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 May 2019 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
The guinea fowl is my talisman. There are two brightly painted models on my study’s window sill. They were bought by my wife, many years ago, as a wry and amused acknowledgement of all the Guinea Fowl Boys High School stories she had endured over the years and of the place that school holds in my affections.

Four to a bath

What a place it was, that Rhodesian school. There was dhobi’s itch, for example. Many of us developed an all but intolerable itch around the most private parts, and would sit in class furtively rubbing ourselves nearly raw. If too bad we braved the sick bay. There an unfeeling matron applied wintergreen. This burned so much we’d race back to the hostel and plunge into a cold bath for relief. The itch comes, I believe, from badly rinsed clothes.

During the war the school had been an RAF training base. Its corrugated iron ex-barrack, boarding houses were named after 2nd World War bombers. The showers in Wellington House never worked. So we all bathed. There were no plugs. Clumps of toilet paper sufficed instead. Small flakes of which floated around while three or four of us, as if in an arm chair, sat in the same bath swapping yarns, our legs dangling out until we were ejected by cooling water.

Too vile to repeat

The food sometimes roused us to rebellion and riot, but there were enjoyable feeds as well as bad. We loved French toast. Bread slices thickly battered and darkly fried. Oil oozed and seeped as we spread them with marmalade. Ordinary bread contained incidental roughage in the form of hessian-sack fibre strands and an occasional salty rat turd. We loved curried eggs. Whole and hard-boiled they slithered around in a thin, faintly-curried gruel. Mid morning sandwiches were disgusting. Cheap margarine, emulsified with bottom of the market mixed-fruit jam to a pastel-coloured paste, earned itself a nickname too vile to repeat.

Saturday sports team bus trips were enlivened with raucously sung, wartime marching ballads. Fragments of them remain with me “.....singing Nelly put your belly close to mine” “.....inky pinky parlez vous”, “......It wasn’t to the family’s fancy when Lord de Vere became a Nancy.....”

Barbarian Neaum

I was fortunate enough to arrive half way through form three and so was spared the worst of senior pupil’s terrorising. A boy called Hilton Grimbeek (he emailed me last week, hence this recollection) gave me my nickname. I was the only boy from Wellington House in Form 3a. He and his mates insisted this to be a house of barbarians, so I was called Barbarian, soon shortened to Barb, then to Bob. Bob Neaum I remained through school and university.

There was a harsh, unfeeling and sad side to the place as well as a comic, healthy and joyous one. In response to a more realistic than rose-tinted, lachrymose, old-school-tie-sentimental reminiscence I wrote years ago, I received an email from a contemporary pupil. He had been so bullied for his whole time there he felt permanently scarred. I myself recall several cases of boys driven to such desperation they ran away. If you were fortunate enough to be allocated to a House with perceptive staff, this sort of thing was nipped in the bud, but a few of the staff, as well as of the pupils, were less than civilized or caring. It was ever thus.

A distaste for snobbery

I am glad that I went to Guinea Fowl and not to some, privileged Private School. The robust ordinariness and basic decency of the average fellow, the often crude but excellent humour, the camaraderie and good will there, instilled in me an appreciation of general humanity and a distaste for snobbery that remains. Although different, I fitted in. Although from a parsonage and more admiring of academe than the sports field, I did well and was appreciated for who and what I was.
Nor was I ever first in my class academically, I might add, to put myself in my place. I vied with several really bright lads who usually pipped me.

The school’s motto was *Sauviter in modo, fortiter in re - Gentle in manner, vigorous in deed*. Have I lived up to it? *Vigorous in deed*, possibly. *Gentle in manner*, rarely.

**(296) “This and That” - 19 May 2019**

A happy half hour last week was spent squatting on a sunny lawn scattered with sprays of dazzled and dazzling daisies. Black birds whistled and tweedled incessantly.

**Netted**

With gloved hands I plucked nettles from beneath our great magnolia tree and snipped their leaves into a bucket. The result, nettle soup to my own recipe.

Tasty. Though to the eye, as dark, murky and turgid as an algae-infested, stagnant pool in the darkest and deepest of forests. Health food faddists claim remedial and beneficial qualities for nettles. In my case there was only the satisfaction of revenge for a lifetime of stings.

**Talking to the God we don’t believe in**

I received a lovely email the other day. It contained the following: *I’m sorry I never come to your services, Andrew - but I do go to the Church quite a lot - not only to do flowers, but also to have a quiet word with the god that I don’t believe in! I love the peace and calm of Boldre Church.*

I appreciated the email not only because it came from an honest and lovely person, but also for revealing ambivalence to be as much a part of unbelief as of belief.

