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FROM BEHIND THE STAIRWELL BALUSTRADE

July to December 2025



Wells Cathedral and Glastonbury Tor

With gratitude and many regrets, the Reverend Canon Andrew Neaum retired 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>

(629) “This and That” - 30 November 2025

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



The Ugly Duchess: Quentin Matsys

At a dinner party it's the whiff of brimstone (*the archaic word for sulphur and associated with the devil*) in a fellow guest, not of aftershave, that's likely to make him good company. In a saintly person it's the hint of a few residual sins or flaws that best highlight and accentuate his saintliness. When my brother and I were little, my mother was right to approve those of our friends who had, as she liked to put it, “a bit of the devil in them”. Virtues to be virtues require their opposite.

Beauty and ugliness

So too it is with beauty. Who would want to visit an art gallery full of Mona Liza style beauties? “*We can only savour the tragic, ephemeral deliciousness of beauty*” writes Stephen Bayley, “*if we have an active concept of what its opposite ugliness is. Heaven needs hella measure of ugliness is essential to keep our appetites alive..... One of the most popular pictures in London's National Gallery is by the 16th century Flemish master Quentin Matsys. It is conventionally known as 'The Ugly Duchess'....[who] appears to be suffering*

from Paget's Disease, a chronic disorder which results in localised bone enlargement with consequently harrowing facial deformities. In The National Gallery's Shop, 'The Ugly Duchess' postcard sells at least as well as Claude Monet's 'Water Lily Pond'.”

A London Quest

These observations result from my discovery last week of one of London's most notorious examples of concrete, brutalist architecture, the Barbican. I have an imaginative, London based nephew who had arranged to meet Diana and me there to begin a “London Quest” that he had thoughtfully planned and named “Secret Doors”. It involved ambling the streets of the City of London to discover little known mysteries, curiosities and treasures, with the help of his meticulously researched and printed clues, observations and directions as to what they are, and where they are to be found. It was all in honour of my 80th birthday and great fun.

Beauty and brutalism

The Barbican, not far from St Paul's Cathedral, is a large, upmarket, residential complex of around 2,000 homes, in four great tower blocks, terrace blocks and maisonettes, built between 1963 and 1982 on an area devastated by World War II bombs. Originally all the residences were rented, but thanks to the “right to buy” are now almost all privately owned and much sort after. An important focal point of the whole complex is the Barbican Arts Centre, containing multiple venues for performance and film, a tropical conservatory, galleries, restaurants, and a library.

A movement dedicated to demolishing brutalist 1960s and 1970s buildings in British cities was thwarted in 2001 by having the whole Barbican complex Grade II listed. Even with my traditionalist sympathies I reckon this to be a good thing, because



The Barbican

(Photo by Helen Maybanks © RSC)



St Bartholomew the Great

church in the City of London and wondrously and ruggedly ancient to walk into and around, although it has been much interfered with, knocked about and altered down through the centuries. Sir John Betjeman considered it to possess the finest Norman interior in London.

The particular mystery in the church to which we were directed, by ingenious clues, however, is not at all ancient. It is a Damien Hirst statue of St Bartholomew, a saint who is said to have been martyred in Armenia by being flayed alive. The statue is called *Exquisite Pain* and is the first work by Hirst at which I've bothered to take a second and third look. I think I actually like it.

On long term loan to the church, it is a gold-plated, silver sculpture of the Saint holding his own skin draped over his raised and extended right arm like a mackintosh and in his hand is a surgical scalpel. In his other hand, hanging by his side, is a pair of scissors. Hirst says that his inspiration "*comes from memories I have of woodcuts and etchings I remember seeing when I was younger. As Saint Bartholomew was a martyr who was skinned alive, he was often used by artists and doctors to show the anatomy of the human body and this is also what I've done. He holds his own skin over his arm and a scalpel and a pair of scissors in his hands so that his exposure and pain are seemingly self-inflicted. It's beautiful yet tragic, and like Saint Sebastian his face shows no pain. I added the scissors because I thought Edward Scissorhands [a 1990 gothic romantic fantasy film] was in a similarly tragic yet difficult position – it has a feel of a rape of the innocents about it.*" It is striking, though to an Englishman who's also an Australian, it brings irreverently to mind:

Tie Me Kangaroo Down Sport

*Tan me hide when I'm dead, Fred
Tan me hide when I'm dead
So we tanned his hide when he died, Clyde
And that's it hangin' on the shed.....Altogether now:*

*Tie me kangaroo down, sport
Tie me kangaroo down
Tie me kangaroo down, sport
Tie me kangaroo down*



Malcom and St Bartholomew

(628) “This and That” - 23 November 2025

Canon Andrew Neaum - *Behind the Balustrade*

The term ‘*carpe diem*’ means *seize the day* and the greatest of all English *carpe diem* poems is Andrew Marvell’s, ‘*To his Coy Mistress*,’ published in 1680.

Vegetable love

In the poem the poet ingeniously urges his beloved to grant him her virginity because, all too soon, youthful beauty fades and life gives way to death:

*“Had we but World enough, and Time,
This coyness, Lady, were no crime.....”*

If only things were different, he says:

*“.....I would
Love you ten years before the flood,
And you should, if you please, refuse
Till the conversion of the Jews.
My vegetable love should grow
Vaster than empires and more slow;”*

Exposing myself

But enough of that! The ingenious and doubtless sexual metaphor ‘vegetable love,’ prompts me to a change of direction. In 1964, when studying for my A levels, I was unfortunate enough to catch “yellow jaundice”. I was confined to home, a couple of hundred miles from my school, bed-bound and on a fat-free diet of steamed fish or chicken. My mother livened up this bland fare with a varied and imaginative assortment of colourful vegetables. I’ve loved veggies ever since. None of my vicarages, down through the years, has lasted long without a vegetable garden.

Here in Wells, our vegetable patch is a couple of miles out of town, half way up the Mendips. It is a portion of Diana’s daughter and son in law’s garden, where to lift your eyes from soil grubbing is to be rewarded with a glorious, distant view of Glastonbury Tor. Being an idle fellow, when we go to tend the garden, instead of simply swapping my daily wear for gardening clobber, I double up, my gardening trousers are pulled over my day to day trousers and likewise it is shirt on shirt.

On returning from a session of leek and onion weeding recently, we visited the supermarket and my idle way of dressing for gardening led to grave embarrassment. On our way to the self-service



Shepparton, Victoria, Australia: vegetable garden 2012

checkout, Diana became engaged in conversation to a friend and so I proceeded alone to the checkout. My debit card happened to be well pocketed in the trousers beneath my gardening trousers which meant that to access it was possible only by way of the fly, or by undoing my belt and pulling down the gardening trousers. I began to unbuckle my belt, but on reflection had the good sense to abort the checkout until Diana finally appeared with her debit card. Had the store’s security cameras exposed me exposing myself, even if only apparently, it would have been far more embarrassing than to be exposed even as a mere shoplifter.



Shepparton, Victoria, Australia: vegetable garden 2012

Artificial unintelligence

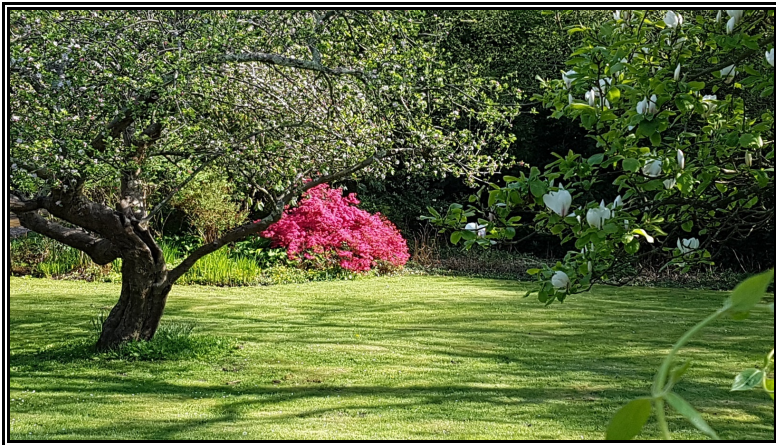
There is something beautiful about vegetables and a well tended vegetable garden. A little known poet, Robert Henry Forster (1867-1923) acknowledges this in his poem, *Growing Vegetables*. He is claimed to be Australian by a website driven by artificial unintelligence, but is not. His poems refer to spring in May and autumn in October. He hales, it seems, from Northumbria. Some snatches from the verse:

Growing Vegetables

*Flowers are poetic, vegetables prose,-
So it is said; yet music may there be,
Though in a lower, less ecstatic key,
In common things, and every flower that grows
Hath elements of beauty to disclose....*

*What leaves are here, so delicate and fine,
Like green lace ruffles, fashioned to adorn
A dress by Oberon or Titania worn?
Can these be carrots? And these plants that twine
Round their supports, with leaves of such design
As Bacchus in his chaplet might have borne,
And flowers as red as poppies in the corn?
Are these no more than beans whereon we dine?*

A garden view



Boldre Vicarage, Hampshire, front garden

My last Australian parish, St Augustine's Shepparton, had probably the most fruitful of all my vegetable gardens. We were especially proud there of three crops of Southern Africa provenance: *Cape gooseberries*, to make the finest of jams, *white maize* with far larger and tastier cobs than sweet corn, if eaten young with lashings of butter and *gem squash*, likewise best eaten young, buttered, seeds and all. Broad beans, beans, mange tout, leeks, aubergine and tomatoes were also prolific.

The world is better viewed from a garden than a mountain top, writes St Cyprian (200-258AD) or, for that matter, than from Sky news, the BBC, Guardian or Telegraph:

“This seems a cheerful world, Donatus, when I view it from this fair garden under the shadow of the vines. But if I climb some great mountain and look out over the wide lands, you know very well what I would see - brigands on the roads, pirates on the high seas, in the amphitheatres men murdering each other to please applauding crowds, under all roofs misery and selfishness. It is really a bad world, Donatus, an incredibly bad world. Yet in the midst of it I have found a quiet and holy people. They have discovered a joy which is a thousand times better than the pleasures of this sinful life. They are despised and persecuted, but they care not. These people, Donatus, are the Christians, and I am one of them”.

(627) “This and That” - 16 November 2025

Canon Andrew Neaum - *Behind the Balustrade*



Glastonbury Abbey

The village of Pilton is 5½ miles from Wells along narrow, winding, hilly lanes. These days it is about 20 miles from the sea, which was not always the case. It lies on the edge of the Somerset Levels and they, centuries ago, formed a tidal, shallow, marshy lake alongside Pilton, then “Pooltown.” Legend tells us that it was here that Joseph of Arimathea landed to bring Christianity and the Holy Grail to England. He is said to have died at Glastonbury, aged 86, having founded a great monastery, its medieval and mighty Abbey despoiled and ruined by Henry VIII. The Holy Grail is purported to be buried at the base of Glastonbury Tor.

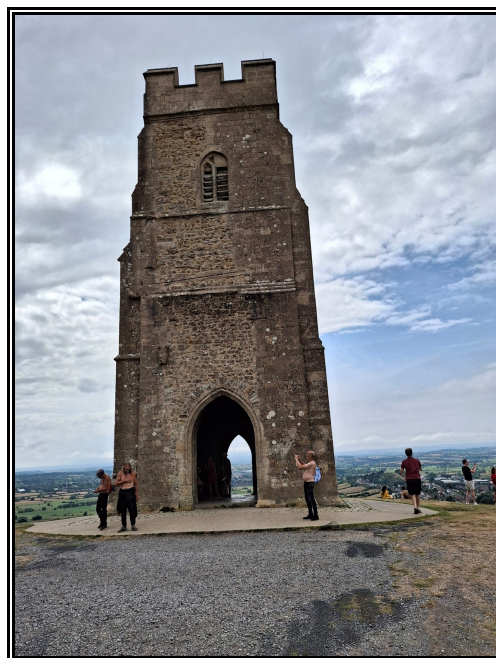
Eloquent silence

It was in Pilton that Diana and I observed Remembrance Sunday this year. The main road through the village was closed and I stood in its middle, alongside the War Memorial and in front of a good crowd, to do my bit. A recorded bugler played the Last Post, but forgot the Reveille and so the two minute silence, which began exactly as the church clock struck 11.00, was a bit longer than usual. No matter, because as someone wise once said (it might even have been me) *“the most moving and poignant part of Remembrance Day services is the silence, the heart-stopping, silent two minutes between the Last Post and Reveille. Words are abandoned, words fail us, words won't do. The horrifying atrocities that warfare inflicts upon soldiers, sailors and aircrews in particular, but also upon civilian men, women and children, are unspeakable, unutterable, inexpressible. Words fail us, word's won't do. Silence is more eloquent than words...”*

The silence was eventually and appropriately broken by the solemn roll call of the village's war dead, Laurence Binyon's verse: *They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old....., the Kohima Epitaph* and a concluding prayer. We then carefully made our way down damp, steep *Shop Lane* for a service in the fine parish church. Among the notables present, with his wife, was a particularly amiable Sir Athelstan Joseph Michael Eavis CBE, local benefactor, dairy farmer and creator of the Glastonbury Festival.

Poppy petals like butterflies

In the afternoon we were stewards at a 3.00pm devotional performance of Maurice Duruflé's (1902-86) *Requiem* in the Cathedral. Conservative in style and based on Gregorian chants, it is wholly appropriate for Remembrance Sunday. Hugo Brady writes: *“..The work is dedicated to the memory of the composer's father, although its dates give it deeper historical resonance. Completed in 1947, perhaps the destruction of the Second World War sparked this unusual musical nostalgia, looking backwards towards an ancient, 'simpler' sound. In fact, the Requiem, (a form which tributes the eternal repose of the dead), may be seen as a token of remembrance for the lives lost in the War.”* The performance



Glastonbury Tor summit

ended in silence not
 applause and with a
 stunning “poppy drop”.
 From an invisible aperture
 in the high nave ceiling
 thousands of bright red,
 tissue poppy petals, like
 butterflies, fluttered
 gently to the ground,
 wandering and even
 lifting for a while as they
 did so.



Distant view, in spring, of Glastonbury Tor

Bravado or acceptance

To what music would it be best to sign off and depart this world I wonder? Surely not to the arrogant, hypocritical bravado of Frank Sinatra's song, “*I did it my way*”, even he came to loathe and disdain it. Tempered, directed and limited as we are by genes, circumstances, upbringing, family, friends and serendipity, none of us, in fact, has anywhere near sufficient freedom “*to do it our way*”.

