

## Home

### **BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE (July 2021)**



#### ***Balletic poise in the Vicarage Bramley Apple Tree***

*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 **July 2021** 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>

## **(410) “This and That” - 25 July 2021**

Boldre Vicarage was built in the nineteen thirties. Neither ugly nor lovely, it's old fashioned, a tad down at heel, but capacious, comfortable and wondrously, wildly treed and gardened. It's a very good place to be. We love it.

### **Nothing upstairs**

We arrived from Melbourne in early August, 2013, after two month's in ships' cabins. To turn off Pilley Hill into its laurel-leafy, dark tunnel of a drive, for the first time, was to discover Eden. Then, once inside the house, to walk upstairs was like ascending Jacob's ladder, because the last double storeyed house I had lived in was from 1982 to 1985, on the island of St Helena, a time of many and deep blessings. Since then it's been all bungalows in foreign parts. Except for the house where first I grew to consciousness, a fine Staffordshire vicarage, from 1945-53. The bungalows were spacious and much appreciated but, when all's been said and done, to have nothing upstairs is a deprivation.

### **A leaking roof and umbrella**

I sang the praises of our present vicarage's study last week. With its adjacent porch it's a later addition to the original house, built, presumably, to turn it into an adequate vicarage. This extension, while lovely inside, is ugly outside, a fault of too many modern buildings. Its flat roof leaks in heavy rain. I keep an umbrella on my desk.

An inch or two outside its west facing window hangs a bird feeder crammed with peanuts. At present it's being visited by flocks of blue and great tits, nut-hatches and sometimes a greater spotted woodpecker. I am as fond of and familiar with them all as I am of the Sunday morning flock at St Nicholas' Chapel and St John's Boldre.

The umbrella on the desk is not there for the leak, but because the window opens outwards and its handle is difficult to reach from my chair at the desk. I leave the window unlatched and infinitesimally open. The umbrella's handle nuzzles the bottom of the window, its ferrule is within easy reach of my hand. This facilitates a game I play with a visitor to the feeder whose relationship with me is more ambivalent and complicated than that with the birds.

A bright-eyed squirrel pops by, three or four times a day, to sit on the window sill and stare at me. When he appears I sit stock still and we gaze at each other for a couple of minutes. If he detects no movement he climbs the window and onto the feeder. There he skewers peanuts through the metal mesh with sharp little teeth and gobbles them down with gusto. Once he's engrossed and hard at it, I grab the umbrella's ferrule and push open the window with a shout. He drops to ground like a coconut from a palm tree and scuttles off, flicking his tail with annoyance.

By now, well aware that I'm unlikely ever to hurt him, he returns to make another attempt half an hour or so later and the fun starts once more. No matter how dull a sermon, rest assured, it's composition is punctuated by bouts of fun and excitement.

### **A much loved adventure**

The Vicarage lawns are not of the croquet, cucumber sandwich, afternoon tea and genteel conversation sort. They're uncouth, ill educated and rough. Two mowers are needed to tame them. There's a hand mower with a belt to drive its wheel and ease its pusher's burden. Sadly, so often is the belt roughed up by fallen twigs and partially flattened mole hills it has long been abandoned. Three years ago the front wheel fittings broke. The wheels are now attached to the frame by clothes-hanger wire, threaded through holes drilled in that frame by Canon Andrew Heath Robinson Neaum. Its superb engine mows with gratifying ferocity and copes well with the extensive border of the bottom lawn as well as with two thirds of the steeply sloped back lawn.

The second mower is an ageing ride-on machine that requires empathy and frequent reassurances from its driver. It conks easily, mows unevenly and on the steep back lawn persuades its rider, idiotically, to lean far to one side with his arm out when he imagines it is about to tip over.

Mowing lawns is one of summer's great, minor joys.

## (409) “This and That” - 18 July 2021

Your priest’s dreams, prayers, writing, reading, listening to music and sermonic lucubrations take place in a study graced by two windows. One looks south, one west. At my desk, for relief, diversion and inspiration, I raise my eyes to gaze west and always with pleasure. At my time of life the setting sun is a friend. We are about the same business.

### Let me know mine end

In the left foreground, as I look out, there’s a six foot high bank of rhododendrons. To the right, past the sitting room’s French window, is the corner post of the vegetable garden’s deer-proof fence. Upon this blackbirds, pigeons, robins, a variety of tits and sometimes a thrush regularly perch. They too appear to delight to look west.

