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FROM BEHIND THE STAIRWELL BALUSTRADE

July to December 2026



Wells Cathedral from the Strawberry Line

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>

(667) “This and That” - 30 August 2026

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



St Mary's Old Ditton, Wiltshire

It's been a glorious summer: shorts-and-sandal weather for the longest period of time since we returned to England in 2013. (Australian summers are more extreme.) At St John's, Wodonga, in north-east Victoria, a metal door at the back of the church became so hot on sunny afternoons that, as a young, lively, and funny curate and I walked past it on the way back from daily Evensong, its radiated heat all but scorched us. We'd touch it, whistle, and say, 'Hot enough to fry an egg on.' One day he said, 'I'll get one...', which he did.

We broke the egg and held it in a glass against the door, but were disappointed. It hardly cooked at all—some of the albumen that trickled down did turn faintly white, but the rest remained resolutely raw. Over the next day or two, ants ate the crusted yolk, closely observed by two fine, interested-in-everything clergymen. Later in the week, on a sheet of iron left flat on the ground for the purpose, we tried once more to cook an egg, but again with little success. Predictably, because Evening Prayer, at 4.00 pm, with a chat afterwards, meant the day's intensest heat had passed.

We did manage successfully to sun-dry tomatoes from my vegetable garden, though. The biggest problem was guarding them against flies without diminishing the sun's intensity; a fine fly-mesh sufficed. Stored in olive oil, they were very good.

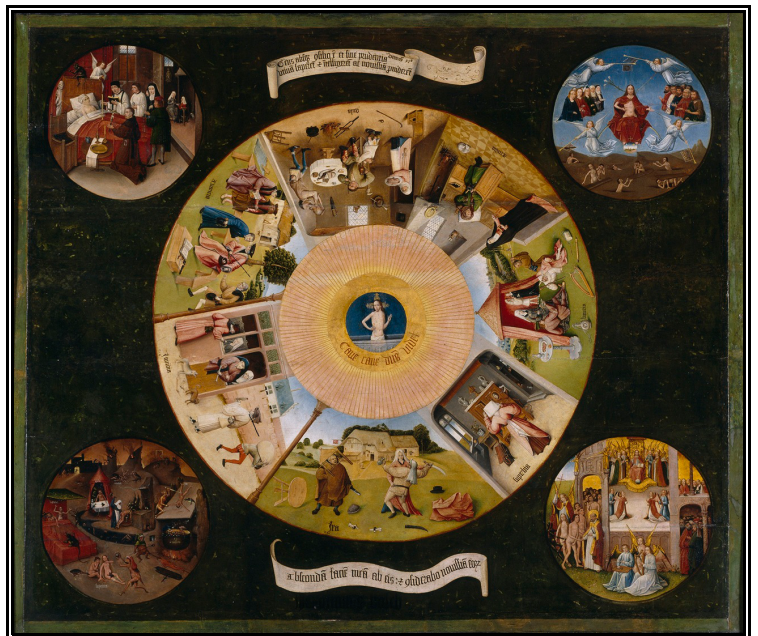
Contemplating human vice

Some time before 1560, Philip II of Spain purchased a painting by Hieronymus Bosch called *The Seven Deadly Sins and the Four Last Things*. It was commissioned and constructed originally as a decorative tabletop for private, devotional use. The King kept it in his private quarters at El Escorial for just that purpose. He was no bundle of joy or fun, he used it to aid him in contemplating human vice.

He was a deeply serious, infuriatingly indecisive, intensely bureaucratic, and fanatically religious control-freak. For 10 to 14 hours a day, he micro-managed his vast empire from his desk and lived like a monk, sleeping in a tiny, bare bedroom with a direct view of the church altar. In public, he cultivated a cold aura of total self-control, rarely smiled, spoke in whispers, and viewed public displays of emotion as signs of weakness. In mitigation, however, behind his cold exterior lay immense personal grief; he outlived four wives and was eventually compelled to imprison his eldest son, Don Carlos, due to that prince's violent insanity. He also lost an Armada.

Beware, beware, God sees

I too love Hieronymus Bosch's paintings. In late January 1971, I was in Madrid for some weeks, primarily to meet up with a girl, but secondarily to visit the Prado to see Bosch's masterpieces, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, *The Haywain Triptych*, and anything else by 'El Bosco' on offer. There, inside a pedestalled glass case that enables visitors to walk around it and observe its fine details from every angle, was *The Seven Deadly Sins and the Four Last Things*.



The Seven Deadly Sins and the Four Last Things.