Much the same can be said of Edith Piaff's “*Non, je ne regrette rien*”. Only the subhuman, surely, depart life without regret. Acceptance best characterises our departure, not bravado or defiance. Old Simeon's Nunc Dimittis: “*Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace.....*” rather than Dylan Thomas's:

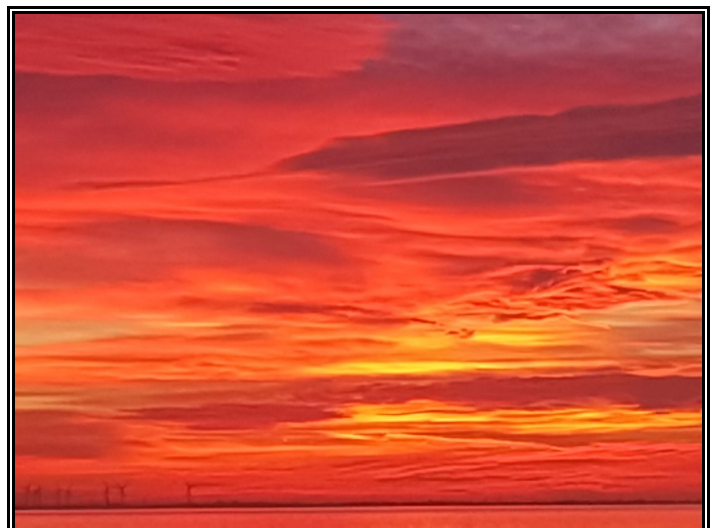
*Do not go gentle into that good night,
 Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
 Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

Bach's divine Cantata *Ich habe genug*, BWV 82 (preferably 82a, the soprano version) is based on the *Nunc Dimittis*, and it's second aria is as close to emotional and musical perfection as any piece of music I know. Then there is Schubert, the melodist of melodists. During Beethoven's final days on earth, a collection of Schubert's songs was placed in his hands, after examining them, he exclaimed: “Truly, Schubert possesses the divine fire.” I have been listening to his *Im Abendrot* over and over again, seemingly as simple as a hymn tune, it is unutterably divine:

In the glow of the evening

How lovely is your world,
 Father, in its golden radiance
 when your glory descends
 and paints the dust with glitter;
 when the red light that shines from the clouds
 falls silently upon my window.

Could I complain? Could I be apprehensive?
 Could I lose faith in you and in myself?
 No, I already bear your heaven
 here within my heart.
 And this heart, before it breaks,
 still drinks in the fire and savours the light.



In the glow of evening: Clacton on Sea

(626) “This and That” - 9 November 2025

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



Policemen and women used to wear whistles, a little silver tube made in Birmingham by Hudson and Co. They were used by police forces all over the world and in England were deemed necessary police equipment for nearly a 100 years, from the 1880's to the 1970's. On a still, clear night they could be heard a mile away if the copper had a good pair of lungs.

Before they came into use, guardians of the law used clumsy wooden rattles to raise the alarm and call in reinforcements.

Zimmer Zooming

The same made in Birmingham, Hudson and Co whistles were used in both World Wars, though particularly in the First: “Trench Whistles”. Here in Wells there is one in a drawer by our front door. In all likelihood it belonged to Diana’s grandfather. Should anyone try to force their way into our house, it will be reached for and blown so mightily and penetratingly it will bring retired, pre-1970 coppers zooming to our aid on their zimmer frame.

Used in the trenches of World War I they blew a dread, penetrating sound that indicated the moment to be up, over and out of the trench to face another and far more deadly whistle, the whistle of bullets.

Trench whistle

Whistle blowing

Over the past thirty or forty years whistles have made a sort of comeback, a discomforting, metaphorical one: “whistleblowing”. In the eyes of some, this is an honourable act, exposing the shortcomings and dangerous malpractices of workmates or bosses. In the eyes of others it is an adult version of the playground’s “tell tale tit”, “spilling the beans” or “playing Judas” to colleagues, fellow workers or boss.

Take your pick. It depends on the circumstances and on the whistle-blower’s motives, but be it good or bad, whistle-blowing does draw attention to its opposite, “loyalty”. This was a virtue very, very dear to my own mother’s heart. Loyalty to family, to kith, kin, county, country, King, the Church of England, Christianity and God, as well as to one’s local village, school and friends was inculcated in us all. As children we were discouraged from bad-mouthing any of them, instead we were enjoined to defend them, come what may. I still find myself bristling inwardly when I hear any of them deprecated scorned or denied.

A doughty digger’s doggerel

About 25 years ago I visited and have never forgotten, the museum of the Black Watch in Perth,



St John’s Boldre: Remembrance 2025

Scotland. What most surprised and struck me was to notice and realise, for the first time, that by far the deepest loyalty of soldiers in the Black Watch and I suspect in all or most other regiments, was not so much to King and country, as to their Regiment and to each other. The following, moving piece of an Australian digger's doggerel for 'Anzac Day', helps make the point:

Mates

*I've travelled down some lonely roads
Both crooked tracks and straight,
An' I've learned life's noblest creed
Summed up in one word ... "Mate"*

*I'm thinking back across the years,
(a thing I do of late)
An' this word sticks between me ears
You've got to have a "Mate".*

*Someone who'll take you as you are
Regardless of your state
An' stand as firm as Ayres Rock
Because 'e is your mate.*

*Me mind goes back to '42
To slavery and hate
When Man's one chance to stay alive
Depended on 'is Mate.*

*With bamboo for a billy-can
An' bamboo for a plate
A bamboo paradise for bugs,
Was bed for me and "Mate"*

*You'd slip and slither through the mud
And curse your rotten fate,
But then you'd 'ear a quiet word:
"Don't drop your bundle Mate"*

*And though it's all so long ago
This truth I 'ave to state:
A man don't know what lonely means
Til 'e has lost his "Mate".*

*If there's a life that follers this,
If there's a 'golden-gate',
The welcome I just want to 'ear
Is just, "Good on y' Mate."*

*An' so to all that ask why
We keep these special dates,
Like "Anzac Day" ... I answer, "Why?
We're thinking of our Mates."*

*An' when I've left the driver's seat,
An' handed in me plates,
I'll tell ol' Peter at the door
I've come to join me Mates.*

Duncan Butler



St Mary Redcliffe, Bristol, High Altar

The visit to Perth and the Black Watch museum was moving not only for revealing where a soldier's primary loyalty lay, it was moving too for highlighting loyalty or love of the sort that lays down its life for its friend. This is a notion and virtue, that lies at the very heart of the Christian story, which radically, compellingly and indeed outrageously, reveals and offers to humanity a portrait not of God almighty, but of God laying down his life for his friends.

Deep loyalty

Loyalty and love are complex. There is an extremely high form of loyalty that does blow the whistle on the beloved, albeit reluctantly. The very best of all and most loving and loyal friends, are not those who say 'Yes' to anything we propose, or who back us up, come what may, right or wrong. Rather, they are those with the courage to challenge us when we are wrong and, if necessary, even to expose our wrong, because to be wrong, seriously wrong, is to be in a bad way and place. Anyone

who truly loves us and is loyal to us, cannot bear to leave us there.

Whistleblowing in such circumstances is not despicable disloyalty, it is the right, loving and most loyal of all actions.

(625) “This and That” - 2 November 2025

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



Autumn: Black Down, Sussex

November! Nasty negatives to do with the month are amusingly catalogued in a poem by the admirable Thomas Hood. It ends as follows:

*No shade, no shine, no butterflies, no bees,
No fruits, no flowers, no leaves, no birds,
November!*

Hood was born in 1799 in London and died there in 1845. Had he lasted another 100 years to visit Hednesford in Staffordshire, in mid-November 1945, he might well have ended his verse with an Australianism:

*No shade, no shine, no butterflies, no bees,
No fruits, no flowers, no leaves, no birds,
November! ‘No worries’! Neaum!*

November is the year of my birth. I turn eighty this month, would you believe it? Can so fine a figure of a man be on the cusp of eighty years of age? So it seems, though thankfully “Madam Life” remains well worth living to the full, even if over the balustrade, beyond the desk, there lurks on the stairwell a “ruffian” who eventually and inevitably will have his wicked way:

*Madam Life’s a piece in bloom
Death goes dogging everywhere:
She’s the tenant of the room,
He’s the ruffian on the stair.*

*With his kneebones at your chest,
And his knuckles in your throat,
You would reason — plead — protest!
Clutching at her petticoat;*

*You shall see her as a friend,
You shall bilk him once or twice;
But he’ll trap you in the end,
And he’ll stick you for her price.*

*But she’s heard it all before,
Well she knows you’ve had your fun,
Gingerly she gains the door,
And your little job is done.*

That’s by another poet I love, W E Henley (1849-1903), the stoical, “bloody but unbowed” model for Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Long John Silver* and the author of one of the Victorian era’s most justly famous poems, “*Invictus*”.

I wonder why, to the likes of me, death imaged as a stairwell “ruffian” is preferable to the more common image of a harvest field’s “grim reaper”? I suspect it is because the word “grim” is a characteristic of religion at its censorious worst and is the antithesis of so much of what makes life worth living. The company of ruffians seems preferable and more likely to be fun than the company of the grim.

The remnant

Although I’m now a retired parish priest, I retain a congregation of about 200 souls, some in Australia, a handful in Southern Africa, an individual or two in America, Canada, the Netherlands and on Tristan da Cunha, as well as a goodly number in England. They are those who receive this weekly article, most though not quite all of them, are past parishioners, or the friends of past parishioners. As with most Anglican congregations not all the recipients are believers and the most responsive and



Autumn: St Mary’s Bruton, Somerset

interested tend to be elderly. I would not be surprised if a fair number of the less than elderly recipients bin the weekly offering as soon as it arrives. By no means all folk do though, because a fair number periodically respond, occasionally to take issue with what has been written, but more usually in gratitude because a chord has been struck, or some dear to the heart memory triggered.

Such weekly effusions have been a feature of my life as a parish priest from the very start, way back in 1979 in Rhodesia. They were then and remain, a kind of one-sided conversation, a means of helping folk feel they know their priest, (or once-upon-a-time priest) even if he hardly knows them.



Autumn: Rodlease Lane, Boldre, Hampshire

Today's effort is the 625th of a particular series that began with my arrival in England from Australia in August 2013 and all 470,000 words of them are online. For the most part they eschew politics and world affairs in favour of the commonplace and quotidian, but they do unashamedly promote and rejoice in the intriguing Jesus of Nazareth, the Anglican version of the Christian Faith, belief as life-enhancing rather than life-denying and in music, poetry, humour and fun. They also provide a retired parson with the lifeline of a deadline each week.

Indebted to what's unhappened

Prayers of gratitude are more rewarding than prayers of intercession. Asking for things is worth a shot, but not a long one. Prayers of gratitude are another matter. They help foster a grateful disposition as well as elevate the spirit. While offering prayers of gratitude, even a grounded fellow like me, has occasionally been granted rare experiences of a mystical and other worldly sort. We can be as grateful for what has not happened as for what has, as Deborah Warren (b 1947) reminds us:

Absences

*More than advantages it's absences
we should acknowledge, being most in debt
to what's unhappened for our happiness.
How easy, though, to let*

*what could have been lie in oblivion:
The wayward lymph, for instance,
spurred to course helter-skelter,
reckless as a Hun scouring west, his horse*

*hoared with foam. Who thinks to thank a fever
passing by uncaught; the pretty mole,
round and innocent on the skin, that never
burrows beyond control;*

*the lottery that lets the horsemen turn
their horses' heads and, riding off, forbear
to run us down; the die we don't discern,
unrolled; the stars that spare*

*us their disasters? Not for what they give;
what they withhold, what isn't, what therefore
remains as unknown as a negative
unproved. No, we ignore*

*the mercy of the lump that isn't there:
Make us alive to what does not exist-
our sufferance to live so unaware
of all that we have missed.*



*Autumn: Bishop's Palace
moat, Wells, Somerset*

(624) “This and That” - 26 October 2025

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



The congenial home

To arrive in heaven without bothering to die would be no mean achievement and to be hugely blessed. To retire to a city as lovely as Wells and reside there in a manageable, modest and congenial dwelling, five minutes walk from a Cathedral where choral evensong is sung daily, is most certainly heavenly and no mean achievement. Diana and I are in heaven then, without yet having bothered to die.

A melody freak

It is not quite heaven though. Like “hope” in Alexander Pope's famous couplet, heaven on earth, is not attainable, “never is, but always to be...”

Hope springs eternal in the human breast:

Man never is, but always to be blest:.....

So although Wells and its Cathedral are indeed a musical paradise, where the girl and boy choristers, as separate choirs or combined, are unutterably and gloriously outstanding and the adult “vicars choral” likewise, I do sometimes find myself less than fully satisfied. It's my own fault, it's because I'm a melody-freak.

In Westminster Abbey, at Choral Evensong in 1971, the simple melody of an Anglican chant sung to Psalm 37 transported me to the very gates of heaven and helped change the direction of my life. In the late 1990s, the sacred cantatas of Johann Sebastian Bach, one of them listened to each day before matins in a parish church chapel, helped sustain me devotionally as a parish priest for many years.

Melody and worship belong to each other and are very, very dear to my heart. Wondrously glorious though Wells Cathedral music undoubtedly is, the choir's repertoire, to a lowly, melody-freak pew-sitter like me, is often deficient in melody.

A faulty ear

“Aha” say the musical adepts and aficionados pityingly, not without some justification, when I complain, “it is your ear that is at fault. There's more to music than mere melody, and more to melody than the diatonic scale. The music you hear as tuneless or unmelodic, to knowledgeable and discriminating ears is fascinatingly original and adventurous, its harmonies rich, daring and bold. To master and sing such music is challenging and exciting and the melodic content, though different, is very much there, though more subtly than obviously.” They're right, I'm sure, but to worshippers and pew sitters like me, modernist and post modernist melody and music rarely transport a listener to the very gates of heaven.

The true goal of music

“The true goal of music—its proper enterprise—is melody” wrote Johann Philipp Kirnberger (1721-83). *“All the parts of harmony have as their ultimate purpose only beautiful melody. Therefore, the question of which is the more significant, melody or harmony, is futile. Beyond doubt, the means is subordinate to the end.”* Kirnberger studied composition with Johann Sebastian Bach, whom he admired as “the greatest of all composers”. We owe



Wells Cathedral viewed from the west

him a mighty debt because many of Bach's manuscripts were preserved in his personal library and are known today as the "Kirnberger Collection".