A gem squash vine vigorously climbs the fence, flaunting its gaudy flowers. Beyond the garden is a great wall of well-leafed oak trees which the sun’s declining rays can’t penetrate. The day’s exact demise, therefore, can never be determined. So too with life. The psalmist’s plea: *Lord let me know mine end and the number of my days, that I may be certified how long I have to live*, mercifully, goes unanswered.

### An offensive sermon

It can be disturbing to see those you love through the eyes of those who don't love them. A point made, somewhat obliquely, by a joke I once used in a Mothering Sunday sermon, which offended several in my congregation:

*A mother was sitting in a train with her little boy, when a man got into the same carriage and sat opposite them. He kept looking at the little boy, couldn't take his eyes off him, and not in a very nice way, either. Eventually he said to the mother. “Excuse me, Madam, I don't suppose I should say this, but I can't help myself, your little boy is astonishingly ugly. He is the ugliest little boy I have ever, ever seen.” The boy's mother, as you would expect, was very, very upset to be told this. She burst into tears, grabbed the little boy's hand, dragged him out into the train's corridor, and stood there weeping. Eventually the ticket-collector walked up and, seeing her crying, asked what the matter was. “It's that man in there” she said. “He has just said a truly terrible thing. He has insulted me awfully.” The ticket collector was most understanding. “You sometimes get men like that on trains” he said. “It's best to ignore them, come into this empty compartment and I'll bring you a cup of tea, and a banana for your pet baboon.”*

### The hermeneutics of love

We might imagine that to see something or someone for what or who they really are requires objectivity and detachment. Not so. To see reality and humanity penetratingly requires not detachment, but love. The mother of the boy, in the story, saw him far more closely for who he really was than did either the fellow passenger or the conductor.

A while ago I read a book by Alan Jacobs called: *A Theology Of Reading: The Hermeneutics Of Love*. It explores what it means to read lovingly. He acknowledges the difficulties of doing so, but makes a good case for it being the most satisfying, penetrating and liberating way to read. Love being not blind, but profoundly clear-sighted.

In those halcyon days in the life of our Church when we argued merely over new liturgies, instead of gender, trans-gender, racism, homosexuality and faith’s terminal decline, I used to argue, I think rightly, that only those who loved the old liturgy should be considered qualified to revise and change it. Creative change, as opposed to destructive change, needs to be loving. Gentle, positive evolutionary change rather than revolutionary change, requires affection and reverence not hatred and contempt.

## **Love deficient, love blind**

Critics of the Church, be they atheists, agnostics or disillusioned believers, unless they are in some sense loving, cannot really see the faith for what it truly is, or what we are on about. They are as blind as the train conductor, for whom a loved and lovable little son and human being was but a baboon. To be love-deficient is to be love-blind.

## **(408) “This and That” - 11 July 2021**

The Presidency of the United States of America, maintained Theodore Roosevelt, is a “bully pulpit”.

### **Bully for you**

By this he meant a wonderful platform from which to advocate an agenda. He uses the word “bully” to mean wonderful or superb. Positively then, as in the phrase: “bully for you”, which still today means “bravo”. “Bully” is a paradoxical word, it holds within itself total opposites.

It began its English life in the 1530s as a term of endearment, another word for “sweetheart” and applicable to either sex. More than likely it is an anglicised version of the Dutch boel, meaning a “lover” or “brother,”

This positive meaning began to deteriorate in the 17th century, heading down through “fine fellow” and “blusterer” to “harasser of the weak”. Sweetheart words often go bad in this way; possibly because love all too easily cools, and then sours. The term “ladybird” in the 17th century, could be either a term of endearment or a whore.

### **Deflecting the attention of bully boys**

I can’t remember ever having been bullied. Though at boarding school there were always a few pathetic and nasty second and third-rate boys, older than oneself, around whom one had to tread warily. A glib tongue and an ability to conceal one’s true feelings sufficed to deflect their attention elsewhere. They were rarely high achievers.

When I consider the world’s all too many blustering dictators and bully-boys, I take comfort in imagining them as the second or third rate school boys they must have been, sneakily preying upon the vulnerable. Those who, by crook more than hook, have clawed their way to power and influence above their competence or deserts. Blustering, posturing, fuming schoolyard bullies, though more damagingly and cruelly. I turn to verse and nature for solace:

### **Bestiary**

Happy the quick-eyed lizard that pursues  
Its creviced zigzag race  
Amid the epic ruins of a temple  
Leaving no trace.

