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### **BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE (February 2014)**



*The Reverend Canon Andrew Neaum became the “House for Duty” Anglican priest of the lovely Boldre Benefice in August 2013. The Vicarage in which he and Diana live is on the edge of the New Forest, a couple of miles north of Lymington in Hampshire. He is old fashioned enough a priest to visit his flock in their homes, but “house for duty” clergy are supposed to work only two days a week and Sundays, which means visiting everyone in the parish takes a long time. The following are the **February 2014** weekly ruminations, aired prejudices and footling observations that in the weekly pew sheet augment his visits and help keep folk in touch week in and week out. Earlier articles are available from the Article Page on this Website: <http://www.andrewneaum.com/articles.htm>*

#### **(26) “This and That” - Sunday 23 February, 2014**

I love herrings. They are so versatile and delicious, kippered, roll-mopped or simply back-boned, dusted in flour and fresh fried. Mackerel I am not fond of. On the Island of St Helena I once went fishing for tuna with professional fishermen. We spent a good hour before dawn in the lee of the island catching hundreds of mackerel for bait. Then on the way out to deeper water we had them cooked for us by the skipper on a tiny stove, heavily enamelled with grease and cockroach saliva. They were delicious until we ventured beyond the island’s lee into open sea. Then they came back. First to mind, then in a rush to the mouth and over the side of the boat.

## **Red Herrings**

I also have a weakness for red herrings. This is why I use a written text for my sermons. If I didn't, I would be chasing red herrings from the North Sea, through the North Atlantic, South Atlantic, Indian Ocean, down into the Great Southern Ocean and into Bass Strait.

I am a chaser of red herrings in more than one way. When I walk into my study to do a particular job, I catch sight of another that needs doing and start that instead. Then another catches my eye and mind and so on. I leave the study having been very busy, but with nothing completed.

I suspect that this weakness for red herrings is the result of years and years and hours and hours of church-going. For sixty five years and more I have been to church twice on Sundays. For the last twenty four years of my life in Australia I attended two services daily. Chasing red herrings is a way of coping creatively with all this worship. It is often more exciting to chase a red herring to some sort of satisfying if imaginary gustatory conclusion, than it is to follow a long-winded preacher to no logical conclusion whatsoever.

## **Haloed Red Herrings**

Unlike those folk who implausibly excuse their non-attendance at church on forced over-attendance in their youth, I still love going to church. I go with pleasure wherever I am. I am often disappointed by what I hear and see, but I still love going, and feel that it is worthwhile.

God, if he exists, as I am convinced he does, deserves to be publicly acknowledged, revered and embraced. If a Church service in its attempt to do just this is dull, the singing execrable and the preacher a fool, then there are always merciful shoals of red herrings to be chased.

To worship authentically does not demand that we always ignore red herrings. Sometimes it is advisable to chase those that are worthwhile. During a boring sermon or tediously verbose intercessions it is inappropriate to the occasion and purpose of being in church merely to fantasise about our girl friend or dream of a dramatic drop in our golf handicap. It can, however, be spiritually worthwhile to allow our mind and attention to wander by allowing a phrase from a hymn or a prayer or a reading to take us who knows where.

When this really works our worship can be like a beautiful melody, soaring above either a satisfyingly repetitive bass line that is composed of the familiar words, actions and ideas of the liturgy, or of one soaring above the droning of a tedious, meandering bass line composed of a poor sermon or verbose intercessions.

Upon either sort of bass line a divine melody can most satisfyingly and fruitfully soar. A wandering mind can be a great blessing.

**(25) "This and That" - Sunday 16 February, 2014**

At the February meeting of the Boldre Parish Historical Society we heard an interesting talk from Georgina Babey entitled "*The Literary Forest*".

**Sir Arthur Conan Doyle marginalised**

I was particularly interested to learn that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and his second wife are now buried in Minstead churchyard and that because Conan Doyle was avowedly no Christian, but rather a Spiritualist, he had been buried just outside the churchyard. Since his burial, however, the churchyard has been expanded, and so he is now on the inside not the outside after all.