Tango with a quark

There is something otherworldly about a beautiful melody or tune. A mere sequence of notes, all but miraculously, transcend the individuality of each of them to become an exquisite and unforgettable entity in its own right. The song *Don't Cry for me Argentina*, is one such, so too, *Early one Morning just as the Sun was Rising* and *The Ash Grove*. Their very existence is as astonishing and wondrous as a "fortuitous conglomeration of atoms" becoming and being a human person.

The song, *'Tis a gift to be Simple*, if set free from the strait jacket of Sydney Carter's *Lord of the Dance* hymn tune version, seems to a listener 'out of this world' and from the beyond. There is a lovely version of it readily available on YouTube, with Yo Yo Ma on the cello and Alison Krauss as vocalist.

Professional church musicians must never forget that although pew-sitters benefit from having their musical horizons broadened, to many of us it is melody above all else that is worshipful and that we go to church not to be educated or for aesthetic reasons, but to worship.

"Melody", writes David Solway, "is a gift from somewhere else. There is an element of the miraculous about melody, and like a miracle it cannot be explained, only marvelled at. It has one wanting to tango with a quark. It has one wanting to play the Neanderthal flute. It has one longing to 'sing Creation'. It has one wishing to harmonize with God. It has one believing in the reality of the numinous."

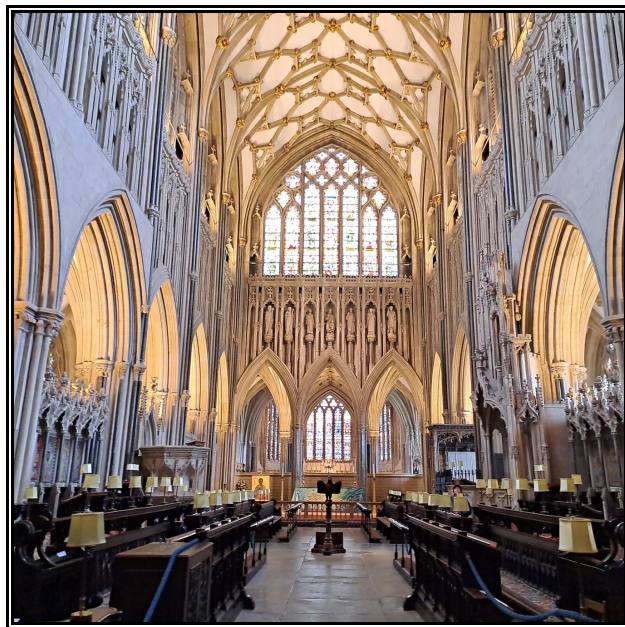
When people speak ill of us

Inquisitorial journalists, punishment freaks and tall poppy loppers appear to delight in hounding and hunting down miscreants, sinners and anyone in high office for public humiliation. Television studio chairs are the favoured sites for public ignominy, but street or doorstep ambushes play their part, as do hidden cameras, computer search engines and idle gossip. Favoured forms of public humiliation in days gone by involved restraints, like fastening offenders in the stocks by the ankles and wrists where they could be mocked, pelted with noxious substances, insulted, kicked, tickled or spat upon. Nasty. These days we watch the accused on our screens wriggle, protest, excuse

and deny their misdemeanours. It is an unedifying business that too often involves lying and rarely succeeds in convincing anyone. Far preferable, surely, to heed the wise advice of the Stoic philosopher Epictetus:

'If anyone tells you that a certain person speaks ill of you, do not make excuses about what is said of you, but answer: "He was ignorant of my other faults, else he would not have mentioned these alone."'

**Wells Cathedral
viewed from the east**



Wells Cathedral quire



(623) “This and That” - 19 October 2025

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



Stickleback Monument: Kronstadt (photo 'The Russian Reader')

There are 16 species of stickleback, most of them in the salt waters of the world's oceans at temperate latitudes. Those that children love to catch in our freshwater ponds, lakes, ditches and rivers are thought to be descendants of marine species trapped in fresh water after the Ice Age, thousands of years ago. Sticklebacks have no scales and the commonest of them, the three-spined stickleback, is rarely more than three inches in length.

Stickleback burgers

Alongside a canal, in the City of Kronstadt, sticklebacks are honoured by a monument of their very own. During Hitler's horrific and ultimately unsuccessful 2 year, 4 month and 19 day siege of Leningrad (and partially of Kronstadt) an estimated 1.5 million lives were lost and starvation was so extreme it led to unimaginable horrors, including the cannibalising of dead bodies. Edible fish from the Gulf of Finland, the Neva river and canal system were soon fished out and the tiny, bony, sharp-spined sticklebacks became a valuable resource. Too small to be caught in fishing nets, they were snared in wicker baskets, fabrics and even clothes instead, and during the spring ice melt four or five hours of labour would produce about twelve pounds of the tiddlers. They were used to make soup and their flesh minced to make fish burgers and also, bones and all, they were turned into fish meal. Extracted fish oil proved useful both for cooking and for treating wounds and burns. The modest monument to honour their part in the relief of human suffering was erected in Kronstadt in 2005. Initially the tiny sculpted fish were painted silver, but a few years ago this was changed to gold. A memorial plaque features a quotation from a poem by Maria Aminova:

To the Siege Stickleback.

*The shelling has stopped and so has the bombing,
But praise still sounds
For the little Siege fish
That helped people survive...*

The world's leaders

What is wrong with the world's leaders? Hitler, one of the vilest of them all said of Leningrad it '*must be erased from the face of the Earth*' and '*we have no interest in saving lives of the civilian population.*'

Leadership in shoals of stickle-backs has been scientifically researched. Graham Robb in a recently published book "*The Discovery of Britain: An Accidental History*" tells us that sticklebacks instinctively follow a leading fish and he then poses the question: "*... what tells the leading fish where to go?* After dissection of a great number of sticklebacks, it was discovered that the leader is the individual whose brain is damaged or genetically de-fective. It would be rash but not irrational to apply this finding to the whole of human history".



Stickleback Monument: Kronstadt (photo 'The Russian Reader')

What is God like?

I listen to more sermons than I preach these days. None are bad, some good, but few sizzle. They are all of them too long.

There is a retired and eloquent United Reformed God-botherer of around my vintage, called Martin Camroux who was once declared “Preacher of the Year” by the London Times. Reflecting upon 60 years of preaching he writes: *One of the great things about being retired is that I am now a hit-and-run preacher. Turn up, preach the sermon and I’m off. Which gives me a certain freedom to say what I like. I came into the ministry above all to preach. I went to a Norfolk boarding school. Sunday by Sunday we trooped in lines up to the college chapel to hear sermons preached mostly by Anglican country clergy. In the arrogance of youth I thought they were nearly all terrible. One Sunday, after what seemed a particularly turgid offering, I said to myself, ‘It must be possible to do it better than that. I will become a preacher.’*

Although I suspect his sermons would be far too long for my taste, I would like to hear him because his theology is of the broad, all-embracing and inclusive sort I love. The title of one of his most recent books is: *“Keeping Alive the Rumour of God, When Most People are Looking the Other Way”*. To the question “What is God like?” he replies: *“Watch Jesus confront the corrupt, watch his tenderness with the damaged and excluded, watch him offer up his life. Go and stand at Calvary and look up at the cross and hear him say ‘Father forgive them.’”*

In the computer file of quotations garnered from my reading over the past thirty or more years I came across what follows, from Camroux:

Where all certainties seem absurd

“Richard Holloway tells the story of a priest who lived in a slum and worked in a factory and lived the life of anonymous Christianity. When asked why he did it, he said he was there to keep the rumour of God alive in that place. At a time when the death of God is a cultural reality it is the preacher’s job to point to the experiences that keep the rumour of God alive. When all orthodoxies seem increasingly implausible there is still the reality of the ‘mysterium tremendum’. There is still marvel, mystery and wonder. There is still in the holy a possibility of encounter with that greater than oneself. There is still the numinous, the other. There are moments of love which remind us that as Auden saw:

*‘Space is the Whom our loves are needed by,
Time is our choice of How to love and why.’*



“And there is still a Galilean carpenter whose words have amazing penetrating power and in whom the reality of God is for me more visible than anywhere else. At the foot of the cross, where all the certainties seem absurd, there is still a love that grasps and claims.....”

Wells Cathedral, West Front - Scaffolding removed, restoration work finished for now

(622) “This and That” - 12 October 2025

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



All Souls, Invergowrie

In the Scottish village of Invergowrie, on the northwest bank of the Firth of Tay, on May the 28th in the year 2000, the Rector of Wodonga, a town on the south bank of the river Murray in Australia, began to read the novel *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*. He loved both Invergowrie and *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*.

The home of whisky and a fine teacher

On the following day, with his wife Margaret, *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* and two of his four children, Elizabeth and Rachel, the Wodonga Rector, who at that time was my good self, set off by car through Cooper Angus, over the Cairnwell Pass to Forres and then on to the village of Knockando. This unassuming village is home to several fine, single malt whisky distilleries, one of them the Speyside contributor to the best selling of all Scottish blended whiskies, Johnnie Walker, but it wasn't whisky that took us there.

We were on our way to visit the only inspirational teacher I encountered in all my years of schooling in Rhodesia, David Couper. He was an eccentric, handlebar moustached pedagogue, during the 1950s and 60s, at

Guinea Fowl Boys High School, who inspired and taught me much, though never one of my classroom teachers.

Scottish Country Dancing yokels

Although Guinea Fowl served me well, it was an utterly sports mad, rough, tough, government boarding school. In Rhodesia at that time, success at rugby and cricket was the supreme criterion used to judge a school's worth. David Couper would have none of that. His major aim and triumph was to persuade a huge number of uncouth, clumsy, young yokels to Scottish country dance. It was almost the only civilising influence in an institution more noted for competitiveness and barbarism.

When he first mooted his intentions the headmaster, Mr Poulson, gave him permission to go ahead, but then went on leave. It was Mr Benkinstein, his deputy, who announced at a school assembly, in a calculatingly derisive and flippant manner, that anyone interested in Scottish Country Dancing should stay on afterwards to see Mr Couper. Of course no one did, but word of mouth and encouragement began to erode resistance and the dancing began, in spite of active hostility from fanatical rugby-coach teachers, who were obstructive and refused to release rugby players for dances on Friday nights because their stars required a good night's sleep. Scottish dancing and music are exhilarating, stir the blood and lift the spirits, though, and what is more, at an all boys, bush boarding school enabled dancers to meet girls at occasional socials. If Guinea Fowl school is remembered for anything unique, these days, it's more likely to be for Scottish Country Dancing than for rugby prowess. A couple of the kilts we used in demonstration dances are on display in the nearby town of Gwelo's museum, so David Couper told me. There's a thing.



Knockando: David & Jill Couper, 2000



Wells: Bishop's Palace Moat in early autumn

Mademoiselle from Armentières and the like. I recognised the booklet as soon as he showed it to me, but had forgotten how it was that I still know, in a fragmentary way, the words of songs like *Marie's Wedding*.

Dangerous driving

David Couper was brought up in South Africa, the son of a Scottish Presbyterian minister there. His honeymoon was a trip north through Rhodesia, Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland in a Morris Minor fitted with an ingenious boxed tent, built with a friend, that opened out to sleep in on the car roof, he showed me a photograph of it. His bride, Jill, didn't fancy sleeping with ants and snakes on the ground. When it became unbearably hot, he would depress the accelerator with a stick and drive with his bare feet out of the window, or so he told me.

One of his disciplinary measures as a teacher was a puzzle that involved pupils standing and trying to extricate some sort of intricate device out of another one. It required an ingenuity that no child ever managed, though they enjoyed rising to the challenge. He eventually left Guinea Fowl to take over a school in Nyasaland where he had many an interview with the country's president, Dr. Hastings Banda, who once told him that on no account should he ever allow black students into the elite school. He loved Nyasaland and recalls taking children on expeditions up Mount Malanje, which was the highest mountain in the old Federation. He met my father in Nyasaland once and showed us a photograph of him nursing their daughter Janet. He went on to become headmaster of the school at Knockando for over 20 years.

At Guinea Fowl he took a shine to my brother and me, asking us on occasions to baby sit his two little boys David and Angus. He and Jill also invited us to share a Burns night celebration, introducing us to a homemade haggis, duly addressed in Gaelic and stabbed with a *sgian-dubh*, drawn from his sock. It is the only haggis I have ever eaten and really liked.

No strangers to tragedy

He is dear to my memory, a man of deep and true faith, though no stranger to appalling tragedy. Their daughter Janet, eight months pregnant, and husband were killed in a head on collision. May they and David and Jill, rest in heavenly peace.



Wells Cathedral: Cider & Cheese Festival

Inky pinky parlez vous

One of Couper's ambitious plans didn't come to fruition. It fell victim to politics and the breakup of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, which took the heart out of some of its important backers. He had planned to take a team of dancers, boys and girls, as well as two school pipe bands, one from Bulawayo and one from Salisbury, on a tour of South Africa which would have included a trip down the coast by ship. He also showed me, on our visit, a copy of his duplicated booklet, "*The Ceilidh Collection*," Scottish songs that he got us to sing on bus trips as a healthy alternative to those we sang on our cricket and rugby team buses: *Eskimo Nell*,

(621) “This and That” - 5 October 2025

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade

A well patronised “*Somerset Wine and Cheese Festival*” took place in Wells Cathedral last Saturday. As we cleared up afterward, well into the night, the sweet odour of alcohol induced conviviality was so soporific and heady we feared that it might rival or even displace the sweet odour of sanctity during the following Sunday’s Eucharist. The scent of pressed and fermented ‘Sheeps Nose’, ‘Fox Whelp’, ‘Cap of Liberty’, ‘John Brown’ and ‘Slack Ma Girdle’ apples, better suits the music of Dolly Parton than that of Sunday’s scheduled William Drakett, a local maestro and composer. Nor can any preacher compete with the lazy, lolling languor induced by boozy, ciderous fumes. Something needed to be done and it was.

Alcohol and incense

As we laboured away the Cathedral’s amiable Precentor, in jacket and dog collar rather than robes, paced up and down the nave swinging a well stoked thurible that puffed great clouds of pungent incense into the apple-sweet, alcohol-laden atmosphere. It was the perfect answer. The odour of sanctity and the odour of conviviality blend most beautifully. Conviviality and Communion are the closest of close cousins.