Happy the weasel in the moonlit churchyard  
Twisting a vibrant thread  
Of narrow life between the mounds that hide  
The important dead.

Close to the complex fabric of their world  
The small beasts live who shun  
The spaces where the huge ones bellow, fight,  
And snore in the sun.

How admirable the modest and the frugal,  
The small, the neat, the furtive.

How troublesome the mammoths of the world,  
Gross and assertive.

Happy should we live in the interstices  
Of a declining age,  
Even while the impudent masters of decision  
Trample and rage.

*James Reeves 1909-1978*

### **On a lower slope**

Thomas Hardy's origins were lowly, many of his relations farm labourers, some born in the workhouse. At his funeral service in Westminster Abbey, an old tramp found his way into the reserved seats. He hadn't just come in from the cold. It turned out that he knew a great deal about Hardy and in all likelihood was a relative. Early in life Hardy began to cut himself off from his lowly background, though his poems draw deeply upon it.

Alan Bennet writes, "as an old man and a celebrity, Hardy was visited by the Prince of Wales to whom he gave lunch. The gardener, as much a social climber as Hardy, but on a lower slope, appropriated the chicken bone that the Prince had gnawed, as a souvenir....."

### **(407) "This and That" - 4 July 2021**

Thomas Hardy, proposed to his second wife in the churchyard of St Michael's Church, Stinsford, Dorset. I proposed to mine in the churchyard of St Cyriac's Church, Lacock, Wiltshire.

#### **Graveyard proposals of marriage**

Hardy's second bride-to-be was Florence Dugdale. He took her to St Michael's churchyard to see the grave of his first wife, Emma. While there he pointed to a nearby vacant plot and said to Florence, "That's for you." From this she inferred, rightly, that he was asking her to marry him and gave her consent. Hardy, though a fine poet, left much to be desired as a husband. As a proposer of marriage he was absurdly oblique, but successful.

Andrew Neaum, a mere and occasional versifier, not a poet, is a million miles behind Hardy in accomplishment. As a proposer of marriage in a graveyard though, he was equally successful and possibly just slightly less absurd.

It wasn't he who took his bride-to-be to Lacock. It was she who took him. After a contented amble around that most beautiful village, they found their way to St Cyriac's churchyard, intrigued by its ancient church and enjoyers of ruminative graveyard rambles. When their thinly cut egg sandwiches proved irresistible they sat down on a lichened bench, in front of an ancient wall, to eat them, closely observed by a curious robin. Over the third sandwich Andrew popped the question. Diana had to ask him to repeat it. Nowhere near as terse as Thomas Hardy, he so cluttered his proposal with annotations, asides, footnotes and commentary she lost sight of it. It took a much summarised, concise repeat to do the trick. She accepted him.

#### **Sweet turtle doves**

Churchyards invite reflection, especially gravestones. The best are those weathered and lichened into anonymity, perfect metaphors for the ultimate forgetableness of us all.

The most sublime churchyard rumination is Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, a wondrous poem. If you haven't read it for a while, google it now and give it a leisurely read out loud.

Thomas Hardy, a thoughtful agnostic, was fascinated by churches, churchyards and graves. He was a regular church attender and reader the lessons. G K Chesterton described him, unfairly but amusingly, as "*a sort of village atheist brooding and blaspheming over the village idiot.*"

As a believer I'd never turn to pessimistic Hardy to be heart-warmed. Richard Crashaw, 1612-49 is more like it. In this epitaph he satisfyingly draws together marriage, graves and the beauty of Christian hope. It might well have influenced Larkin's famous *An Arundel Tomb*.

**An Epitaph upon a Young Married Couple,  
Dead and Buried Together**

To these, whom Death again did wed,  
This grave's their second marriage-bed;  
For though the hand of Fate could force,  
'Twixt soul and body, a divorce,  
It could not sunder man and wife,  
'Cause they both lived but one life.  
Peace, good reader. Do not weep.  
Peace, the lovers are asleep.  
They, sweet turtles, folded lie  
In the last knot that love could tie.  
And though they lie as they were dead,  
Their pillow stone, their sheets of lead,  
(Pillow hard, and sheets not warm)  
Love made the bed; they'll take no harm;  
Let them sleep: let them sleep on,  
Till this stormy night be gone,  
And the eternal morrow dawn;  
Then the curtains will be drawn  
And they wake into a light,  
Whose day shall never die in night.

[Home](#)