Although not considered one of Bosch's masterpieces, and possibly finished off by one of his pupils, it is nonetheless fascinating. A large central ring depicts the 'eye of God', with a depiction of Christ as the eye's pupil and gold rays radiating outward from him as the eye's iris. Beneath is a warning painted in Latin: 'Cave, cave, Deus videt' (Beware, beware, God sees). Around the eye are depictions of the seven deadly sins.

The sin of Envy (*Invidia*) shows a couple standing in their doorway looking enviously at a rich man with a hawk on his wrist and a personal servant to carry his heavy load, while their daughter flirts with a man standing outside her window, as she eyes a well-filled purse at his waist. Two dogs illustrate a Flemish saying: 'Two dogs and only one bone, no agreement.'



Hieronymus Bosch - detail: The sin of envy

at his waist. Two dogs illustrate a Flemish saying: 'Two dogs and only one bone, no agreement.'

Faith envy

It was the sin of envy that brought Bosch's painting to my mind this week, because, in my file of downloaded quotations, I came across a passage on 'faith envy' by the American author and essayist Joseph Epstein (born 1937): "Apart from emulative envy," he writes, "the only aspect of envy that does not seem to me pejorative is a form of envy I have myself felt, as I suspect have others..... the envy that I think of as faith envy. This is the envy one feels for those who have the true and deep and intelligent religious faith that sees them through the darkest of crises, death among them. If one is oneself without faith and wishes to feel this emotion, I cannot recommend a better place to find it than in the letters of Flannery O'Connor. There one will discover a woman still in her thirties, who, after coming into her radiant talent, knows she is going to die well before her time and, fortified by her Catholicism, faces her end without voicing complaint or fear. I not long ago heard, in Vienna, what seemed to me a perfect rendering of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, and was hugely moved by it, but how much more would I have been moved, I could not help wonder, if I were in a state of full religious belief, since the Ninth Symphony seems to me in many ways a religious work. Faith envy is envy, alas, about which one can do nothing but quietly harbour it.

What turns an atheist's mind to prayer?

There are traces of 'faith envy' in the writings of many sensitive agnostics and atheists, even the most vehement of them. For example, in one of the non-believing poet Peter Porter's most famous poems, 'An Angel in Blythburgh Church':

.....What is it

*Turns an atheist's mind to prayer in almost
Any church on a country visit?*

*Greed for love or certainty of forgiveness
High security rising with sea birds?
A theology of self looking for precedents
A chance to speak old words?*



St Mary's Old Ditton, Wiltshire, box pews,

(666) “This and That” - 23 August 2026

Canon Andrew Neaum - *Behind the Balustrade*



Windmill and water tank: Penong, South Australia

Even the gardens of the City of Wells now suffer from a hosepipe ban, though water from the eponymous wells in the Bishops’ Palace Gardens continues to flow down the High Street. In Africa and Australia, I’ve spent months and months of my life longing for rain; and now, in this green and pleasant land, too.

Windmills, rain tanks, crows and barmaids

Two great symbols of rain-thirst in outback Australia—where the crows fly backwards (to keep the dust out of their eyes) and the barmaids devour their young—are iron windmills and corrugated-iron tanks. The latter were described by Les Murray as:

*Pencil-grey and stacked like shillings
out of a banker’s paper roll.*

We bought our little pad here in Wells, aware that it needed its roof re-tiling, fortunately with enough cash in hand to see it done. A family firm was recommended to us for the job, and they lived up to expectations. It meant that we were one of few houses in Wells untroubled by a deluge on the 22nd of June this year, which dropped 1½ inches of rain on the city in about 20 minutes. Even the Cathedral sprang leaks.

Wake surfing

We live on a very narrow street, and the re-tiling required scaffolding that closed it to vehicular traffic for most of February 2023—mercifully a dry month. The father and his two sons who performed the task were hard-working, efficient, and delightful; though sadly, during the process, the father’s father died, and they required a few days off to arrange and attend the funeral. I have a professional interest in funerals, and so quizzed them about their plans for the event. In talking about the sort of wake they intended holding after the funeral, the father told me, with wry amusement, that in catering for mourners these days, ‘wake surfers’ have to be taken into account. These are folk who make a point of attending the funerals of total strangers in order to enjoy any bountiful post-service refreshments and, if lonely and isolated, the buzz of fellowship as well.

It reminded me of an Australian story. At a large, no-expense-spared wool-grazier’s mother’s funeral, all the station hands were invited to attend, no matter how lowly. One of them courageously tried out all the flash tucker on offer, much of it especially imported for the occasion.

