed

Masefield is an accomplished rhymester and this long, narrative poem is a most enjoyable read. It was published in 1911 and like “*The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner*” is a “redemption poem”. It scandalized the po-faced with its sometimes harsh and coarse language, but made Masefield famous. It is the confession of a violent, drunken womanizer called Saul Kane who undergoes a series of encounters that turn him right round from sinfulness to an overpowering love of creation, humankind and God.

I recall the verse and its occasion, because I’ve been staying with one of the two girls to whom I read the poem 26 years ago. She’s now a sensitive and lovely adult, totally immersed in thoughtfully and imaginatively bringing up an extremely lively and bright three year old boy and his lovely and only marginally less lively seven month old sister. Rearing little ones, while a great joy, is also totally absorbing and relentlessly sleep and time consuming. It requires resilience, perseverance, courage and love of a sort all too rarely celebrated. While we were with her she quoted from Masefield’s poem:

*To get the whole world out of bed  
And washed, and dressed, and warmed, and fed,  
To work, and back to bed again,  
Believe me, Saul, costs worlds of pain.*

### Hark, hark, the lark

How appositely and pertinently poetry can articulate and encapsulate our hum drum, daily lives. The Australian, Peter Ryan, writes: “*A culture in which poetry and ordinary people are sundered is a sad one, but it was the poets who retreated from the relationship, and not the other way round. We did not lack warning of what might happen,..... the writer and master-craftsman C.E. Montagu (who was also editor of the Manchester Guardian) demonstrated what to expect if poetry were allowed to express no more than mere private sensibility, and if rhyme and metre were abandoned. Poets, said Montague, would simply offer us ‘ideas, unblemished by the application of mere workmanship’. Shakespeare’s ‘Hark, hark, the lark at Heaven’s gate sings’ would be rendered:*

|                    |                 |
|--------------------|-----------------|
| <i>Observe the</i> | <i>Grass</i>    |
| <i>lark</i>        | <i>still</i>    |
| <i>before</i>      | <i>plaguily</i> |
| <i>breakfast</i>   | <i>wet.”</i>    |

*Composition would become so easy that everyone would become a ‘poet’; they would proliferate like mice and spread like measles.”*

### St Peter’s Dorchester

Before Christmas, on a week’s holiday in Dorset, we attended church in St Peter’s Dorchester, outside of which is a statue of the poet William Barnes. He was born in the Blackmoor Vale, near Sturminster Newton, in North Dorset, where my daughter in law was once a curate, residing there with my son, who was a curate at nearby Marnhull.

Barnes was lowly born and left school at the age of 13, but became a polymath, poet, writer, philologist, linguist, school teacher, mathematician, engraver, inventor and a devoted Church of England priest. He appears too, to have been the very loveliest of human beings.

## The loveliest of love poems

At the age of 18 he saw an elegant young woman named Julia Miles alight from a Magnet stagecoach in the cobbled yard of Dorchester's *Kings Arms Hotel* and fell in love with her, she was fourteen. Her parents rejected him as a suitable suitor for their daughter because of his poverty, but once he decided to embark on a teaching career and had become the head of his own school for several years, he obtained her father's consent to marry her in 1827, after a nine year courtship. She was the source of intense happiness and a great support to him until her death at the early age of 47. For the rest of his life he closed each day's diary entry with the Italian form of her name: 'Guilia'.

Most of his poems are written in Dorset dialect, which can be off putting, but they are as lovely as Hardy's novels and poems in their portrayal of ordinary, humble country life, though without Hardy's deep pessimism. This poem by Barnes is surely among the loveliest of love poems. It needs to be read out loud.

### With You First Shown to Me

|                                                         |                                                      |
|---------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>With you first shown to me,</i>                      | <i>I thought of years to come,</i>                   |
| <i>With you first known to me,</i>                      | <i>All free of tears to come,</i>                    |
| <i>My life-time loomed, in hope, a length of joy:</i>   | <i>When I might call you mine, and mine alone,</i>   |
| <i>Your voice so sweetly spoke,</i>                     | <i>With steps to fall for me,</i>                    |
| <i>our mind so meetly spoke,</i>                        | <i>And day cares all for me,</i>                     |
| <i>My hopes were all of bliss without alloy,</i>        | <i>And hands for ever nigh to help my own;</i>       |
| <i>As I, for your abode, sought out, with pride,</i>    | <i>And then thank'd Him who had not cast my time</i> |
| <i>This house with vines o'er-ranging all its side.</i> | <i>Too early or too late for your sweet prime.</i>   |



William Barnes,  
St Peter's Dorchester

*Then bright was dawn, o'er dew,  
And day withdrawn, o'er dew,  
And mid-day glowed on flowers along the ledge,  
And walls in sight, afar,  
Were shining white, afar,  
And brightly shone the stream beside the sedge.  
But still, the fairest light of those clear days  
Seem'd that which fell along your flowery ways.*

### Witty retorts

In a book review some years ago, the biographer Bevis Hillier tells us that he lived for twelve years above Foyle's bookshop, in a block of flats owned by Miss Christina Foyle: "...*The lobby*" he writes "had a foundation stone engraved, 'Laid by the Poet Laureate', (John Masefield). 'Every nice girl's ambition', commented John Betjeman."