The Festival draws to a close

*Oh, we came up from Somerset
To see the Great Revue
There was Mary drest in her Sunday best
And our boy Billee too
The drums were rolling rub-a-dub
The trumpets tooting too
When right up rode His Majesty
An’ says, “An’ who be you?”*

*“Oh, we’ m come up from Somerset
Where the cider apples grow
We’ m come to see Your Majesty
An’ how the world do go
And when you be wanting anyone
If you’ ll kindly let us know
We’ ll all come up from Somerset
Because we loves you so!”*



Barrels of Cider - Burrow Hill

Because we loves you so
The most famous and memorable advertising jingle for Somerset Cider goes:

*Coates comes up from Zummerzet,
Whur the zoider apples grow...*

It’s origin is a charmingly soppy song composed in the nineteen thirties: *Up from Somerset*. Here are 4 of 6 verses:

*Then the queen she looked at Mary
“An’ what’s your name?” she said
But Mary blush’d like any rose
An’ hung her pretty head
So I ups and nudges Mary
“Speak up an’ tell her do!”
So she said, “If you please, Your Majesty
My name is Mary too!”*

*“An, we’ m come up from Somerset
Where the cider apples grow
Where the gals can hem an’ sew an’ stitch
And also reap and hoe
An’ if you’re wanting any gals
An’ will kindly let us know
We’ ll all come up from Somerset
Because we loves you so!”*

One long bloody thread, from tail to snout

Pilton is a pleasing village with an impressive ancient church, a mere five hilly, scenic miles from Wells. It hosts the mighty *Glastonbury Festival* which takes place with noisy perzazz and huge hype on Worthy Farm, just next door. All one thousand or so residents are given a free ticket to the festival and some of them rent out rooms, or their whole residence, to those of the wealthy festival clientele who disdain camping. The cost of a single ticket to this year's event was £378.50.

Last Sunday Diana and I went to church in St John the Baptist's, Pilton, where I preached and celebrated. The Gospel for the day was Jesus' parable about Dives, the rich man who ends up, tortured by thirst, in hell (cheers from the Guardian) and Lazarus, the poor man, who ends up in the capacious bosom of old Abraham, in heaven, (further cheers from the Guardian). I had just completed and submitted my tax return and so welcomed a chance to ruminate upon the relationship between the rich and the poor. I resist delivering a synopsis of my homily, but do pass on a new and interesting thought that occurred to me as I composed it: the Abraham who welcomed Lazarus to his heavenly bosom, by all accounts was a very rich man (cheers from the Telegraph).



St John the Baptist's Pilton



St John the Baptist's Pilton

Perhaps then we ourselves, who globally speaking are all of us filthy rich, might, against all odds, find our way to heaven:

*All things (e.g. a camel's journey through
A needle's eye) are possible, it's true.
But picture how the camel feels, squeezed out
In one long bloody thread, from tail to snout.*

C. S. Lewis 1898-1963

Masala dosas

It has been a week of high achievement. It seems that I have at last mastered the art of cooking a decent masala dosa. Many years ago, in my first parish in Zimbabwe, I was taught by a lovely Indian woman how to make the paper thin pastry from which delicious, meaty samoosas are made. It is an art that is not complicated, but tricky. It is also one that these day is unnecessary, because frozen sheets of such pastry can be bought cheaply from any Indian shop.

Masala dosas are a favourite breakfast in South India, though in the dosa restaurants around Tooting in South London diners, such as ourselves, enjoy them for dinner. They are a sort of thin, savoury pancake made from a batter of fermented, parboiled rice and legumes plus spices such as fenugreek and dry red chilli. The rice and legumes are fermented by soaking overnight in water and then ground or whizzed into a batter. The difficult to master part of the procedure is frying the pancake, which needs to be thinly, crisply, golden brown on one side and spongy on the other. A spicy, oniony potato curry is loaded on to it, still in the pan, and then it's folded over or rolled, and served with dipping dishes of chutney, sambar and raita. As with samoosa pastry, packets of ready to mix batter are readily available today.

(620) “This and That” - 28 September 2025

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade

The wealthy aristocrat Lord Finchley, who never existed, was nonetheless memorably immortalised and moralised in four lines by Hilaire Belloc (1870-1953):

*Lord Finchley tried to mend the Electric Light
Himself. It struck him dead: And serve him right!
It is the business of the wealthy man
To give employment to the artisan.*



Goodrich Castle, Herefordshire

Written in 1911, the verse's moral is not at all fashionable these days. It makes much the same point as a verse in Mrs Alexander's most famous hymn, “*All things bright and beautiful*”, written in 1848. The verse is omitted in modern hymn books for appearing to condone social inequality:

*The rich man in his castle,
The poor man at his gate
God made them, high or lowly,
And ordered their estate*

Dining in Soho

Belloc's verse popped to mind last week at a Soho Chinese restaurant, much favoured by Diana for being reasonably priced and well

patronised by discerning Chinese diners. The clientele it attracts are more of the artisan, labouring, garbo and retired clergy sort, than aristocrats, plutocrats, celebrities and bishops. There is nothing fancy about the establishment's decor, but the food itself is satisfyingly good. After cleaning our plates, licking our lips and expelling a discreet and contented burp or two, we looked up the restaurant on our phones and were well and truly vindicated in our choice.

The establishment is indeed, it seems, more suited to artisans, labourers, garbos and retired clergy, than to aristocrats, plutocrats, celebrities and bishops, not least because it received from the *Food Standards Agency*, in July 2024, a food hygiene rating of only two out of five, meaning “*some improvement is necessary*”. A dead mouse and cockroaches had been found in the kitchen, resulting in the restaurant's operator and director being fined over £40,000 for food hygiene offenses and falsifying documents. A follow up inspection, however, found that “*most of the issues had been addressed.*”

Golders Green to Finchley Central

Exactly why the restaurant's proletarian clientele brought to my mind the word “*artisan*” is perhaps not immediately obvious, but that the word “*artisan*”, in its turn, reminded me of Belloc's verse about Lord Finchley's unhappy fate and his disregard of a wealthy person's obligations to artisans is. What is more, to someone fortunate enough to have spent the best part of his youth in the nineteen sixties, the name *Finchley* brought flooding back to mind, inevitably and with a great wave of nostalgia, the New Vaudeville Band's, laid back, spoof 1920's style, catchy hit song *Finchley Central*. Diana and I have been listening to it on YouTube with delight, as well as to their two other 1960's hits, *Winchester Cathedral* and *Peek-A-Boo*.

*Finchley Central is two and sixpence
From Golders Green on the Northern Line
And on the platform, by the kiosk
That's where you said you'd be mine*



34 Balfern Grove, Chiswick

seemed to a wild, colonial exile from the tropics, turned out to be hugely significant. It became to me what a burning bush in the hot, dry Sinai desert was to the exiled Moses, for in that cold, rented room a religious experience, as I knelt beside the bed, turned me round and back full-face to God. It led me, eventually, back to Africa and to priesthood.

Music invoked nostalgia

The novelist and poet Thomas Hardy was fascinated by and loved music, as many of his poems and the happiest of his novels "*Under The Greenwood Tree*" testify. That novel is all to do with the sacking of Mellstock church band and choir in favour of an organist, and the love match between Dick Dewy, a choir member, and the new village school-teacher, Fancy Day, who happens to be the organist.

Nor was Thomas Hardy a stranger to music-invoked nostalgia, such as Diana's and mine for *Finchley Central*, *Winchester Cathedral* and the 1960s. In a fine poem called *The Small Hours* Hardy tells fondly of dreams he's had about playing the fiddle in a band for weddings and dances, in days gone by. It ends memorably:

*It seemed a thing for weeping
To find, at slumber's wane
And morning's sly increeeping,
That Now, not Then, held reign.*



St Nicholas' Chiswick

Frugality and God in Chiswick

We were in London to attend a meeting of the St Helena Diocesan Association in Church House, Tufton Street and to stay a night with my hospitable and witty nephew in his Isle of Dogs flat. Before meeting up with him, we walked from Hammersmith to 34 Balfern Grove in Chiswick, to view nostalgically the house in which I rented a room and a daily breakfast pot of tea, plus two slices of bread which I toasted on a single bar electric room heater, all for £4.10 a week. This was in the cold, postal strike struck February of 1971.

Balfern Grove is smarter than it was in my day, the houses crisp and well maintained. My landlady all those years ago will have long gone to God. She was a devout and frugal Roman Catholic who turned off the hot water system once summer arrived, but kindly and trusting enough to offer me credit until I began to earn a salary. That rented room, in the winter-cold desert that Chiswick



St Nicholas' Chiswick

(619) “This and That” - 21 September 2025

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



The Cathedral and green

Wells, in Somerset, close to the paddocks of active, productive farms and to the wooded foot hillocks of the Mendips, is possibly England’s loveliest city. Its population is less than 12,000.

England’s finest city

It boasts a glorious medieval Cathedral and green, the oldest medieval street still in use for the purpose for which it was built and a tranquilly moated Bishop’s Palace, with resident swans and its own extensive and fine gardens. A few hundred yards from the Cathedral is St Cuthbert’s Church, another incomparable medieval building, graced by the third highest church tower in Somerset. It is often mistaken for the

Cathedral itself. From the Cathedral green, through an ancient archway called the “Penniless Porch”, at the top of the High Street, lies a cobbled square, surrounded by fine buildings, including one of the city’s many hostleries, a remarkable, half-timbered, fifteenth century pub, *The Crown*. On Wednesdays and Saturdays the square hosts a bustling, well patronised, market. Ancient stone walls, both high and low are a pleasing feature of waywardly wandering and winding streets and narrow passages, their courses determined centuries ago. Of all the towns and cities I have ever lived in, Wells is the finest.

Dirty old Town

Not so fortunate was the angry, steadfastly communist folk-singer and actor, Ewan MacColl (1915-1989). He came from a dirty old town: “*I met my love by the gas works wall*” goes the first line of his well known song, “*Dirty Old Town*”. He wrote it back in 1949 and that first verse continues: “*dreamed a dream by the old canal, I kissed my girl by the factory wall: Dirty old town, Dirty old town....*”

He’s talking of Salford which, like Wells, is a city in its own right, although cheek by jowl with Manchester, separated only by the river *Irwell*. Back in the 1940s and heavily bombed in the Second World War, it was indeed a dirty old town, notable for declining factories and unutterably miserable slums. Even as late as 2005 it was voted the ninth worst place to live in Britain.

The song’s “*old canal*” was the coal-ferrying Manchester, Bolton & Bury Canal which fell into disuse in 1961 and which is now in the process of being reclaimed for recreational pursuits. The original 1949 version of the song tells of the smell of a nearby spring being on “*the Salford wind*”, which in some renditions appears as “*the sulphured wind*”, though modern versions, including McColl’s own 1982 recording, euphemize this to “*the smoky wind*”.

My unlikely interest in Salford was aroused by coming across a striking, short poem written by a largely forgotten poet from the north of England called John Short (1911-1991). It has been set to music by Louis MacGillivray:



Dirty Old Town: Salford

(Photo: ‘In Your Area Community’)

Carol

*There was a Boy bedded in bracken,
Like to a sleeping snake all curled he lay;
On his thin navel turned this spinning sphere,
Each feeble finger fetched seven suns away.
He was not dropped in good-for-lambing weather,
He took no suck when shook buds sung together,
But he is come in cold-as-workhouse weather,
Poor as a Salford child.*

Cold-as-workhouse weather

The infant Jesus, *poor as a Salford child*. I love that. The poem's imagery is arresting for being so less than clichéd. A Boy not babe is *bedded in bracken* not hay and his beauty, appropriate to bracken, is *like to a sleeping snake all curled*, the serpent, this time round, lovely as a peacefully sleeping redeemer not a disastrous temptress, nor a baptism-card's pretty bambino. Wondrously, he's umbilicalled to this *spinning sphere* from the far far beyond of a mysterious, unimaginable *seven suns*, rather than from our more predictably imagined, hackneyed views of heaven.

The bucolic, inclement and poverty-stricken side to this momentous event is underlined by the boy, this lamb of God, being *dropped* rather than born and in far from *good-for-lambing weather*. On the contrary, he's suckled *in cold-as-workhouse weather*, the harshness of a pre-welfare state workhouse a salutary contrast to the Christmas card, animal-warmed and sweet-breathed stable. The holy family's poverty is "dirty old town" severe, he's as *poor as a Salford Child*. In so few words and lines the poet gets the Incarnation refreshingly right.

My own father could remember workhouses. Here's a parody of a sentimental Victorian monologue to lower the tone and bring these ruminations down to earth.

Christmas Pudding in the Workhouse

*It was Christmas night in the workhouse
The paupers were having their dinners.
The preacher called from the top of the hall,
"Get down on your knees, you sinners."*

*The paupers knelt in the cheerless room
Beside benches hard and wooden,
And the preacher called in a voice of doom,
"Bring in the Christmas pudding."*

*"Now bow your heads," he says with a leer,
"As I want you all to think
Of the sins of the flesh that brought you here,
Tobacco and women and drink."*

*"I'm telling you all and telling you well,"
and his voice took a threatening edge,
"No one gets to ate the pudding
Till all have taken the pledge."*

*A chill of doom ran round the room.
You could cut the air with a knife.
As each man searched the depth of his soul
For the sins of his wasted life.*

*Then all the paupers rose as one
And said as bold as brass,
"You can keep your Christmas pudding
And stick it up your arse."*



Wells: Market Square



Wells: Tractors on the High Street

(618) “This and That” - 14 September 2025

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



St Peter's Cornworthy, Devon

The staff room of Alan Wilson Technical Boys High School, in Salisbury, Rhodesia, was a dark and gloomy place. Whenever the deputy headmaster entered it became a sinister one too. He affected a Hitlerite moustache and delighted in his nickname “Hitler”, granted by schoolboys to whom he took the cane with a good deal more enthusiasm than reluctance.

A Françoise Hardy lookalike

I was an English teacher at Alan Wilson school for all of 1969 and 1970 and in the second of those years the gloom of the staff room lifted with the advent of a young woman teacher, whom I will call Naomi. She was a Françoise Hardy lookalike, though even lovelier. We knew each other by sight from our university undergraduate days and because of this, on her first day, she sat down beside me in the staff room, glad of a familiar face. As far as I can remember she was a student teacher, undergoing a mere ten weeks of practical teaching as part of her year-long postgraduate diploma. At the time I myself was thoroughly involved with and enraptured by another and dazzling teacher from my university days. She was employed at a school 165 miles away, which meant that I could visit her only at weekends in my fourth-hand, bashed-in, wheeled-matchbox of a Ford Escort “Estate” car, and then only as Saturday school cricket or rugby obligations permitted. It allowed my relationship with Naomi to be one of genuine friendship rather than romance and it was all the easier and lovelier for that. She was a gracious delight, I remember her fondly and gladly.