To start with, he spooned a generous cluster of Almas Beluga caviar onto a sesame and black pepper cracker and popped it into his mouth, only to splutter in disbelief and spit it out into a monogrammed table napkin. Undaunted, he then tried a couple of Olives Noires de Nyons, only to screw up his face and again spit them out into a table napkin. ‘Stone the flamin’ crows,’ he muttered fiercely to his mate. ‘You’d think the boss or the cook’d be a bit more careful with this tucker—the flamin’ blackberry



Re-tiling the house roof



St Mary's Lynton, Devon

jam tastes like fish, and I reckon the cat's pissed on the prunes!'

Risk aversion

Risk aversion leads to all sorts of absurdity and daftness: disallowing children from sharing cakes they've baked, banning the game of conkers and running in school yards for fear of scraped knees. Or, in the case of parents, printing on push-chairs, 'remove child before folding'; or on hair dryers, 'do not use while sleeping or in the shower'. Or, in the workplace, preventing employees from using even a small step-stool to change a lightbulb—insisting instead that a 'certified facilities' team is called in for a ten-second job—or leaving 'wet floor' signs up permanently.

As a young priest in Rhodesia, I once took part in a public discussion with an articulate agnostic. In the God or no God debate, even in my cocksure youth, I respected agnosticism; and so, in my philosophically unsophisticated way, argued that to believe in God involves a decision to take a step beyond where the evidence can take us, as too does not to believe. Agnostics, then, by refusing to make any such decision without sufficient evidence for so doing, are not being at all unreasonable

A cowardly surrender to scepticism

The discussion heated up only when I suggested that to refuse to commit to one side or the other is possibly a cowardly refusal of risk. This was in no way original; I was co-opting William James's view that neutrality is unavailable on the question of God's existence because to live as though God does not exist is, in fact, a 'forced option', for it yields the same practical results as atheism. So, to refuse to choose either way, for fear of being wrong, is a cowardly surrender to scepticism. Both Pascal and Kierkegaard come to much the same conclusion by rather different routes.

I can't now remember how the discussion eventually concluded, but I do recall comparing a refusal to decide to believe in God to a refusal to pop the 'will you marry me?' question to a girl—namely, a fear to risk commitment. Even way back then, I knew several unmarried couples with children whose mothers longed to say 'yes' to a question never asked from fear of commitment.

Immortality

I retain a soft spot for agnostics, though. Especially one as vehement, eloquent and partially right as R. G. Ingersol (1833-99):

"The idea of immortality, that like a sea has ebbed and flowed in the human heart, with its countless waves of hope and fear, beating against the shores and rocks of time and fate, was not born of any book, nor of any creed, nor of any religion. It was born of human affection, and it will continue to ebb and flow beneath the mists and clouds of doubt and darkness as long as love kisses the lips of death. It is the rainbow — hope shining upon the tears of grief."

And also the end of his justly famous eulogy for his brother:

".....in the night of Death, Hope sees a star, and listening Love can hear the rustle of a wing."



St Mary's Lynton, Devon, interior

(665) “This and That” - 16 August 2026

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



Australian pied cormorant
Photo: Sid Mosdell

The Bpangerang people of north-eastern Victoria, Australia, are river people, well acquainted with cormorants—as, indeed, are Diana and myself, for we’ve leisurely inner-tube-drifted and canoed the River Murray below the Hume Dam on several memorable occasions, communing closely with birds, platypuses, and dragonflies.

The Bpangerang people’s word for a cormorant is “ratta”, and for the bird’s long neck, “wanga”; hence the name of the city of Wangaratta, sited at the

confluence of the Ovens and King rivers, prone to flood in wet seasons, and well fished by cormorants. The fishing prowess of cormorants is aided by their water-permeable feathers, which facilitate diving by decreasing their water-resistant buoyancy. After a dive, it requires them to perch with wings splayed to dry off in the sun and wind.



A little pied cormorant drying out
Photo: J.J. Harrison

Platonic relationships



Wangaratta Cathedral
Photo: Website, Australian Christian Church Histories

A retired dean of Wangaratta Cathedral, Ray McInnes, and his wife, Glenys, stayed with us in Wells for three days and nights last week. Ray is a devoted watercolourist and was to be seen round and about Wells, perched on a little stool, lovingly depicting the city’s beauty. How we reminisced, gossiped, and laughed, for we were both intimately involved in the politics and governance of Wangaratta Diocese in fervid times. One of the characters we fondly recalled was Fr Ellis Jones, an associate priest with me in Wodonga, hugely intelligent, witty, and older than us both. I dug up an article he’d written for my parish pew-sheet, which contained this:

“The Church’s favourite philosophical tools are those of Plato, whose philosophy is about as interesting as a platonic relationship, and that’s why I reckon the Church of God has always favoured Plato. A platonic relationship contains no passion or sex, so it gets a 9/10 from the Church. It occurs when one partner looks like Michelangelo Buonarroti’s David, and the other has a face like a half-eaten mango. Incidentally, I hate it when people refer to the great sculptor/painter as Michael Angelo. This is because we can’t cope with the fact that Michelangelo Buonarroti was not British. Anyway, the fruit-face has to accept that there will be no fun and games, just deep and meaningful—about as useful as one chopstick.”