"Miss Foyle," Hillier continues, "lived on the penthouse floor above me with her husband Mr Batty. She was an amiable and tolerant landlady. On the floor below lived the drag artist, Danny la Rue. It is quite untrue that they sometimes swapped evening dresses. One time I shared the lift with Danny and he told me a story .... a girl with pink and green hair had accosted him in Shaftesbury Avenue and asked, skittishly, 'Don't you wish you looked like me, Danny?' He replied: 'I did look like you, darling — 30 years ago when I played one of the Ugly Sisters at Margate.'"



Dawn: Wells Cathedral



## (582) “This and That” - 5 January 2025

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



*Weekdays in January, no chairs*

It is New Year's Eve. On our way to the Cathedral for the morning liturgy we nosily inspected the containers full of empty bottles put out for recycling along the way. As we passed the first of them I commented, “Wow, they’ve been hard at it,” and as I did so, round a little hedge, well within earshot, appeared the lady of the house with yet another empty bottle. Fluttering across her face was the suspicion of an enigmatic smile, leading me to suppose that she had detected admiration not censure in my comment. If so she is a perceptive neighbour worth getting to know, if only to help her empty even more bottles next Christmas.

### **Taking the Collection**

On Christmas Day Diana and I were stewards at the Midnight Mass. Beforehand, as we sat putting gift-aid envelopes into the service booklets, a fine adult choir was practising a Palestrina setting for the service. It deepened our

familiarity with and appreciation of it, and of the part it played in a glorious, glittering act of worship.

For the first time in my life I found myself passing round an offertory basket. It was interesting. There were those who held up proceedings for an agonisingly long time, either by fumbling through half a dozen pockets for cash, or for a biro to fill out a gift-aid envelope. There were many others who passed the basket on as fast as a child playing ‘pass the parcel’. We were in bed by half past one on Christmas morning.

### **A visit to the third world**

At about 10.15am on Christmas Day we drove to Milton Clevedon to take the 11.00am Christmas Eucharist in *St James in the Farmyard*. It is a lovely and ancient building, between Evercreech and Bruton, and is indeed sited on a working dairy farm that produces high quality cheddar cheese, of a sort unlikely to be found in Lidl's. The service was lively, lovely and a good deal slicker than those we so much enjoy in the Cathedral. The preacher, a wild, retired, old colonial boy, delivered a homily of only 738 words and his intercessions likewise were notably brief. Christmas Day is not the time for homiletic logorrhea. We finished well within the hour.

There were about forty of us present, including our own Christmas guests: Diana's son 'Pula and his family, all the way from Haslemere that morning. At the service's end, I thanked everyone for the privilege of officiating and preaching in one of the far too many, episcopally unregarded and cash-strapped country churches in England. I went on to urge them to keep up their support for a unique, irresistibly sited church and scored an appreciative chuckle when I told them that to be with them at St James on Christmas morning, instead of at the Cathedral, with its sanctuary full of largely superfluous and merely ornamental clergy, was like visiting the third world.

### **Bizzare, absurd, true**

The homily was built upon and around a poem by George Macdonald 1824-1905:

*They all were looking for a king  
To slay their foes and lift them high;  
Thou cam'st, a little baby thing,  
that made a woman cry.*

“They all were looking for a king”! That is, for a swaggering, strutting bully boy: a Putin, a Xi Jinping, a Lukashenko, a Kim il Yong, to slay their foes and lift them high....

*Thou cam'st, a little baby thing  
That made a woman cry.....*

How bizarre, how crazy, how unutterably absurd the Christian story is. It's little wonder that those of a literal or prosaic mind-set find it difficult to swallow and yet, how unutterably beautiful, beautiful, beautiful is the doctrine, the poetry, the Truth of "Incarnation," which doesn't stand or fall on the mere historicity of these lovely stories, though, as Keats observes, in his *Ode to a Grecian Urn*:

*Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.*

The homily ended with some of the stanzas of another poem by George Macdonald that is unashamedly sentimental, but no less moving and lovely for that. It is in the form of a dialogue between an adult and a baby, not Jesus in particular, just any baby, but as with any baby, Jesus is there too.....

### **Out of the everywhere into here.**

Where did you come from, baby dear?  
*Out of the everywhere into here.*

Where did you get this pearly ear?  
*God spoke, and it came out to hear.*

Where did you get those eyes so blue?  
*Out of the sky as I came through.*

Where did you get those arms and hands?  
*Love made itself into bonds and bands.*

Where did you get that little tear?  
*I found it waiting when I got here.*

How did they all just come to be you?  
*God thought about me, and so I grew.*

But how did you come to us, you dear?  
*God thought about you, and so I am here.*

### **Homegrown beef and champagne**

On the Sunday after Christmas we attended the Cathedral's 8.30am Eucharist, to allow us, later in the morning, to drive a couple of miles over lovely Somerset dale and hill to the impressive church of St John the Baptist, Pilton. I had been asked to officiate at a baptism there, always a joy. As a last minute fill-in officiant, I hadn't met the family of the youngster to be baptized and so there was a little, mutual sizing up of each other, before the ceremony began. The mother of the little girl to be baptized is American, and they live in Brooklyn, New York.

It all went swimmingly. So much so, we accepted an invitation to join the family for lunch at the nearby property of the child's grandparents. There we drank fine champagne from their own, small, private, vineyard and ate beautifully rare, rare-breed beef, bred on the property. We met a six foot six, 2024 Olympic gold medalist and engaged in fascinating conversations with an excellent mix of American and English folk, about vineyards, rare-breed cattle, artificial intelligence, banking, Donald Trump, Christianity, life in New York, West Africa, Angola in the 1950s and much more.

*Have a happy New Year  
of blessings manifold.*



*St John the Baptist: Pilton, Somerset*

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