She has been in the forefront of my mind because last weekend Diana and I visited the tiny village of Cornworthy, near Totnes in Devon, for the eightieth birthday party of a Lancaster university friend of Diana's, also from way back in the late 1960s. We stayed with him and his wife for the night before the bash, to help prepare for the festivities and for an expected twenty or so guests. It was a party of parties with wondrous food and drink and what was even better, excellent company, conducive of conversations profound as well as light, long as well as brief and informative as well as frivolous. Like-minded, well travelled and well educated, seventy and eighty years olds make very good company.

Dropping of the twig time

For a time I found myself sitting next to an interesting fellow with an air of sadness to him and I discovered that his wife had fairly recently died and that he was still mourning her. He mentioned, in passing, that she had attended the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland and that her name was Naomi. “Naomi who?” I asked. It was the very same Naomi of the Alan Wilson school staff room. We were able to share happy, though bitter-sweet, reminiscences. Autumn being upon us means that seasonally it is dropping off the twig time for leaves and biographically, for those of late 1940s vintage, dropping off the twig time for friends and loved ones.



*Medieval paintings on the screen,
Holy Trinity, Torbryan, Devon*



Medieval paintings, Holy Trinity, Torbryan, Devon

“Snobs mind us off religion....”

At the birthday bash in Cornworthy, several of my best and friendliest conversations were with ex-believers and non-believers. I particularly enjoy these because my relatively liberal theology can surprise and even disconcert them. How can there be so many areas of agreement with a believer, they muse and some of them are intrigued by my favourite and all too often quoted aphorism: “the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty.”

However, in spite of all the agreement and mutual toleration, my favourite poem to do with the death of a loved one is the Australian Les

Murray’s, “*The Last Hellos*”, a largely gentle, reflective, but occasionally barbed piece on the death of his father. I particularly love its last four verses and most especially the last three lines, which are in no way at all conciliatory or tolerant:

*Your grave’s got littler
somehow, in the three months.
More pointy as the clay’s shrivelled,
like a stuck zip in a coat.*

*Your cricket boots are in
the State museum! Odd letters
still come. Two more’s died since you:
Annie, and Stewart. Old Stewart.*

*On your day there was a good crowd,
family, and people from away.
But of course a lot had gone
to their own funerals first.*

*Snobs mind us off religion
nowadays, if they can.
Fuck thém. I wish you God.*

Undoing the Reformation

I began to help unpick and undo the Reformation during a stint as “Day Chaplain” in the Cathedral last Monday. In mid afternoon Roman Catholics began to pour into the building and overflow the Lady Chapel for a recitation of the Rosary. We then helped guide well over 200 of the delighted and devout followers of the Pope into the Quire, for a celebration of the Roman Mass by Fr Joe Pazhayakalam, their local parish priest. It was possibly the first celebration of the Roman Rite, by a Roman Catholic priest in Wells Cathedral, since the death of Bloody Mary in 1558.

As I lugged chairs into the Quire to help seat them all, my mind’s ear could hear the dry rattling of vaulted bones all around and underfoot, as the entombed remains of long dead Protestant worthies turned in their grave. My mind’s eye observed too, the serene faces of Protestant bishop effigies grimace in disapproval.

The imaginative and innovative Dean of Wells had invited our Catholic brothers and sisters to a trip across the Tiber on the feast of “Latter Marymas”, which commemorates the Birth of Jesus’ mother, exactly nine months to the day after the commemoration of her Conception, on December the 8th. A lovely gesture.

(617) “This and That” - 7 September 2025

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade

The final part of an edited talk, delivered a good few years ago,
about being brought up and educated in Rhodesia and Zimbabwe

(Part 5)



Baby chameleon (Photo: 'LookAfrica')

“..... The chopstick, which deals in small portions and does no violence to the mouth, helps to guarantee both restraint and conversation..... The African custom of eating with the fingers is just as effective at inducing good manners, when the bowl sits at the centre of the family circle, and everyone must reach forward ceremonially to partake of it, afterward raising hand to mouth while looking and smiling at his neighbour. All such customs point toward the same end: the maintenance of human kindness” (Roger Scruton).

A rifle butt to the mouth

My wife and I were asked to partake of a traditional African meal by a friendly neighbouring parish churchwarden in my first Rhodesian parish. The meat dish and boiled kale were in two common bowls and the staple “sadza” in another. Towards its end, the meal developed an almost Eucharistic significance. As we contentedly ate together, blacks and whites, the guerrilla war that was to turn Rhodesia into Zimbabwe was raging and the conversation turned to the conflict and our experiences of it. We learned, almost as an aside, that our genial host had been captured and imprisoned by guerrillas, that his wife had had her teeth knocked out by a rifle butt and that their families lived in extremely dangerous areas. We were momentarily silenced. Like a Eucharist, the meal suddenly and poignantly revealed to us the cost, pain and suffering of innocence, goodness and redemption.

Freedom arrives at 9.00am

Many white Rhodesians were unaware of to what extent our servants supported the nationalists and their guerrillas. They told us what they thought we wanted to hear. Only when Mugabe was arriving by plane for the election that put him in to power, did Raymond, our servant, say to me: “Freedom arrives at 9.00 o’clock this morning.” His true feelings at last. At the start of his prime ministership Mugabe, a talented man, appeared more a pragmatist than an ideologue and all seemed well. Then, as with so many newly independent countries, things began to go awry. Why?

It had nothing to do with innate ability. The African peoples are as talented and able as any of us, but tribalism and cultural factors arising out of tribalism, did play a part. Obligations to family and tribe overrode obligations to a nation state, too often arbitrarily created by a colonial power. The resultant nepotism, once extended to the judiciary and armed forces spells disaster. What is more, many nationalist leaders in the struggle for liberation were educated at the Cold War universities of the 1950s and 1960s, when leftist, revolutionary ideologies held sway. In theory revolutions can seem necessary, right and even justifiable, but in practice their violence, brutality and ruthlessness too easily corrupt and poison the aims and ideals aspired to.

Be that as it may, in 1982 I succumbed to a malady from which I’d been suffering for years, caught as a child from our three and a half years on the island of Tristan da Cunha, it’s called *islanditis*. To cure the malaise required a good dose of island life. So we left Zimbabwe to take up a post on the island of St Helena, only to discover there symptoms of another and related malady, *Africanitis*, manifesting itself as a deep yearning for the Africa of my youth.



Yellow billed Kite

(Photo: 'whiteheaded vulture')

It is a yearning still with me, one that was only partly assuaged by a return to Zimbabwe with Diana in 2010, a deep longing for the yeasty smell of the first summer rain on hot earth, for spectacular summer thunderstorms and for the sight of yellow billed kites, in wheeling flocks, gorging on flying termites after such rain.



A female duiker (Photo: Bernard DUPONT)

Africanitis: guava juice and mahobohobos

Africanitis, a yearning for the peace of an un-televisioned sitting room, filled with the acrid scent of vaporised moths, charcoaled to death on the tilly lamps of our mission station home; for the scent and sight of early morning wood smoke, filtering through hut thatch, as fine an incense as any thurible ever wafted; for the insistent summer call of the Piet me Vrou Cuckoo and the plaintive song of the Black Capped Bush Shrike; for the wide-eyed beauty of shiny little African babies and the single arm dexterity of their mothers in swinging them up and binding them to their back.

Africanitis, a yearning for orange, or gray-green lichened, mighty granite boulders and rugged kopjes and for the spindly, crooked trunks of msasa trees which miraculously come into soft, bright, new leaf after six months with no rain;

for termite mounds, baby chameleons and the unexpected glimpse of a delicate duiker crossing a dusty road; for early morning chilled pawpaw, fresh guava juice, and for pockets of Mazoe oranges and a profusion of avocado pears.

Africanitis, a yearning for cheerfulness and laughter in the face of deprivation, and for simplicity of life and basic values; for the rich harmony of voices singing in church, accompanied by the insistent, thrilling beat of cowhide drums; for tall, orange-yellow elephant grass alongside dusty rutted roads; for the fruit of the mahobohobo tree and the glory of flaming flamboyant, sweet scented bauhinia and syringa trees. It is a yearning for little round, thatched-roof hutted villages, scattered throughout tribal areas, perfectly at one with their environment.



Mahobohobo tree and fruit (Photo: Cathy Buckle)

Elemental

But there's more than just beauty to this yearning, there's something elemental about Africa. Its despair tests the mettle of hope by revealing the shallowness of most of our hopefulness. Its poverty, likewise, tests the mettle of our plenty to find it wanting. Africa challenges our values and priorities and points us to some of the elemental truths of Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount*, reminding us that if there is to be resurrection in our lives, there needs first to be death to much of what we cling to.

(The end.) [parts 4,3,2 & 1 below]



Flamboyant tree

(616) “This and That” - 31 August 2025

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade

The second part of an edited talk, delivered a good few years ago, about being brought up and educated in Rhodesia and Zimbabwe (Part 4)



All Saints' Church, Gatooma

From 1979 to 1982, All Saints Church, Gatooma in Rhodesia suffered me as its rector, my first parish. For several of those years we were prohibited from leaving the town from dawn to dusk by a curfew and I travelled to distant parts of the parish in armed convoy, a sub machine gun on the car seat beside me, in case of an ambush.

Compromise or defiance

The 1965 *Unilateral Declaration of Independence* from Britain had added fuel to an incipient guerilla war, already just begun with the killing of a white farmer by nationalist insurgents in July 1964. This war intensified as the years went by.

To deny the inexorable tide of black nationalism turned out to be myopic and futile. Compromise with the inevitable was called for, not defiance. UDI was defiance.

That the defiance succeeded for as long as it did was remarkable. It was largely due to the high quality and well equipped forces of law and order, as well as to the sympathetic governments of neighbouring Mocambique and South Africa. Once Mocambique gained its independence from Portugal in 1975 and South Africa's support began to waver, UDI's fate was sealed.

The world's whipping boy

For fourteen years, Rhodesia was a pariah state. Sanctions were applied and obloquy and opprobrium heaped upon the nation. A relatively minor African nation provided the politicians of countries of all sorts and types with a conveniently insignificant *bête noire*, or rather *bête blanche*, against which to signal their own self-righteous indignation and virtue. Rhodesia was the world's whipping boy.

A whipping boy, historically, was a more red-blooded than blue-blooded lad educated alongside a boy prince, or boy monarch, in order to receive due corporal punishment for any of the princely boy's transgressions. The doctrine of *The Divine Right of Kings* rendered it inappropriate for a prince to be whipped or beaten by a socially inferior tutor. Instead, it was deemed more fitting for a princeling to witness a close companion and friend suffer such humiliation and so, perhaps, be motivated against repeating the transgression.

The divine right of power

Those in power, far too often, get away with evils of all and any sort. The miserable fate of Tibet and its native people, for example, unlike Rhodesia and its black population, has been overlooked, excused and long forgotten, so powerful is the country's conqueror and oppressor China. Crimea and Donetsk and their people are likely to suffer a similar fate, so powerful is their conqueror and oppressor, Russia. The *Divine Right of Kings* and the *Divine Right of Power* are not only much of a muchness, they are also a statement of brute fact and necessity.

Thanks to the fast-fading power of Britain and possibly as well, to a growing sense and awareness of what ought to be, which at times accompanied it, Rhodesia was different. The black majority achieved their due and their independence.



Gatooma Vicarage



Great Zimbabwe: the Enclosure

Heaven forfend!

Ian Smith and the majority of white Rhodesians resisted the rights and aspirations of the black majority as much, if not more, for fear of the consequences of not doing so, than from racism. We whites were too easily fooled into thinking that the electoral system in Rhodesia was anything but racist, because it was based upon property and wealth rather than race. However, this happened to exclude the vast majority of the black African population and so was racist in effect. Racial segregation and discrimination in other ways and of

different sorts, both minor and major, also pertained. However, the fear of likely disastrous consequences to a far wider franchise was possibly the most dominant motive behind support for UDI.

In 1526 England, when copies of Tyndale's translation of the New Testament were beginning to circulate widely throughout the land, the powers that be feared that the consequences would be disastrous. The Bishop of London, Cuthbert Tunstall, called the translations "pestiferous and pernicious poison" and Tyndale was eventually tracked down and martyred for his noble work. The authorities, myopically considered Tom, Dick and Harriet to be incapable of interpreting scripture correctly on their own, that wide familiarity with the bible's contents would endanger political stability and call the comfortable status quo into question.

They had a point. *The First Book of Samuel* tells us that God had no desire to appoint a king and only consented to put Saul on the throne because of the insistence of the mob. Heaven forfend, divine approval of republicanism! *The Acts of the Apostles* approvingly informs us that early Christians eschewed private property and held all things in common. Heaven forfend, divine approval of communism!

Spare a thought for losers

The Reformation, for all its noble and necessary achievements did prove to be a bloody, messy, nasty and violent business. Likewise, the end of Rhodesia and the birth of Zimbabwe, for all its noble and necessary achievements, gave to the country Robert Mugabe, repression, corruption, crimes against humanity and a wrecked and broken economy. Always spare a thought for losers, they are rarely entirely wrong.

Possibly the strangest and most heartening thing about the guerilla war though, was how amiable and good everyday relations between blacks and whites, workers and bosses, servants and masters, clergy and people, for the most part remained. Even though the blacks almost to a man and to a woman supported the insurgents. It is a tribute to the character of the Shona people that there was very little of what happened in Kenya with the Mau Mau, the murdering by workers and servants of their bosses.



Harare: Streetscape in the Mugabe era, 2010

(To be continued, above) [parts 3,2 & 1 below]

(615) “This and That” - 24 August 2025

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade

The second part of an edited talk, delivered a good few years ago, about being brought up and educated in Rhodesia and Zimbabwe **(Part 3)**



Diggelford boarding school dormitory in 2010, unchanged

Everywhere you went in 1950s Rhodesia, people were to be seen walking along the roadside. Especially where we lived, in the overcrowded tribal trust lands, but even in the hugely productive white farming areas, pedestrians and bicyclists abounded, for each farm was home to its own village of workers and their families.