Castle Combe and Lacock

On Saturday, we drove to the beautiful village of Castle Combe, where Ray wished to paint; but, it was so utterly swamped with visitors from every nation in the world, and its car park filled to overflowing, we moved on to Lacock instead. There, sixteen years ago, in the churchyard of St Cyriac’s, I popped the question to Diana. We picnicked in welcome, heavy shade and wandered around that most pleasing village, with visitors aplenty but by no means overwhelmingly so. Ray painted the church and later presented us with the result to grace our walls.



St Cyriac's, Lacock, Wiltshire

authors, and environmental conservationists. She revolutionized Australian garden design by shifting the focus away from strictly manicured, formal European lawns toward naturalistic “woodland” aesthetics and the preservation of native Australian bush.

It was at the height of the wool boom, the national flock was estimated to be 173 million head and Australia exported 4.5 million bales of wool annually. The well advertised church fair, and the Edna Walling garden in particular, brought hordes of visitors from as far away as Melbourne, though the weather was squally and cold. The rector sold the fleece of his merino sheep for \$50 and then swapped the sheep itself for two freshly butchered “fat lambs” to the benefit of his capacious freezer.

A cocky sheep cocky

The second half of the 1980s was a good period to be a rector in Australia’s sheep country, and even better to be a grazier (the standard term for large-scale wool producers) or a sheep cocky (originally a disparaging term for small-scale settlers who “pecked” at the land or sat on fences like cockatoos, but later applied to smaller-scale farmers more broadly). During these boom years, before wool prices crashed dramatically in February 1991, a sheep cocky from nearby Willowvale ventured all the way to London to order his third Rolls-Royce. He went to see dealers in Berkeley Square, but turned down the first two or three demonstration models as inadequate to his needs. Finally, they unveiled the ultra-exclusive, stately Phantom VI, built for heads of state and the global elite, powered by a 6.2-litre V8 engine, priced, even way back then, at £110,000.

“That’ll do,” the cocky said, “but I want one of them press-button glass windows between the front and back seats.”

“Of course, sir,” said the salesman, “but sliding glass windows like that aren’t very popular these days. They’re regarded as old-fashioned, even a bit elitist, and we didn’t think Australians went in for that sort of thing.”

“If you think that is so, then none of you pommie bastards have ever had the back of your neck licked by a sheep on the way to market,” he retorted.

173 million sheep

The rector of Skipton in the Western Districts of Victoria in Australia, during the late 1980s, once won a full-fleeced merino sheep at a great parish garden fair. He managed to do this by guessing it’s weight more closely than anyone else.

His name was Andrew Neaum and the fact that he still remembers the feat indicates immodest pride in it. The site of the fair was a 5,500 acre property called Naringal at a tiny rural locality called Wallinduc and owned in those days by the Rowe family. The homestead’s garden was designed by Edna Walling (1895–1973), one of Australia’s most influential and pioneering landscape designers,



St Cyriac's Lacock, Wiltshire

Photo: Dipu Antony Mavely

(664) “This and That” - 9 August 2026

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



Dr Johnson's Pub, City of London

We all love—or should—a true hero, though they are few and far between, and the best of them always flawed. Those who are not, in all likelihood, have been sentimentalised, hagiographised, and marinated in treacle, as is all too apparent in funeral eulogies, the best of which admit to and acknowledge a deceased's flaws as well as merits. Authenticity demands this. Without shadows, illumination lacks context. Contrast heightens perception.

Vile melancholy

Foremost among my personal heroes is Dr Samuel Johnson (1709–1784), whose flaws heighten, sharpen, and polish his merits to heroic proportions. His physical flaws rendered him little short of grotesque. A tall, large-boned man, inclined to corpulence as he aged, he suffered throughout his life from involuntary and violent tics, twitches, and vocalizations (whistling and gasping sounds). Due to scrofula, his face and neck were deeply scarred, and he was blind in one eye and severely nearsighted in the other. This, combined with impaired hearing in one ear, led to awkward social moments and physical accidents—like frequently singeing his wig

while reading by candlelight. He suffered from obsessive-compulsive disorders: touching every post he passed on the street and counting every step he made.

According to Fanny Burney, before crossing a building's threshold he would twist and twirl, with odd hand gestures, before suddenly leaping inside with an enormous stride. 'His body', she tells us, 'is in continual agitation, see-sawing up and down; his feet are never a moment quiet; and, in short, his whole person is in perpetual motion.' He tended to wear unbuttoned and far from clean clothes and, at table, ate with ferocious gusto, making grunting noises and sweating profusely. His appearance, an observer remarked, was 'little better than that of an idiot'.