This delighted me, not least because I much prefer an inclusive to an exclusive Church, even it only by accident. It brought to mind a splendid little epigram by an American poet called Edwin Markham:

*He drew a circle that shut me out-  
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.  
But love and I had the wit to win:  
We drew a circle and took him In!*

**Buried standing up**

A little research of my own, however, reveals the story to have been possibly somewhat different. When he died in 1930, Conan Doyle was buried, vertically, in the rose garden of his home Windlesham in Crowborough. There he was joined some years later by his second wife Jean.

When Windlesham was sold in 1955 to become a home for the elderly, the two bodies were re-interred (side by side and not vertically) right on the edge of Minstead churchyard, not outside of it. This was probably a typical Church of England compromise. With a disapproving "tut tut" the grave were pushed to the edge, but not rejected outright. I notice too that there is a cross on the grave's headstone.

One of my oldest Australian friends floated a company many years ago to bury people vertically. It is now in operation. Another and atheist friend of mine was the very first customer. His body was placed in a biodegradable bag and then lowered feet first into an augured, cylindrical hole about thirty inches in diameter and nine-and-a-half feet deep. Such interments are said to be far more environmentally friendly as well as only half the cost of traditional burials or cremations. When the country paddock cemetery is filled with bodies it will be transferred back to pasture. Rather than a headstone above each body the names of those buried are inscribed on a memorial wall.

**Buried upside down**

I jokingly suggested to my friend that they should market their venture by arguing that burial from a standing position makes for an easier exit from the tomb on resurrection day. However Jonathan Swift trumped me with a similar but far more ingenious argument in *Gulliver's Travels*. The Liliputians, he says:

*... bury their dead with their heads directly downward, because they hold an opinion, that in eleven thousand moons they are all to rise again; in which period the earth (which they conceive to be flat) will turn upside down, and by this means they shall, at their resurrection, be found ready standing on their feet. The learned among them confess the absurdity of this doctrine; but the practice still continues, in compliance to the vulgar....*

Swift's notion is not as far fetched as it might seem. Among English millenarians the idea that the world will be "turned upside down" at the Apocalypse was not uncommon. There is at least one attested case of a person being buried upside down at his own wish. A certain Major Peter Labilliere of Dorking (died June 4, 1800) resides thus upon the summit of Box Hill.

## **(24) "This and That" - Sunday 9 February, 2014**

An off beat and excellent UK-based Christian website called *Ship of Fools* sends round to Sunday church services all over the English speaking world, anonymous "*Mystery Worshipers*". They give a critique of what they experience, filling out a questionnaire, often severely.

On the Sunday after Christmas' St John's was visited by a "*Mystery Worshipper*". The following result is printed on Ship of Fools website. It is very flattering to us.

**(<http://www.shipoffools.com/mystery/2014/2647.html>)**

**Mystery Worshipper:** Scholastica.

**The church:** St John the Baptist, Boldre, Hampshire, England.

**Denomination:** Church of England, Diocese of Winchester.

**The building:** An ancient church, built on a site that may have been a place of worship in pre-Christian times, since its foundations include three sarsen stones (ancient sandstone blocks found throughout the British Isles) that could be up to 4,000 years old. William the Conqueror decided to turn the New Forest area into a royal hunting forest and he may have caused the church to be built here. Assuming this, the parish celebrated the church's 900th birthday in 1987. Its architecture is eclectic, with contributions from every century from the eleventh to the present day. The present building is an odd shape, with a long nave, quite a long chancel, a narrow south aisle above which rises a squat tower, and a very large chapel on the north side. It is astonishingly light, with long range of windows on the south side, and some modern stained glass including a millennium window into which is etched a view of the church on its hill. One very unusual feature of the church is its memorial to the battlecruiser HMS Hood, which was sunk by the German battleship Bismarck in 1941. The Hood blew up dramatically and only three men survived of a crew of nearly 1,500. Among the dead was Vice Admiral LE Holland, whose family used to worship in this church. His widow commissioned the memorial and each year the British Royal Navy attend a special service in the church.