Wide-eyed kiddies

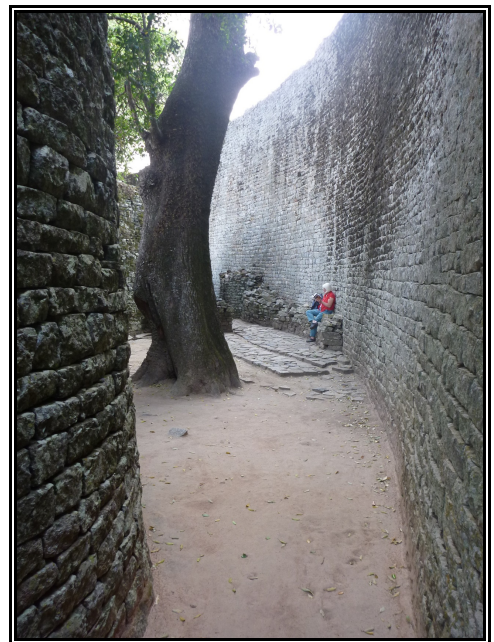
When family groups walked the roads, the husband tended to take the lead, his wife following with a bundle or suitcase on her head, children in hand and a baby on her back. Some older men, on buying a new felt hat, wore it still wrapped in the protective plastic it came in, to help

preserve it from fading too soon into dull ordinariness. The fact that no matter how far you were from anywhere, people were about, was one of the most immediately obvious differences between Africa and Australia, when once we had settled in the land of Oz. If you stopped your car for a picnic lunch in Rhodesia, after but a few minutes, a group of wide-eyed African kiddies would be watching intently your every movement and mouthful.

The extended family is important in African society. If relatives called, no matter how distant the relationship, they were to be offered hospitality. In times of famine this could be particularly hard on children, because they ate last. The staple food was sadza, which is ground maize, boiled and eaten, either as porridge or more usually as a thick dough, pulled off in lumps from a communal dish, dipped into a dish of meat or vegetable “relish” and then popped into the mouth.

A semi-liquescient splodge

Meat was highly favoured, though among the really poor, a luxury. By and large tougher, cheaper and tastier cuts were preferred, tenderised by being left to go high before cooking, as are game birds among the shooting fraternity here in Britain. Long after my youthful mission station years had ended, when I was the rector of my own, very first Zimbabwean parish, the church employed an amiable cleaner, caretaker and gardener called Everest. One day I walked into the church hall and smelt the foulest of foul stinks, not entirely dissimilar to the whiff of a sunblackened, five-day-dead kangaroo by the side of an Australian highway. With little difficulty I sniffed my way to its source in the kitchen and found the fridge door ajar. On a plate inside was an unappetising, stinking, yellow-grey, semi-liquescient splodge of animal origin. I called for Everest. “What is this?” I asked. “It is my nyama”, (my meat) he replied, smacking his lips. “Why is the fridge door open?” “Because the nyama smells” he said, as if I were a simpleton. “Get rid of it please,” I said, which he duly did, by cooking and eating it with pleasure. He was a man far closer, gustatorily speaking, to the entitled, plus-four sporting, doughty shooters of Britain, than to his uptight, bourgeois, dietary-cautious priest.



Dry stone walling: “Great Zimbabwe”



Shrine to Bernard Mizeki - Shona and Anglican Martyr

For emphasising the communal and shared nature of genuine well-being, surely nothing can better the final, courteous response to the standard greeting of the Shona people: “Mangwanani.” (Good morning.) “Marara sei?” (How did you sleep?) “Ndarara kana mararawo.” (I slept well if you slept well.) The Shona people were uninhibitedly affectionate, if they hadn’t seen each other for a long time they would shake hands and then not let go as they talked and laughed. I found this a little embarrassing when I was at university and a fellow I’d known as a boy on the mission station, turned up as a fellow student. In the middle of the crowded Students Union

Building he shook my hand and didn’t let it go as we chatted. The University was one of the few educational establishments that wasn’t segregated.

The declaration of UDI

When we first arrived in Rhodesia in 1956, my parents had wanted to enrol my brother and me in the St Bernard’s Mission Station primary school, to avoid having to be sent us to a boarding school. Had they been able to do so we would have been the only white students. The law of the time, however, did not permit this, even after special pleading from my father, so to a boarding school we went.

When I was in my final year at boarding school, my father left the mission station at Chikwaka and accepted a parish in what was then Salisbury, but is now Harare. This was to ease the financial burden of sending me to university. It meant that I could live at home and so avoid residence hall fees. I also accepted a government “teaching grant” which paid my tuition fees, on the understanding that I would do a postgraduate teaching diploma and then teach for two years in a government school. It also meant that I was at university when Ian Smith declared UDI, his infamous Unilateral Declaration of Independence from the United Kingdom.

The end of Federation

All the while that we were on mission stations, the political situation in Southern Rhodesia was became more fraught. When we first arrived the federal experiment, the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, was still in place and flourishing. Its disintegration was due as much, if I remember rightly, to growing black nationalist pressures and to British sympathy with them, as to anything else. Nyasaland broke away to become eventually Malawi, under the increasingly ruthless and somewhat egomaniac Dr Banda. Northern Rhodesia broke away to become eventually Zambia, under the rather less than entirely competent, lachrymose, but certainly not malign Kenneth Kaunda. Southern Rhodesia, with a much larger, white settler population, became simply Rhodesia, with an extremely limited franchise restricted almost totally to whites, which lead, eventually, to the election of Ian Smith’s conservative and myopic Rhodesian Front party.



University of Rhodesia & Nyasaland Students’ Union

(To be continued above) [Parts 2 & 1 below]

(614) “This and That” - 17 August 2025

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade

The second part of an edited talk, delivered a good few years ago, about being brought up and educated in Rhodesia and Zimbabwe **(Part 2)**



Honde Valley, Zimbabwe in bushfire haze

In mid 1950s Rhodesia we lived among and worked with the Shona people, who make up about 80% of the country's population; talented, amiable and hugely likeable folk. It did mean that church worship was rather different.

Odoriferous

In those days Africans, unlike us, seemed naturals for worship. They lived in a largely un-demythologised world, home to both good and bad ancestral spirits and to minor deities as well as to Mwari, God himself. There is no need for pretence or posturing if God is a daily life matter of fact, rather than a mere possibility. As few doubted him nearly all could be natural with him. People came into church at any time during services, some only for the last hymn.

If bored they unashamedly looked it, if they wished to prod their nose, scratch their ear or rub their eyes, they unconcernedly did so. They knelt bare kneed, without complaint, on cement or on polished, gold-flecked, dried cow-dung floors. They were odoriferous, for there were no baths or showers in most small rural villages. On a hot summer's day the acrid stench of packed humanity was enough to bring tears to your eyes. Church services could be tedious too, as a youngster I have been bored witless for hours in church, which is not altogether a bad thing. It helps develop the imagination and is a healthy balance to constant stimulation and entertainment at the push of a button.

An African Eton

Tedium fled when cow hide drums began to beat the introduction to a hymn. As the rhythm hotted up, women began to shuffle from their bench, do little dances and ululate at the top of their voices. There's no pleasure without pain. Bouts of music-making brought relief from slabs of incomprehensible, vernacular tedium.

After a few years at St Bernard's my father found himself at odds with the diocese. The Anglican Church hierarchy in those days, even in central Africa, was still much influenced by public school and Oxbridge alumni. Several of whom, led by Canon Grinham and Maurice Carver and backed by the bishop, decided that St Bernard's was an ideal site for an elitist school for African boys, to match several flourishing private schools nearby that they had already established, largely for white boys. The Marandellas area was deemed particularly ideal for being a healthy 5,500 feet above sea level. My father, with some prescience, opposed this, but to no avail. Wikipedia tells us: “..... the project was not without opposition. Canon David Neaum resigned from nearby St. Bernard's Mission and relocated to Chikwaka Mission in protest. He criticized the decision to prioritize an elite institution when broader access to education—particularly for girls—was still lacking.

The move to Chikwaka to establish a new mission centre and eventually an orphanage, proved a happy one for us. About forty miles from the



St John's Chikwaka



St John's Chikwaka

capital city and several from the double tarmac strip-road to the north east border with Mocambique, the new mission was sited on a well treed, rocky hill, above a minor river in which African otters played. My father and an African builder designed and built a new home for us, an assistant priest's house and extended the already existing church.

While our house was being built we lived in a vacant and isolated farm house, a good few miles away, on largely undeveloped farmland, where bird life was astonishingly rich and varied. We first heard and grew to love the bubbling call of the rain bird there: Burchell's Coucal. Our new house was built of homemade, home-fired bricks, harsh to handle, but a

lovely rose colour. The assistant priest's house was built of local stone. On school holidays I remember sawing through asbestos roofing sheets. How can it be that I am still alive?

Ingenious bandaging

My parents had no medical expertise but, because hospitals and clinics were distant, they were called upon to perform basic medical duties nonetheless. A woman came to see them once who, when asked what the matter was, exposed her breasts to reveal beneath both of them two very nasty burns. "How did you do that?" asked my Father, "I fell into the fire, Baba?" she replied. "Surely not?" he responded, "you were leaning too far over the beer barrel were you not, Mai?" "Yes Baba." My mother smeared the wounds with a soothing unguent and then bound bandages right round her, over the whole bosom. When she had finished the patient said, "but what about the baby?" Consternation. What to do? A pen was brought, two circles drawn on the bandage and then cut out to allow the nourishing nipples to protrude. All was well and the mother was so pleased with the arrangement she left her blouse off to show all her neighbours and friends as she walked home.



The homebuilt mission home, about 60 years later

Laughing at misfortune

I suppose it is "racist" to say even complimentary things about an entire race of people, but there is much that is deeply attractive about the Shona. There are many these days to be encountered in the UK, part of a world wide diaspora that's the result of bad government in Zimbabwe. I love to encounter and chat with them, nearly all so well educated and articulate. The subsistence farmers among whom we worked owned little materially. They lived in small, round, thatched huts and tilled land which, for want of ready cash and so fertiliser, tended to produce poor crops of maize to make sadza, a stiff porridge and their staple food, plus

pumpkins and kale for vegetables, and millet for beer. They kept cattle on common ground, chickens around the village and little else, but were always smiling. They had a great, if often basic sense of humour. Should one of their number slip and fall hard to the ground, so long as it was not quite fatal, the laughter was uproarious.

(To be continued above) [Part 1 below]

(613) “This and That” - 10 August 2025

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade

The first part of an edited talk, delivered a good few years ago, about being brought up and educated in Rhodesia and Zimbabwe (Part 1)



Traditional village near Great Zimbabwe

Although Africa, stereotypically, is a dark, sad, miserable, wrecked and ruined, continent, teeming with humanity, disease and misery, I love it. From the age of 11 I was brought up there. Signs of hope and progress in the continent lift the spirits these days, but it's the “colonial” Africa of yore I look back to with delight and joy.

Baboons, leopards and religious ecstasy

I'm filled with an aching nostalgia for the scent of early morning wood fire smoke in thatched-hut villages, the ringing duets of black collared barbets, the dry rattle of termite wings on window-gauze after rain. Likewise for the sound of African drums from nearby village parties as I went to sleep as a boy, and in church the honeyed

harmony of school boy voices singing Victorian hymns as if they had been composed just for them, descanted spine-tinglingly by shrill ululations from elderly women, brought to the brink of religious ecstasy by rhythm, melody and harmony.

I first visited Africa at the age of six, on my way to Tristan da Cunha. Four years later in 1956, aged eleven, I travelled there to live permanently, again by sea, from Southampton to Cape Town and then north for three days and nights by steam train to Marandellas, in Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe. The train carriages had a small ‘verandah’ at each end, from which we watched kopjes inhabited, we fancied, by monkeys, lions and leopards, rise like islands from seas of early morning mist.

On arriving in Marandellas we were crammed into a dented Studebaker utility and driven wildly and fast, over heavily corrugated dirt roads, by a half-crazed, cockney mission station headmaster, to St Bernard's Mission, 13 miles outside of the town. It was set in savannah bushland among great, granite bouldered kopjes which, we discovered later, were teeming with a baboons and wild pig as well as an occasional leopard to be spotted, now and then, in early evening headlights.

Thatched roofed, termite ridden and beautiful

The mission station comprised an African boys' boarding school, houses for its teachers and its priest in charge, a farm of about 2000 acres and a thatch-roofed, termite infested but beautiful church. It was also the centre of a 50 mile wide and 300 mile long “mission district”, a swathe of wild and beautiful country with 35 smaller mission centres, each consisting of a school, a church and teacher accommodation, most of them situated at the end of the most appalling roads and tracks. They were to be administered and managed by my priest father, with the help of an African associate priest, an amiable and capable Father Michael Zambezi.

In those days almost all education for blacks in the country areas of Rhodesia was provided by the churches, with a degree of government assistance and oversight. Education was not yet universal, it was a privilege, not a right, and competition for places could be stiff. It was



Bushfire smoke hazy rural scene, Zimbabwe

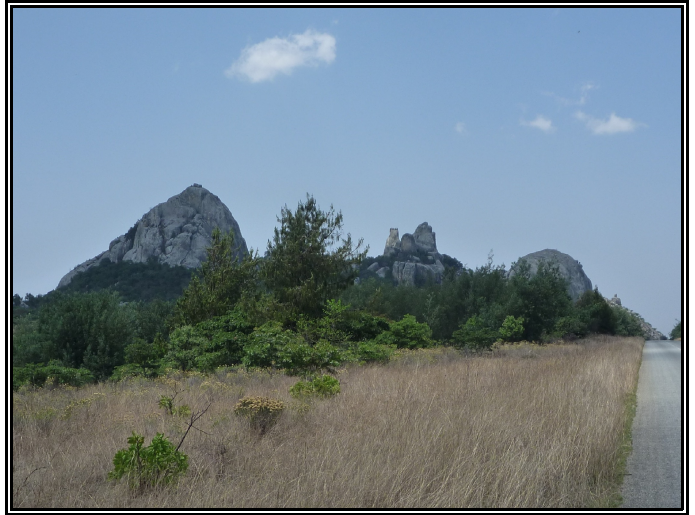
the era before African nationalism fully came into its own and when Rhodesia was Southern Rhodesia, part of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. White rule, from our mission perspective, seemed more paternalistically than cruelly racist, though racist it most certainly and indefensibly was.

The Inter Tropical Convergence Zone

Life on the mission station was fascinating to my brother and me. At an altitude of about 5000 feet above sea level it enjoyed a marvellous climate. Dry, cool winters were sometimes misty, but more usually offered day after day of crisp sunshine with the temperature rising to about 22° or 23° Celsius, though with night time ground frosts. The summers were hotter, especially in November, “suicide month”, when humidity built up to sometimes intolerable levels. Summer was the wet season and once the “Inter Tropical Convergence Zone” moved south and began to drop 35 inches, or more, of heavy, tropical and often spectacularly thundery rain, the summer climate was more than tolerable. In the Marandellas area secretary birds stalk the savanna land and the predominant Msasa trees come miraculously into soft, and colourful new leaf at the end of the bone-dry winter. Bird life is spectacular and the sandy soils, derived from the great granite boulders of the rugged kopjes, are ideal for growing tobacco. Where soils are heavier, bountiful crops of maize can be grown.