Socially and psychologically he was flawed too. He hated losing an argument, could be intensely overbearing, stubborn, and abrasive in conversation, and was prone to dominate or silence others at dinner tables. His private diaries show him to have been crippled by intense guilt over what he perceived to be his chronic laziness, and he wrestled with lifelong and severe bouts of deep depression which he called 'hypochondria' or 'vile melancholy'. During these bouts he was all but paralysed with fear of death, spiritual anxiety, and despair.

No self-pity

He allowed none of this to ruin, pull him down, diminish, or shipwreck him, though. He considered courage to be the greatest of virtues because it enables all other virtues to exist, and he exemplified courage impressively in his own life—not least by



Dr Johnson's House today



In Dr Johnson's House, City of London

accepting and learning to live productively and creatively with his own lifelong ailments and disabilities, never indulging in self-pity. Boldly independent, he compiled his monumental English dictionary 'without any patronage of the great', relying solely on his own hard work and genius, rather than submitting to the degrading flattery of wealthy sponsors. Among the most influential dictionaries in the history of the English language, it is a masterpiece that took him seven years to compile, all on his own, with the help only of copyists.

A hatred of cant

Hugely well read and a brilliant conversationalist, he was fiercely loyal to, and supportive of, his friends. He gave away a huge proportion of his income to the poor and needy, and opened his London home to a collection of broken, quarrelsome, and destitute dependents who had nowhere else to go. His hatred of 'cant' extended to his own domestic affairs; he refused to let his servants lie to visitors as to whether or not he was at home. He was also a deeply thoughtful, High Church Anglican for whom the Christian faith was the ruling yardstick of his daily conduct. His piety was not comfortable or conventional, though, intertwined as it was with deep melancholy, an over-scrupulous conscience, and a haunting fear of death and damnation.

"Samuel Johnson: moralist"

I admire his wit and brilliance, his vehement and practical opposition to the slave trade, his humour, literary output, tour de force Dictionary, Anglicanism, and profound common sense, but I love him most of all for his innate goodness.

It is goodness that matters. We exist, above all else and against all odds, to learn to be good, and to grow in dying-to-self-for-love-of-others goodness as exemplified by Jesus of Nazareth. Over the years, I have read a lot about Johnson and a good deal of what he wrote. He is, indeed, foremost among my heroes, and it pleases me that he has a place on the Church of England's official calendar of saints and holy people. He's commemorated on the 13th of December as 'Samuel Johnson, Moralist'.

Randomly from Johnson's Dictionary

- gámbler n.s.** [*A cant word, I suppose, for game or gamester.*] A knave whose practice it is to invite the unwary to game and cheat them.
- nétwork n.s.** [*net and work.*] Any thing reticulated or decussated, at equal distances, with interstices between the intersections.
- pátron n.s.** [*patron, Fr. patronus, Latin.*] One who countenances, supports or protects. Commonly a wretch who supports with insolence, and is paid with flattery.
- tarántula n.s.** [*Italian; tarentule*] An insect whose bite is only cured by musick.
- tóry n.s.** [*A cant term, derived, I suppose, from an Irish word signifying a savage.*] One who adheres to the antient constitution of the state, and the apostolical hierarchy of the church of England, opposed to a whig.
- váticide n.s.** [*vates and cædo, Latin.*] A murderer of poets.
- scomm n.s.** [*Latin.*] A buffoon. A word out of use, and unworthy of revival.



Westminster from the South Bank

(663) “This and That” - 2 August 2026

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



The City Arms pub, Wells (once the City gaol)

To settle down in a pub, preferably an ancient one, with a pint of bitter, a good friend or two, and time to linger, talk, unbend, and relax, is among life's greatest minor pleasures. Few therapies are so gently restorative and life-affirming.

Mellifluous relief

To settle down in a country church, preferably an ancient one, for an early Sunday morning Book of Common Prayer Holy Communion,

with about 20 like-minded folk, most of them as ancient as oneself, is another of life's great, minor pleasures. The opening words: 'Our Father, which art in heaven...', and later, 'Come unto me all that travail and are heavy laden...', and 'Ye that do truly and earnestly repent you of your sins, and are in love and charity with your neighbours...', and, best of all: 'Let us pray for the whole state of Christ's Church...', which presages a mellifluous relief from the now all-but-obligatory, tedious trot through the latest BBC dictated headlines, are sweet balm to the soul. Few therapies are so gently restorative and life-affirming.