On holiday for a few days after Easter I read and deeply enjoyed a little book called: *A Masterwork of Doubting-Belief: R. S. Thomas and His Poetry*. Thomas died in the year 2000. He was a parish priest, convinced pacifist, ardent Welsh nationalist, curmudgeonly human being and a very, very fine poet. From 1954 to 1967 he was parish priest of *Eglwys-fach*.

His wife Elsi was an artist who couldn’t abide sheen of any kind, “… not even the glimmer of a bald man’s head. So when she arrived at *Eglwys-fach* and found glossy varnish on the church’s furnishings, she insisted it must go. Yielding, perhaps with a new vicar’s misgivings about making hasty changes, Ronald sanded off the lustre and painted the pews and pulpit matt-black…..”

Black, the author of the book maintains, came to represent and symbolise for Thomas the concept of nothing, the belief that there’s nothing beyond the farthest reach of science, the absence of God. An absence experienced and expressed succinctly and memorably in his poetry. In tension, though, with the presence of God, also experienced and memorably expressed as light. Hence the book’s title, “Doubting belief”. Reluctant unbelievers should read him.

**Loyalty**

Being able to hold on to and retain one’s faith is assisted by a sense of loyalty. A virtue less fashionable these days, regrettably, than “whistle-blowing”.

Loyalty helped hold me in the embrace of mother church throughout the agnostic years of my late teens and early twenties. It motivated me to find new ways to believe when old ones proved wanting. Loyalty to my parents and their beliefs; loyalty to my confirmation vows; loyalty to a goodly and beautiful heritage; loyalty to sweet Anglicanism experienced at its best, and so beautifully in music, poetry and architecture; loyalty to my background and culture.

I could no more desert belief than I could my wife or my children. If there was a way to believe with integrity I was determined to find it. I did. Praise God.
John Byrom and Galileo

The author of the carol: Christians awake! Salute the happy morn, is the poet John Byrom (1692-1763). One of his claims to fame is the coinage of the phrase Tweedledum and Tweedledee, usually attributed to Lewis Carrol. Byrom wrote the following piece of verse about an eighteenth century feud in England between the two foreign born composers of opera, Handel and Bononcini:

*Some say, compared to Bononcini,*
*That Mynheer Handel's but a ninny;*
*Others aver that he to Handel*
*Is scarcely fit to hold a candle.*
*Strange all this difference should be*
*'Twick Tweedledum and Tweedledee.*

Galileo (1654-1642) proved himself as much a poet as a scientist in saying: *Wine is sunlight, held together by water.*

(295) “This and That” - 12 May 2019

Dubious conclusions drawn from daft statistics inundate us. Here’s one of them. *Modesty increases longevity.* The survey that revealed this, though small was, at least partially, local.

Old St Paul’s and Notre Dame

In the year 1087 two significant building projects were mooted and begun. The first was modest St John’s Boldre, in Hampshire. The second, grandiose old St Paul’s, in London. Lowly St John’s still survives and thrives at 932 years of age (32 years short of Methuselah). Old St Paul’s was burned down in 1666, aged merely 579 years.

When finally completed in 1314 (about the same time that St John’s chancel and the lower part of its tower were completed), old St Paul’s was a gothic wonder of wonders. If the burning of Paris’s Notre Dame was terrible. That of London’s old St Paul’s was cataclysmic.

586 feet in length, it was 68 feet longer than the current St Paul’s, and 30 feet longer than our own Winchester cathedral. The spire, made fatally of wood, was estimated to be between 60 and 80 feet higher than Salisbury cathedral’s. In England only Lincoln had a taller spire, by 30 feet, but that collapsed in a 1549 storm. Whereupon old St Paul’s spire survived as the tallest in England, but for only twelve years. It burnt down in 1561 and was not rebuilt.

Inside the cathedral the tower was open as far as the base of the spire. According to the parson and academic, William Benham, old St Paul’s was almost certainly the most beautiful of English Cathedrals, both inside and out.

St Paul's Walk

Particularly striking was the length of its nave, nicknamed Paul's Walk. In Elizabethan and Stuart times this became a major London meeting place. There were no pews or chairs. The many who gathered for gossip and news from Newsmongers were called Paul Walkers.

As thronged as a shopping mall it was the place to go to hear the latest on current affairs, war, religion, parliament and court. The 16th century playwright, William Haughton, described Paul's Walk as a kind of open house filled with a great store of company that do nothing but go up and down, ......up and down, and make a grumbling together. It was infested with beggars and thieves, a place to pick up gossip, topical jokes, and even prostitutes.