44 gallon drums of beer

St Bernard’s mission station was unusual for being surrounded by white farm land, but it wasn’t far from the vast tracts of land known then as Tribal Trust Lands. There the African people, already beginning to be overcrowded, managed to live not too harsh a life of subsistence farming, supplemented by income sent home by relatives working in the cities. Every weekend, crowded buses, their roof racks piled high with suitcases, boxes, bicycles, live chickens in homemade coops and everything else imaginable, ferried mostly male city workers back to the Tribal Trust lands to party and make merry. A sorghum based, cloudy beer was home concocted, cooked and fermented in 44 gallon drums. The end product was an unappetising grey colour and sour to the taste. It was alcoholic enough to bring on delirium, if drunk in sufficient quantities though. I sampled it only once, as an adult, it was not at all to my taste.



Zimbabwean kopjes



Roadside Msasa tree, Zimbabwe

Blue headed geckos

It was at St Bernard’s Mission that I first grew to appreciate African worship. I loved the mission church, made of termite mound soil, home kilned bricks and thatched with local grass. Its ragged eaves were deep, supported by spindly msasa tree poles and the glassless windows looked out over an area of carefully swept sand, shaded by a variety of trees, including Australian bottle brush trees and eucalypts, Large, blue-headed geckos scuttled up and down their trunks.

(To be continued next week, above)

(612) “This and That” - 3 August 2025

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



St Mary's Stoke-sub-Hamdon

It was good to be born in 1945, the year that saw an end to a vile War and to Adolf Hitler, a vile human being. I have faults myself, but hopefully am not vile.

Hail divinest Melancholy

In 1945 the bruised and battered western world had yet to be seduced by affluence into soulless secularism, moral relativity, consumerism and the worship of celebrities instead of saints. Society appeared still to retain sufficient Christian faith and practice to enable beauty, truth and what is right and good to stand firm on the historical foundations upon which they had been built.

I have had a good trot. It was indeed good to be born in 1945, but it does mean that my eightieth

birthday approaches and that grants a mild elegiac quality to all I think and write and do. A gentle melancholy, lightened by gratitude and brightened by love, suffuses my life and being these days.

“Hence loathed melancholy....” begins Milton’s poem *L’Allegro*, set beautifully to music by Handel. I am not sure I agree. Its companion piece, *Il Penseroso*, also set beautifully to music by Handel, begins:

Hence vain deluding joyes....

and then a little later: *Hail divinest Melancholy....*

Melancholy has merits. The beauty of the slow movement of Mozart’s clarinet concerto and of his 20th and 21st piano concertos, fills my being with a melancholic longing almost too beautiful to bear: *Hail divinest Melancholy* indeed.

The tearfulness of things

This summer, for the first time since their mother died, more than 16 years ago, my four children and their families gathered all together, here in England, to enjoy each others company and, in part, to mark and celebrate my coming 80th birthday. How I love and admire them. To raise children is not easy and their mother Margaret and I made many a mistake in bringing up our four, none of whom seem to hold it against us. Children succeed as much in spite of their parents as because of them.

To observe my four, with the help of fine spouses, lovingly, sacrificially and competently bring up theirs, two families having to cope with daunting childhood and teenage health challenges is deeply moving. Petitionary prayers are my least favourite, but when it comes to my children and grandchildren an unaccustomed fervency overcomes me, as too does the *lacrimae rerum*, “the tearfulness of things”. Children are wondrously, wondrously worth it, how lovely they are, but:



St Mary's Stoke-sub-Hamdon

*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.*

John Masefield

I send a small circle of friends and acquaintance a poem each day of the week, except on Sundays. This means that I read a lot of verse but, as a practised skimmer, I can reject a hundred with ease before settling upon one that I respond positively to and feel worth passing on. The last line of the following verse is unutterably intriguing and strikes a profound chord, not least because beauty, strangely, raises questions about everything. To look back in elegiac mood, assisted by a memory that censors out most heartbreak, sadness and nastiness in my self and life, fills me not only with deep gratitude, but also with an awareness of how much better I could have been and how much more I could have made of it all:

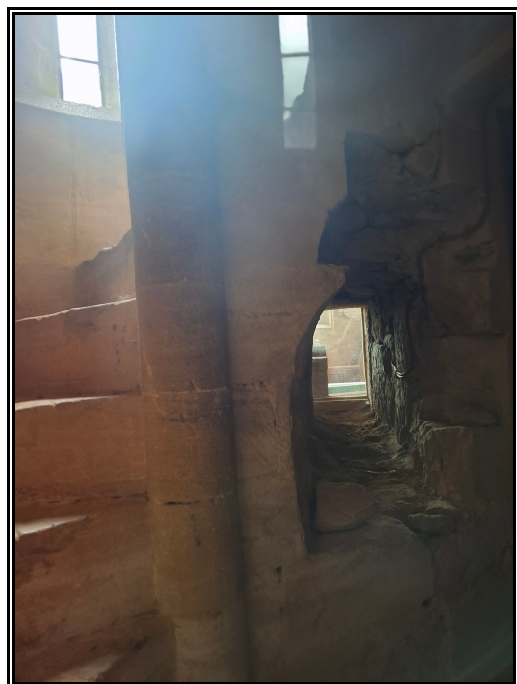
Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota

*Over my head, I see the bronze butterfly,
Asleep on the black trunk,
Blowing like a leaf in green shadow.
Down the ravine behind the empty house,
The cowbells follow one another
Into the distances of the afternoon.
To my right,
In a field of sunlight between two pines,
The droppings of last year's horses
Blaze up into golden stones.
I lean back, as the evening darkens and comes on.
A chicken hawk floats over, looking for home.
I have wasted my life.*

James Wright

Hagioscope, squints and lychnoscopes

On our way to fossil hunt at Lyme Regis with my Australian based and omni-curious son, we stopped to view the parish church of St Mary in Stoke-sub-Hamdon. My all too brief journal entry remarks: *A truly ancient architecturally higgeldy piggeldy church with a great Norman Arch, mostly Gothic, and with two of the longest squints we've ever seen, a truly*



St Mary's - squint, north side

the service without coming into contact with the rest of the populace, these are termed 'leper windows' or 'lychnoscopes'.

fascinating building, though also with a nasty projection screen unsympathetically erected, indicating evangelical oversight, and the place was a tad untidy. The best minders of ancient churches are not fervent vicars but ancient parishioners who love the building and respect the past....



St Mary's - squint, south side

A hagioscope or squint is a small opening or tunnel, at seated eye-level, through an internal masonry wall of a church to grant worshippers an oblique view of the altar and therefore of the liturgically important elevation of the host. Sometimes they were placed to enable nuns or anchorites to observe the services without having to lay aside their isolation. Squints in external walls enabled lepers and other non-desirables to see

(611) “This and That” - 27 July 2025

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade

The 4th & final part of an edited talk, delivered a good few years ago about time spent on the island of St Helena in the 1980s. **Parts 1, 2 & 3 below.**



Dangerous crumbling cliffs

Our two and a half years on St Helena were fascinating and fulfilling. The vicarage and garden were delightful and the job was relatively stress free, administratively a doddle, pastorally rewarding and intriguingly different.

Brimming with magnanimity

There was time enough to take off to be guided down crumbling, daunting, dangerous cliffs to fish for the table and occasionally to go out with hard-bitten professionals to catch tuna. Our third child and the first of our two daughters was born there. We reared ducks, hens and turkeys for the table and from virgin soil created a productive

vegetable garden. We had brought with us a fine wood-working bench enabling me to construct several poultry houses, mosquito netted frames for the vicarage bedroom windows, birthday toys for the children and a tree house. The people appeared appreciative of our ministry and the old folk in the 32 homes to which I took the sacrament each month, often at the end of a glorious walk in isolated, beautiful locations, were a sheer delight to sit, laugh and chat with over a cup of tea. On one monthly circuit I would end at the home of two ancient and merry sisters who plied me with cake and sherry, sending me on my way home brimming with magnanimity and ticking like a bomb.

Ennui, resentment and murder

However, there is no such place as the Garden of Eden. While we were on the island there occurred the first murder in something like 80 years. It was all to do with drink, jealousy and adultery - common enough sins everywhere, but a remark to me from an amiable defence lawyer, brought to the island from England for the trial, has stayed with me. On his very first day he looked around at our lovely island and said: “What a terrible place, how can anyone bear to live here? The sadness of the people is all but palpable.” Though just a first impression and overstated, he had caught something of an underlying feel to the island at that time, something less than obvious to casual visitors and tourists. Superficially everything was indeed lovely, beautiful, exotic and paradisaical. People waved as you passed them in a car and when encountered face to face were smiley, helpful and interested in where you came from and what you did. There was also, though, an undercurrent of discontent, resentment, aimlessness, frustration and parochial self absorption, of unoriginal original sin.



An isolated country cottage

In this South Atlantic Garden of Eden, people were no happier than anywhere else we have ever lived, perhaps less so. The illegitimacy rate was 50% in spite of all the churchgoing, pre-baptism counselling and marriage preparation. Round the world yachtsmen knew St Helena to be a haven where so called love is free. They dallied for weeks, conveniently bringing new genes to the island and less usefully, new strains of venereal disease. Guaranteed, low-paid employment for men discouraged initiative, why rise to challenges and strive to better yourself if government-supplied work is available no matter what? Such employment came in the form of a work for the dole scheme, unemployed men spent three days a week scaping weeds from the fifty or so miles of narrow, twisting roads and lanes.

The island produced little to export and help pay its way. Only once, in 1951, had exports ever exceeded imports in value, thanks to the flax industry which had been killed off finally in the 1960s when the British Post Office moved over to synthetic fibres. Nor are the waters around the island rich in commercially valuable fish, a small amount of dried fish was exported but little else.

For no good reason the island was not even self sufficient in vegetables and fruit. Alcoholism was a problem, drunkenness among the men commonplace and gossip flourished mightily.. A single tot of brandy for the vicar and he was declared an alcoholic, a smile at the churchwarden's wife and he was an adulterer.



Looking south from the centre of the island

Hair brained schemes

Also, thanks to the end of empire, Britain has forgotten how to govern colonies, is embarrassed by them. Well paid experts with often hair-brained schemes were all too familiar on the island and resented both for their pay and their failed projects. The Queen and Royal Family were loved and revered, their portraits on display in nearly all homes, but the British Government was not. For more than any reason this was because of the failure of an ongoing campaign and struggle by the islanders to regain full British identity and freedom of movement in and out of Britain. This has now been regained, but while we were on the island it had not and was a great source of grievance. Finding leaders and people who would speak their mind was difficult and talented, high achieving islanders tended to be demeaned and deprecated as sycophants. Church membership and attendance, while heartening and good was also based as much upon an inherited affection for the institution and its buildings than on anything else. This affection was especially evident for the graveyards. Graves were lovingly and beautifully tended.

Close curls the serpent

No Garden of Eden then, and what a good thing that is. Eden is always once upon a time, always yesterday not today. It s a necessary myth and a lovely one which, elaborated and adorned by nostalgia, is where we travel from, not towards.



The Pith-helmeted Governor

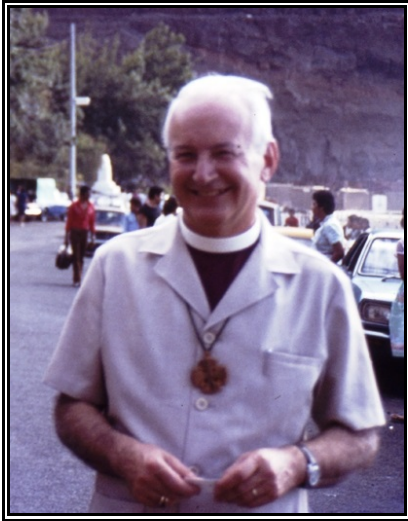
For Christians it is Golgotha, the place of the skull, not Eden, the garden, that reveals the true nature of God. Eden is no place for the likes of us. Love is fostered and flourishes in the real world of joy and grief, struggle and grit, not in Eden and learning to love is why we exist, is life's purpose. Love symbolised by a Cross, not a Garden. The more like Eden our circumstances, the closer curls the serpent. St Helena, is wondrous. All the more so for its non-Edenic, enriching, gritty reality.

(Parts 3 2 & 1, below)

(610) “This and That” - 20 July 2025

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade

The third part of an edited talk, delivered a good few years ago, about time spent on the island of St Helena in the 1980s. (Part 3)



Bishop Ted Cannan

My reason for being on St Helena was the Church, what was that like? In the 1980s it was surely the Anglican Communion's most perfect diocese. One Bishop, four parishes and four priests, with one parish and its priest inconveniently but intriguingly situated 700 miles away on Ascension Island. In such a diocese a bishop was able to be all that a bishop ought to be, a pastor, shepherd, mentor, father and friend, known personally by his priests and people. Ideally every large parish in the Anglican Communion should have a bishop as its team vicar. A multiplicity of bishops would dilute the episcopate, of pomp, undue deference and self importance.

The diocese of dioceses

During our time on the island the bishop took over the reins of each parish, whenever its priest was on three months leave, usually every two and a half years. He could be no remote, deferred to, condescending “My Lord Bishop”, living in a great palace, nor was he weighed down by red tape, bureaucracy, synod reports, surveys, strategising and his own dignity, power and importance. He was closely observable, widely known and revealed to be an ordinary, fallible priest and human being, living on a limited, missionary salary, only a little more than his clergy's and like them, happy to be so. In my time his name was Ted Cannan, an amiable, able, ex-airforce chaplain; an apostle with a manageable diocese of an ideal size. To the eye of a cynical observer, at Lambeth conferences, when all the world's Anglican diocesan bishops meet together, the bishop of St Helena might appear a Gilbert and Sullivan bishop, with his pocket handkerchief sized diocese of only four priests, but not at all, not at all. He was better off than any diocesan bishop in the Anglican Communion, overseeing the best of all dioceses, one in which he had a chance to be as true and lively a pastor, shepherd & apostle as was St Peter, we presume.

Eleven churches for one small island

And what about the priests? Well, in those days each of the three on St Helena had a parish that roughly comprised a third of the island's total population, under two thousand souls apiece. There was the parish of Jamestown, the only town on the island, which had three churches to serve a population of around 1,800. Then there was the Cathedral parish, of which I was vicar, situated up in the hills and comprising the lovely western half of the island. There, to cater for a similar number of parishioners, was the small Cathedral and four daughter churches, none of them empty or in danger of redundancy. The third parish took in the rest of the island and had two churches with another planned.