The wicked way of wowzers

Few would agree with such sentiments. In the UK, two pubs close down every day, and one church every two to three days. In the case of pubs, it is wowzers who are having their wicked way. The average price of a pint in the UK is now £5.50, thanks to their punitive, kill-joy taxes. In the case of churches, it's a hostile-to-faith commentariat, and the variety and superfluity of distractions available at the tap of a finger, that are having their wicked way

Little wonder that mental-health conditions have become the leading driver of disability in the UK. Roughly one in five adults live, or claim to live, with a mental-health disorder. More pubs and churches are needed, not fewer.

A peeved psychaiatrist

Do pubs and publicans really help, though? Do they, in actuality, ever offer positive, good and therapeutic advice? Well, yes indeed. A disturbed fellow we'll call William once went to a psychiatrist and said, 'I'm in trouble. Every time I get into bed, I think there's somebody under it. Then, when I get under the bed, I think there's somebody on top of it. You've got to help me. I think I'm going mad.' The psychiatrist was reassuring: 'Put yourself into my hands for a couple of days every week and I'll have you completely cured of your fears within a year or two.'

William, a miserably paid, rookie teacher, asked, 'How much do you charge?' On being told that each visit cost £100, he said: 'That's a lot of cash. I'll sleep on it and get back to you.' Six months later, the pair's paths crossed again. 'Why didn't you ever come back to see me?' asked the psychiatrist. 'Far too expensive,' said William. 'My local publican, for a mere £10 bet, came up with the perfect remedy.' The peeved psychiatrist asked, 'And what was that?' 'He told me to cut the legs off the bed!'



*The Crown pub, Chiddingfold
viewed from St Mary's churchyard*



St Mary's Micheldever, Hampshire

really.' But a staff worker grabbed me and hissed, 'TAKE IT! She needs a chance to give!' So I took it, sat down, and ate it. The old woman beamed, gave me a huge hug, and a blessing. That was over 30 years ago and I've never forgotten it. I think I humbled considerably."

The end or the "Red Flag Act"

On our way to Haslemere recently we deviated, as is our wont, for a refreshment break and so found our way to Micheldever Station, two miles from the village of Micheldever itself. The station is a Grade II listed, two-storey flint building with a verandah all round, on the Waterloo to Southampton line. It is notable for being the starting point of the first-ever automobile journey in Britain.

On 5 July 1895, the Hon. Evelyn Ellis drove his imported 4-horsepower Panhard- et-Levassor from Micheldever Station to his home in Datchet, Berkshire—a journey of 45 miles which took 8 hours and 14 minutes to complete. Motoring in Britain at that time was severely restricted by the 'Red Flag Act', which mandated that a man carrying a red flag had to walk in front of any self-propelled vehicle on public roads, limiting speeds to 4 mph. Ellis deliberately flouted this law by making the trip without a man with a flag, helping to expose the absurdity of the legislation.

The successful drive by Ellis and his passenger helped galvanise public and political support for the motor car, and contributed to the Locomotives on Highways Act 1896, which raised the speed limit to 12 mph and removed the need for a pedestrian to walk in front of any vehicle.

Refreshment in Micheldever

We took our refreshment on a bench in the churchyard of St Mary's, Michel-dever in Hampshire: an unusual 1808, brick-built, octagonal nave, attached to a thirteenth-century stone tower. It is less than pleasing from the outside, like so many modern buildings, but not at all so inside, though its walls suffer from damp and apparent roof leakage.

Bones and chicken skin

Does church really help, though? Do priests, in actuality, ever offer positive, and therapeutic advice? Well, yes indeed; a certain Judy Ringle informs us on Quora that, on telling her priest that she could do with rather more humility in her life, he advised her to go to a particular soup kitchen. Not as a volunteer worker, though, but as if she were one of the clients—to join them for a meal, not admitting to anyone that she had no need to be there. "... I got there too late," she says. "They were cleaning things up. I was approached by an elderly, nearly blind, street woman, who expressed great concern that I had missed the meal. She held out her bag of leftovers and told me to take it. Bones and chicken skin and bits of crispy stuff—I'd have given it to the cat. I said, 'No, no, I can't,



St Mary's Micheldever, Hampshire, interior

(662) “This and That” - 26 July 2026

Canon Andrew Neaum - *Behind the Balustrade*



Sutton Hoo Helmet, reconstructed from fragments
[Photo The Guardian]

The 2021 film, ‘The Dig’, is a slow-moving, somewhat melancholic but absorbing drama, based on possibly the most significant of all archaeological excavations ever undertaken in England. On the 8th May 1939, as war loomed, an Anglo-Saxon burial mound at Sutton Hoo in Suffolk began to be excavated at the instigation of a physically ailing widow, upon whose property it happened to be sited. The man she chose for the task was Basil Brown (played by Ralph Fiennes), who had left the local elementary school at the age of 12 to work on his father’s small farm. Despite his lack of formal education, he taught himself Latin, French, geography, and geology, and was a skilled astronomer who published a scholarly book on that subject.