John Earle, the Bishop of Salisbury, described it as:

.....a heap of stones and men....The noise in it is like that of bees, a strange humming or buzz mixed of walking tongues and feet: it is a kind of still roar or loud whisper... It is the great exchange of all
discourse, and no business whatsoever but is here stirring and a-foot... It is the general mint of all famous lies, which are here, like the legends of popery, first coined and stamped in the church.

Decline and fall

From the time of Henry VIII the building fell into serious decline. Much of its interior decorations were despoiled by his greedy sycophants and followers. Then in 1561, thanks probably to a lightning strike, the spire caught fire and collapsed. Its lead covering poured like molten lava through the nave roof. The blaze was fierce enough to melt the bells. Queen Elizabeth and the Bishop of London contributed towards the cost of repairs, but the spire was never rebuilt. Worse, the repair work on the nave roof was sub-standard. Fifty years later it was in a dangerous condition.

Restoration work, except during the Civil War, was ongoing right up until 1666 when the great Fire of London razed it. Possibly a good thing. Architectural fashions had changed. It was now the era of Inigo Jones, Christopher Wren and classicism. As part of the restoration an incongruous classical portico by Jones was appended to the west end. Wren planned to replace the long gone spire with a dome. This, on an essentially gothic building, would seem bizarre. Though in miniature, and successfully, this is what has happened to St Thomas’ Lymington.

Whither Notre Dame?

A fire-bared, blank site for Wren to work wonders with was probably a boon and blessing. Can modern architects and political correctness be trusted with Notre Dame?

(294) “This and That” - 5 May 2019

The god Pan loved to wander peacefully through Arcadia’s woods and pastures playing his pipes. Though if, during his noonday nap, he was accidentally disturbed, he awoke with so great a shout it caused flocks to stampede in terror. Hence the word “panic”.

The dog return to his vomit

We’re urged to panic over climate change. How stupid. To panic is to be frightened beyond reason. Yet calm, considered reason is vital in a crisis.

Doom mongering is so relentless in the press it’s a relief to turn to more profound pessimism in the book Ecclesiastes, or in this Rudyard Kipling stanza from:

The Gods of the Copybook Headings

As it will be in the future, it was at the birth of Man
There are only four things certain since Social Progress began.
That the Dog returns to his Vomit and the Sow returns to her Mire,
And the burnt Fool's bandaged finger goes wabbling back to the Fire;

The word ‘wabbling’ is perfect. A strangely pleasing variant of wobbling.

The first wedding of the season

On Easter Monday there took place the first wedding of the season. Paul Chapman to Laura Dominguez. The bride arrived at the church in Paul’s father’s venerable, bright red Porsche convertible. The couple departed in Paul’s new, glistening red, low-slung, throaty Lamborghini.

Burp, snore and swig

I began my short wedding homily as follows: “On Easter Monday most clergy like to put their feet up and relax. Lent is over, and the busiest liturgical week of the year done with. So if, like me, for the past forty days of Lent they’ve given up meat as well as booze, then on Easter
Monday all they want to do is sink their teeth into slow roasted, well garlicked shoulder of lamb and sluice their throat with pint after pint of best bitter. Not hang around in church sermonising, praying, praising or marrying. All they want to do is burp, snore and swig.

“However, for Paul and Laura I’d do almost anything. They’re the best of people, and Paul has been a good friend of St John’s ever since I arrived here, nearly six years ago. One of those people who when they say they’ll do something, do it.

“I am also a traditionalist, and so more than happy for Easter Monday to return to what it used to be like in days gone by. When my father was a young curate in the Staffordshire potteries in the late 1930s, there was a wedding every 20 minutes on Easter Mondays. Thanks to Paul and Laura this old tradition could well be reviving in Boldre and this wedding the beginning of many more…...”

There are twenty weddings this year. They add immeasurably to our parish life.

Limericks

Limericks first appeared in English in the early 18th century and were popularised by Edward Lear in the 19th. The best, it is generally conceded, are obscene:

The limerick packs laughs anatomical
Into space that is quite economical.
But the good ones I've seen
So seldom are clean
And the clean ones so seldom are comical.

However the very first limerick ever recorded is by St Thomas Aquinas. Far from being obscene is a prayer. Christianity is in the vanguard yet again!

Sit vitiorum meorum evacuation
Concupiscentae et libidinis exterminatio,
Caritatis et patientiae,
Humilitatis et obedientiae,
Omniumque virtutum augmentatio

A rough translation: Let it be for the elimination of my sins, for the expulsion of desire and lust, for the increase of charity and patience, humility and obedience as well as all the virtues.

Home