St James' Jamestown

So for a mere five and a half thousand people, three priests with less than 2000 souls to a parish. What an opportunity. It was perfectly possible to visit every single house in your parish each year. Eleven Anglican churches for so small a population seems excessive, but it was due largely to



St Paul's Cathedral

the rugged nature of the terrain. The churches were where the people were and none of them was empty. So for a priest too, the place was indeed the Garden of Eden.

A whole world mix of people

What about the people, what of them? As previously noted the population of St Helena was, and remains, a friendly, whole-world-mix of every colour and characteristic, bearing evidence in features and pigmentation of China, India, Malaya, Madagascar, Europe and Africa. In the 1980s, ninety percent were Anglican. There was a quite strong

group of uncooperative and somewhat defensively militant Jehovah's Witnesses and a small, active group of Baptists. There were also tiny communities of Salvationists, Roman Catholics, 7th Day Adventists and the Bahai, but the overwhelming majority was Anglican. By no means all went to church, but unlike in Britain and Australia, which even in those days were well on the way to thoroughgoing secularism, and where the attitude of the public to the Church was often far from positive, this was not so on St Helena. There, in the 1980s, everyone seemed appreciative of the Church as a positive part of the island's life.

Until about three years before we arrived, by unwritten agreement, no public dances were held for the whole six weeks of Lent. There still weren't any during Holy Week. The priest was "Father", even to those who never went to church. He was called in, without exception, at grievous illness and death and each month I took the sacrament into thirty two homes where there were housebound elderly or sick, desirous of the sacrament. Churchgoing, although purportedly in decline, was

far better than anywhere else in the world I have experienced. A regular Wednesday Evensong in St Andrew's, Half Tree Hollow, attracted anything up to sixty people. The Garden of Eden indeed.

The Vale of Soul Making

All of which leads on to an obvious question. Why were 'missionary' priests like me being called upon to go to such a place? The traffic should have been the other way. In those days St Helena was a more Christian and Anglican society than either Australia or England. It was an inspiration. It should have been exporting clergy and Christians, not importing them.

The answer to the question is also obvious. There is no such place as the Garden of Eden,

which is a myth from the dim and distant past, a manifestation of an idealisation and nostalgia for our youth, or even for the comfort and security of the womb. The truth in the myth is that God, for our good, expels us from Eden into the actual world, the "Vale of Soul Making". Even lovely St Helena was and remains very much a part of the real and fallen world. To pretend otherwise is delusion, wishful thinking and a lie, though all I have said so far is true.

(Parts 2 & 1, below)



St Matthew's Hutts Gate



St Peter's Sandy Bay

(609) “This and That” - 13 July 2025

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade

The second part of an edited talk delivered a good few years ago about time spent on the island of St Helena in the 1980s. (Part 2)



A black, volcanic-sand beach, on Tristan da Cunha

In the 1920s, five bachelors on Tristan da Cunha asked the captain of the Royal Naval vessel, the *Duke of Gloucester*, to find each of them a wife from the island of St Helena, one willing to take a punt on marital bliss on windswept, rainy Tristan.

Intrepid matrimony

The Governor of St Helena, having successfully asked for written assurance that any women who rose to the challenge would be well looked after, gave his consent. Five intrepid women were landed on the black volcanic sand of a Tristan beach early one morning, whereupon the pusillanimous captain sailed to the other side of the island in case the practicalities of match-making

went awry. On his return he found satisfaction all round, the five bachelors had amicably settled upon a wife each. Although 1,500 miles apart, Tristan and St Helena have been linked ever since and today share a St Helena based British Governor who, on ceremonial occasions, still wears a white plumed pith helmet and also occasionally visits Tristan, which is benignly and light-handedly overseen by a British appointed “Administrator”.

In the early May of 1982, my family and I left Zimbabwe by train on our way to Cape Town to catch the eponymous *RMS St Helena*, upon which we were booked to be taken to that island. We stopped in Johannesburg for a week on the way and while listening to the news one evening, learned that the British Government had requisitioned our vessel, the island’s only supply ship, to assist them in the Falklands war. We were stranded for a frustrating couple of months, though happily in one of the world’s loveliest cities, Cape Town, generously and satisfactorily accommodated by mother Church. The ship eventually acquired to replace the requisitioned *RMS St Helena* was a rusty little tub called the *Aragonite*, a mere six hundred tons which, once smartened up and refitted, took seven days to get us to the island, rolling and lurching in the South Atlantic swell. It accommodated only twelve crew and twelve passengers, offered few comforts, but was an altogether happy little vessel.

Anchorage

On the morning of the seventh day we were woken by unfamiliar noises from the deck above us and so rose from our bunks, before light, to stare at a black stain on a starlit horizon. As day dawned and the ship drew nearer to the island that was to be our home for the next two and a half years, we viewed it in ever increasing clarity and wonder. Once in the lee of its precipitous brown cliffs, a dozen or more porpoises heralded our arrival by breaking the water for the ship’s bow as they leapt and dived in unison all the way to our anchorage, well off the narrow valley into which the only town of the island is crammed, Jamestown. St James’ Church and tower were clearly visible beyond an ancient fortified wall at the valley’s mouth.



Jamestown from the sea



Jamestown from above

Just six by ten miles in size St Helena is a scrap of an island, forty seven rugged, precipitous and very beautiful square miles. It was discovered in 1502 by the Portuguese and garrisoned by the British East India Company in 1659. It is inhabited these days by about three and a half thousand descendants of British officials, settlers, servants, castaways and slaves, some of the last liberated on the island by the Royal Navy while policing Atlantic waters to bring an end to the trans Atlantic trade in slaves. In 1982, when we arrived, the population was about

six thousand. There were never any native or aboriginal inhabitants and the population today is a whole world mix of lively, friendly folk of every colour and characteristic. They bear evidence in their features, surnames and pigmentation of China, India, Malaya, Madagascar, Europe and Africa.

An emerald set in bronze

The island is sited well into the tropics, but is cooled by the constant trade winds. It is brown and arid around its precipitous perimeter cliffs, but lush, green and temperate higher up in the centre. "An emerald set in bronze" as viewed from the air by passing angels. The highest point on the island is Diana's Peak at 2,684 feet. The island is beautiful, peaceful and also anachronistic for being one of the few remaining, willing, full British colonies. It is financially poor, but by no means destitute thanks largely to British Government grants-in-aid.

What more could a priest ask for then? Truly a little Garden of Eden in this troubled world. Out of the stream of things. Famous briefly when Napoleon was exiled there and died, but now largely forgotten. In our time there was no airstrip of any kind, the terrain being far too rugged to construct one easily and so there were almost no tourists. Mail arrived by ship from the north six times a year and from the south six times a year, brought by the one regular supply vessel, which in our day sailed from Avonmouth in England to Cape Town and back, calling in both ways.

Bearded trees

The climate where we lived, 1,700 feet up, next door to the Cathedral of which I was vicar, was almost perfect. In our two and a half years, the coldest temperature on the coldest night was 14 degrees centigrade, the hottest temperature on the hottest day was 25 degrees centigrade. Rainfall was about 33 inches per annum, though three miles away, on the coastal cliffs, a mere 8 inches per annum. It was always gentle rain too, never any thunder storms, the last thunderstorm had



The lush interior

occurred sixty years before our arrival. The rainfall is orographic, a shallow layer of moist air when forced up and over a mountainous obstacle in the sea, drops a degree or two in temperature resulting in what is usually gentle precipitation. It means far less rain on the perimeter, far more in the interior. At higher altitudes there is also much mist and so around our vicarage the trees grew lichen beards along their branches, epiphytic growth. The Garden of Eden indeed.

(Part 1, below)

(608) “This and That” - 6 July 2025

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade

*For the next few and busy holiday weeks, these articles will be based on a talk about St Helena, delivered years ago. **Part 1...***



The Island of St Helena

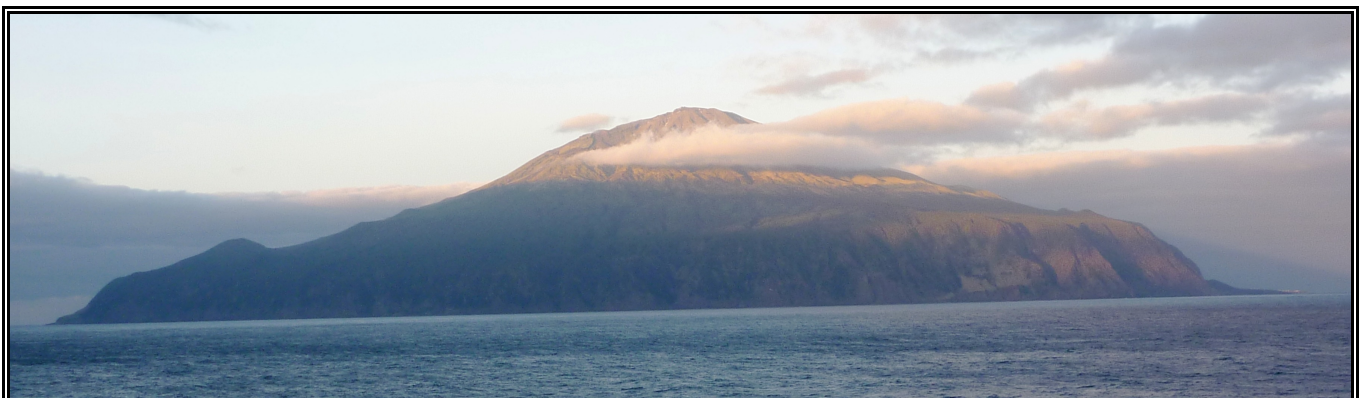
When I was a curly headed lad of nearly seven, my father, an English country parson, left a comfortable rural parish in Staffordshire, England and went off to be a missionary priest, with his wife and three children, on the Island of Tristan da Cunha, in the middle of the South Atlantic Ocean.

Trumpeting whales and roaming donkeys

It was 1952 and the island was then, and remains, the most isolated peopled island in the world, fifteen hundred miles from the nearest inhabited land. It is the peak of an ancient volcano that rears up from the sea floor to an altitude of six thousand seven hundred feet above the sea's surface. Situated on the edge of the 'Roaring Forties', it is almost midway between Cape Town in South Africa and Montevideo in South America. The population then was about 360, folk of mixed race who scraped a living from the sea, thanks to the abundance of widely desirable crayfish in the kelp beds that surround the island. Their tails were tinned in a small factory and sent off, via Cape Town, to America to be gobbled down with partician gusto, presumably, by the likes of Rockefellers, Roosevelts and Kennedys.

On Tristan da Cunha I imagine myself to have been profoundly happy. Wild seas, rugged cliffs, a mighty mountain, squalls, gales and tranquil calms were a part of daily life. We lived in a Royal Navy built, bungalow, about 100 unobstructed grassy, cliff-top yards from the sea. On still evenings whales were to be heard blowing, trumpeted and smashing their tale flukes on the sea's surface. The island has become my personal narrative's Garden of Eden. My brother and I ran wild and free, bare-footed in summer, riding the unfenced settlement plateau on freely roaming donkeys, fishing for tiddlers in rock pools, serving at the altar, eating penguin and albatross eggs and even keeping a penguin as a pet. A happy childhood, uncomplicatedly aware of and acquainted with God, well loved and loving.

We were there for three and a half years and when we left we presumed we would never ever return. I was expelled from my Garden of Eden, fondly looking back to it, remembering it, reminiscing about it and longing for it.



The Island of Tristan da Cunha

Expulsion from Eden

The old, old story tells us that Adam and Eve were expelled from their Eden too. Driven out and away from the sort of garden that wild, flea-ridden, grit- in-the-eye, desert nomads dream of: scented, flowering leafy-loveliness, bubbling streams, tinkling fountains and ordered paths where God was wont to stroll in the cool of the evening, like an Oriental Sheik. They too were expelled from loveliness into an all too real and adult world of nettles and thistles, struggle and discord, cancer and multiple sclerosis, war-mongers and terrorists, pollution and politicians, grubby, graffiti-scribbled walls and city streets upon which the weak and elderly can be pushed, shoved and mugged, a world in which innocence and goodness are crucified. Pity Adam and Eve, pity us, their descendants.

We come to terms with our lot though. Kicked out of Eden, the Eden of childhood, we attempt to build, or find again, our very own Garden of Eden. Most of us, perhaps after a little impossible fantasising and dreaming, are content to settle upon our home and garden, which become a personal and particular Garden of Eden, a carpeted, comfortable, just-as-we-like-it, bolt-hole and paradise. We lavish upon it our savings, plans and dreams, until, with ineffable sadness and regret, we are expelled once more, by incapacity or death.

Too much money

Little different from anyone else, I too have fancied a personal Garden of Eden, but being a nomadic parson, who didn't own his own house, or particularly want to, I looked elsewhere for Eden. In 1982 I decided to return to the sort of Eden from which I was expelled as a child. At the time I was a priest in Africa and happy enough as the Rector of a parish that had been left a share in a local gold mine, in days when gold was but a few dollars an ounce, but which, since then, had soared to astronomic heights. We were embarrassed with money, the richest parish in the diocese of Mashonaland. All of this inherited income had been judiciously lodged in a carefully controlled and locally policed Trust Fund, for the use and welfare of this particular parish alone. The Bishop and Diocese were locked out. Whatever the Rector did or said, it mattered not, the parish coffers were full and brimming over.

To the clergy of less well endowed parishes, life in so affluent a patch would seem a sort of Garden of Eden in itself, but my vision was formed by that childhood on Tristan da Cunha. So after four contented years as Rector, my wife and I, with two little boys, turned our backs on the problems

of too much cash and on Africa, where we'd lived for many years, and accepted a position somewhere very different and which, I hoped, would approximate closely to Tristan da Cunha.

Looking for a wife

We went to the island of St Helena, once more right in the middle of the South Atlantic Ocean, a thousand or so miles from Africa, many more from South America and one thousand five hundred miles north of Tristan da Cunha, but with Tristan connections. Many years before, the men on Tristan had asked the captain of a passing whaler to acquire some wives for them, women being hard to come by in the middle of a wild ocean.



Tristan donkeys

The captain forgot, until he called in at St Helena. There he picked up a handful of adventurous women willing to take a chance on Tristan and her men. As he drew near to Tristan, so one version of the story maintains, he began to have a few qualms. The women were decidedly dusky of complexion, would the Tristan men accept them?

(Would they indeed? To be continued.... above)

Home