Sri Lankan garnets

Drawing on his deep, practical knowledge of local soil types, Brown carefully and systematically excavated the site, often in foul weather. On uncovering a cluster of rivets, he suspected what he was about to discover; in the middle of June, an 89-foot-long impression of an Anglo-Saxon ship was fully revealed. Beneath it was a burial chamber packed with treasures: gold jewellery set with Sri Lankan garnets, Byzantine silverware, and the now-famous Sutton Hoo helmet. The film, for dramatic

reasons, adds romantic sub-plots that are fictional, and class struggles are accentuated; otherwise, the story stays close to historical facts. Diana and I watched it last week while dog-sitting in Hazlemere.

Una ninna-nanna

The next day, still ruminating over the film and upon the gem-adorned regalia uncovered at Sutton Hoo, Diana was dazzled by, of all things, a cirque couchant dog turd on the sunlit lawn. A well-spaced circle of iridescent bluebottle flies had momentarily be-gemmed it to an unexpected beauty. When she described this to me later, it brought to mind a verse I encountered many years ago in W. H. Auden’s commonplace book, *A Certain World*, which is still on my shelves. ‘...this anonymous Neapolitan lyric,’ he writes, ‘is, surely, beautiful:’

Strunz’ . . .
Nel sole fumante
Come un incenso A Dio . . .
Una mosca ti canta
Una ninna-nanna . . .
Zzz . . . Zzz . . .
Ma . . . tu non ascolti . . .
Strunz’



Sutton Hoo: detail of belt clasp
[Photo The Guardian]

Turd,
smoking in the sun
to God like a thurifer ...
A fly sings you
a hush-a-bye . . .
Zzz . . . Zzz . . .
but . . . you don’t listen . . .
Turd! . . .



St Mary's Chiddingfold

Gnomic epiphanies

We were at church last Sunday in the lovely Surrey village of Chiddingfold. It was a relaxed, well-ordered service that flowed easily to its fifty-five-minute-long conclusion. There was a decent congregation, a thoughtful short sermon, familiar hymn tunes and a bright, melodious organ voluntary to send us on our way. It was good to be there.

Afterwards, in the church's interesting underground hall, I had an epiphany of sorts—not a 'holy' one, though perhaps more so than I imagined at the time, because, as the poet David Wright says in a remarkable poem to do with the birth of Jesus, my epiphany actually was, after a fashion,

*'....accordant with the disposition of things holy
as we understand them; whose epiphanies are banal,
not very aesthetic; gnomic; unremarkable;
and very much like what we have to put up with daily.'*

My bright-eyed, 12-year-old grandson, Thomas, observed me fiddling with my phone to change the setting of my hearing aids from the church loop system back to general listening. He asked me what else they could be tuned into, and I confessed to never having bothered to investigate, whereupon he relieved me of the phone to have a look. 'Would you like to configure the hearing aids to listen to Wi-Fi music?' he asked. Why not? So, with a little dextrous tweaking and twiddling from his expert fingers, my ears were suddenly flooded with a divine aria by Giovanni Paisiello, a favourite composer.

It was, indeed, an epiphanic moment. Music takes me closer to the gates of heaven than almost anything else in daily experience and hearing aids, unlike earbud headphones, tell no tales. For the first time in my worshipping life, I might well now be brought to a state of devotional ecstasy during the most boring of sermons, simply by listening serenely and unnoticed to a Bach sacred cantata.

Genesis meets Revelation

A theologically liberal, newly appointed priest was visiting his parishioners. At the home of one of the few evangelicals left in the parish, repeated door knocks went unanswered, though he heard signs of occupancy. 'He's seen me coming,' he thought, 'and with typical Protestant rudeness isn't answering!' To show himself to be as biblically literate as any evangelical, he wrote on a card, *Revelation 3:20*, and pushed it under the door. Next Sunday, on the collection plate, his card was returned with *Genesis 3:10* added. On checking the citation he chuckled, signifying the beginning of a good relationship with his evangelical parishioner: *Revelation 3:20* begins, 'Behold, I stand at the door and knock'; *Genesis 3:10* reads, 'I heard your voice in the garden and I was afraid for I was naked.'



Sutton Hoo purse lid [photo: The Guardian]



Glastonbury Abbey, Somerset

Cathedral entrance, a great, big, extravagantly tattooed hunk of a man walked in, gave me a cursory nod and then stood transfixed, gazing down the centre aisle towards the scissor arch. After a while he expostulated: 'Jesus Christ! Awesome!' It wasn't blasphemy, it was prayer of a sort. I felt exactly the same when I first visited the

Cathedral, early one morning sixteen years ago: wonder, awe, delight, reverence.