**The church:** St John the Baptist belongs to the Boldre and South Baddesley benefice, a group of three parishes comprising the villages of Boldre, Pilley and South Baddesley. The aim of this group is to help everyone within the benefice to experience the love of God by giving an unconditional welcome to all, and actively addressing their spiritual and

social needs.

**The neighbourhood:** The church stands on a hill above the village of Boldre, which is located in the New Forest in Hampshire, in the south-east of England. It is surrounded by a large, well-kept graveyard and clumps of trees. The "New" Forest is actually ancient and spreads for some distance in every direction. Worshippers may have to travel several miles as houses are quite scattered, other than in the small village centres. To assist them, the website carries a prominent notice through which they co-ordinate a service between those who need a lift to church and those who can offer to pick them up and drive them home.

**The cast:** The Revd Canon Andrew Neaum led the service, supported by two unnamed male readers for the first and second lessons, and an unnamed female who led the intercessions. One of the male readers was also the organist.

**The date & time:** Sunday, 29 December 2013, 10.30am.

**What was the name of the service?**

Holy Communion.

**How full was the building?**

Not very full – about 40 people.

**Did anyone welcome you personally?**

I was greeted warmly as I entered, and asked if I was visiting the area on holiday. Another welcomer handed me a collection of books and mentioned that the weekly news-sheet marked the first hymn.

**Was your pew comfortable?**

Extremely comfortable wooden pews, with wide seats made more comfortable still by attractively embroidered pew-length cushions. Sadly the ledge in front of them, intended to accommodate service books, was not wide enough to support those books, which kept falling off. Eventually I put them down on the seat beside me.

**How would you describe the pre-service atmosphere?**

Friendly.

People were wandering about asking after the health of friends (and saying hello to me).

**What were the exact opening words of the service?**

"Welcome to our Sunday morning worship."

**What books did the congregation use during the service?**

Common Worship – Holy Communion for the service, and Common Praise for the hymns. These were supplemented by the weekly news-sheet, which included the prayers and readings for the day.

**What musical instruments were played?**

The church organ, an opus of Copeman Hart Organ Builders of Shaw, Lancashire.

**Did anything distract you?**

The magnificent Christmas flower arrangements. The large one by the altar was superb and wonderfully illuminated by the sun streaming through an adjacent window. All the window ledges had festive greenery and candles on them. There was a crib too, tucked under the altar and illuminated by fairy lights. Also very distracting were figures of the Magi perched on the ledge round the pulpit; they looked rather precarious and I wondered if the priest might knock them off while preaching.

**Was the worship stiff-upper-lip, happy clappy, or what?**

Fairly uncomplicated Anglican worship.

Middle of the road, neither one extreme or the other.

**Exactly how long was the sermon?**

There were two, a total of 17 minutes.

**On a scale of 1-10, how good was the preacher?**

9 – It's quite an art to talk to children at an appropriate level without boring the adults, but the preacher did this well, and then shifted seamlessly to addressing the adults in more complex language. This guy's got skill!

**In a nutshell, what was the sermon about?**

The first sermon was a short child-friendly homily on the flight into Egypt. For this the preacher sat on the chancel step and the children sat on a rug specially put down for them in front of the pews (clearly an accustomed routine). The children were reminded that parents love their children and want them to be safe. This was why Mary and Joseph undertook a journey, on foot, possibly with a donkey, about the distance from Lymington (the closest big town) to Liverpool (250 miles north), in order for Jesus to be kept safe. This section ended with a short prayer for parents and giving thanks for Mary and Joseph. The children then left for their own activities and the preacher went into the pulpit to talk to the adult congregation. His theme was the family, and how within families we can all learn to share love, practise patience and tolerance, and disagree while still getting on with each other. Families come in many different forms, including the church family. Members of the church family may vary enormously, from believers to non-believers and including the wild and wacky, but we are all called to share the love of Christ.

**Which part of the service was like being in heaven?**

The sermon was jolly good, and the beauty of the flowers and the warm sunshine through the windows were also uplifting.

**And which part was like being in... er... the other place?**

The first part of the service was intermittently interrupted by a squalling baby. After a short time it was either removed or fell asleep and peace was restored.

**What happened when you hung around after the service looking lost?**

Hanging around looking lost was not possible. Coffee was immediately served in the church, and shared with all present.

**How would you describe the after-service coffee?**

Hot instant, served in mugs, with a generous quantity of biscuits also offered.

**How would you feel about making this church your regular (where 10 = ecstatic, 0 = terminal)?**

9 – A lovely little building, obviously well-kept; delightfully welcoming people; and it was good to be in a church where the children have their own special niche in the service with the adults before going off for age-appropriate activities.

**Did the service make you feel glad to be a Christian?**

Yes.

**What one thing will you remember about all this in seven days' time?**

The children's sermon and those flower arrangements.

**(23) "This and That" - Sunday 2 February, 2014**

It is easier to satirise or caricaturize Australians than it is to encapsulate or epitomise them. As a young teacher in London in the early nineteen seventies I was

fascinated by Barry Humphries' comic strip character *Bazza Mackenzie* in the fortnightly satirical magazine *Private Eye*. It eventually became too crude even for that scurrilous rag and was discontinued. I loved it.

### **The all-Australian male**

Bazza was a gauche, coarse, beer-swilling likeness, as well as caricature, of the all-Australian male in London. His crude, colourful Australianisms delighted me. His beer guzzling and persistent but always unsuccessful pursuit of Sheilas, while comical and entertaining, possessed as well a faint, unexpected innocence and pathos. It was he who first awakened in me a more than passing interest in Australia. Years later I annoyed respectable, churchgoing Australians by claiming, only half jokingly, that he was the evangelist who first awakened in me a fascination for their land. His creator, Barry Humphries, is as clever and ingenious a satirist and comedian as England's very best. Australia had to be worth living in.

### **Australian pommy**

If years of residency count for anything I am an Australian myself. I have lived there longer than anywhere else, though never really feeling myself to be one. A long term resident and for some years now an Australian citizen, I remain resolutely a pommy. My mild Derbyshire accent has only been softened, not eradicated, by fifty two years in Africa and Australia. There is no nasal colonial whine to my speech, just a light seasoning of my vocabulary with African and Australian oddities and barbarisms. Or so I like to think.

A sense of Englishness came first and foremost from my home. My parents were resolutely English, they returned "home" constantly on long-leave. My father was a raconteur of raconteurs and his best and most outlandish stories were of his Derbyshire childhood. I studied and loved English Literature at university. Possibly just because we moved from island to continent and continent to island, I was always something of a stranger wherever I found myself to be. England became a necessary reference point and source of identity. Hence my return and residence today in Pilley.

Yet I love Australia as much as I do England, though with an ambivalent love. Like the Australian A D Hope, who wrote this brilliant poem:

### **Australia**

*A Nation of trees, drab green and desolate grey  
In the field uniform of modern wars,  
Darkens her hills, those endless, outstretched paws  
Of Sphinx demolished or stone lion worn away.*

*They call her a young country, but they lie:  
She is the last of lands, the emptiest,  
A woman beyond her change of life, a breast  
Still tender but within the womb is dry.*

*Without songs, architecture, history:  
The emotions and superstitions of younger lands,  
Her rivers of water drown among inland sands,  
The river of her immense stupidity*

*Floods her monotonous tribes from Cairns to Perth.  
In them at last the ultimate men arrive*

*Whose boast is not: "we live" but "we survive",  
A type who will inhabit the dying earth.*

*And her five cities, like five teeming sores,  
Each drains her: a vast parasite robber-state  
Where second-hand Europeans pullulate  
Timidly on the edge of alien shores.*

*Yet there are some like me turn gladly home  
From the lush jungle of modern thought, to find  
The Arabian desert of the human mind,  
Hoping, if still from the deserts the prophets come,*

*Such savage and scarlet as no green hills dare  
Springs in that waste, some spirit which escapes  
The learned doubt, the chatter of cultured apes  
Which is called civilization over there.*

## Home