"I trust all of you listening to me here today felt something similar when you walked in and around this astonishing building. It is that sense of wonder, awe, and reverence that makes a cathedral visit truly memorable, and even brings us back for more. It is also why the Cathedral is here and has survived down through turbulent centuries—because it is awe and wonder that drive us to our knees, impel us to worship, and fill us with gratitude. All the glorious music, prayer, and devotion elicited and produced in this place—day by day, week by week, year by year, and century by century—are a response to wonder and awe. They are more varied, poetic, and creative ways of articulating what the tattooed hunk expostulated: 'Jesus Christ! Awesome.'"

I then invite everyone present to bring to the forefront of their mind, and hold there in love for twenty seconds of silence, any situation, person, problem, worry or concern for God to attend to, if they are people of faith; or if not, simply to hold in mind as an act of love, because love spills out creatively into our lives from our minds and hearts in all sorts of positive and creative ways, no matter where we are on the faith/no-faith spectrum. After the twenty seconds of silence, I recite the actual words of the remarkable historical figure without whose existence the Cathedral would not exist: Jesus of Nazareth. It is the Lord's Prayer, though in traditional English rather than in Jesus' Aramaic, and without the doxology that the Church has tacked on to the end. I conclude with a personal quip or two.

One upmanship

Texas harvests over two million acres of wheat a year, and Texans think big. One of the state's largest producers, doubtless a friend of Donald Trump, decided a while ago to visit Australia to compare their methods of wheat production to those in his home state. He visited some of the large producers in Western Australia and New South Wales—the two states that produce roughly three-quarters of Australia's output—but then visited the small town of Pinnaroo in South Australia to see its heritage centre, which contains a world-renowned Cereal Collection of over 1,300 varieties of grain, mostly wheat, much

of it displayed with the whole ear of wheat, not just the grain. Although impressed, the Texan didn't admit to being so, and when his host proudly showed off a three-thousand-acre wheat paddock, the Texan commented, 'We have wheat fields at least three times as large as that.' It was much the same when the Australian showed off his fine herd of Santa Gertrudis cattle. The Texan retorted, 'Our longhorns are at least twice as large as your beasts.' Thereafter, the conversation began to fizzle out until the Texan spotted a mob of kangaroos hopping through a paddock and asked, 'What are those?' The Australian replied laconically, 'Don't you have any grasshoppers in Texas?'



Abbot's Kitchen, Glastonbury Abbey, Somerset



St Agnes's Wallinduc, Victoria, Australia

church was deconsecrated and sold to private developers in 2025. Furthest away, about 18 miles south of Skipton, was St Agnes's, Wallinduc, an attractive, simple, weatherboard and corrugated-iron-roofed building that began its life as a chapel to a gold mine, then as the chapel of Ballarat Grammar School, until finally, in 1922, it was moved to a paddock at Wallinduc.

Born into a country parsonage, and a country parson for most of my life, I love country churches and farming communities. Many years ago, I wrote a provocative Australian verse version of the parable of the ten Wise and Foolish Virgins for broadcast on the ABC. It was based loosely on a wedding I had taken in St Agnes's, Wallinduc. Here are a few of its better, less-than-provocative lines:

A Wallinduc wedding

*.....I'd ask you all with joy, not stricture
To call to mind, imagine, picture
A bride who makes her stately way
Upon her long-planned wedding day
Resplendent in the whitest white,
Along a path in sunshine bright
Towards a little country church.
From their nearby gum-tree's perch
The cockatoos appear to scream
That brides in white aren't what they seem.*

*As crickets trill a descant shrill
The bridal party starts to fill
The tiny porch with happy giggles,
And flower girl and page boy wriggles.
A bride who'd rather not offend
Must choose as bridesmaid every friend*

*Though this can mean she ends with more
Than she, perhaps, had bargained for.
Today, demure and blue of dress,
No less than ten of them process
Slowly in before the bride,
It's hard to get them all inside.
The aisle's so short the church so small,
There's little room to move at all.*

*Yet all goes well, they all fit in
The cockatoos' atrocious din
Is blotted out, and all but drowned,
By a wheezing, groaning sound.
It's Wagner's wedding march perhaps,
With here a pause and there a lapse.
The old harmonium's badly played
By the district's last old maid....*



Another Australian Country Church (St Thomas' Talgarno)

(659) “This and That” - 5 July 2026

Canon Andrew Neaum - *Behind the Balustrade*



“Queen of the Night” flowering in day light

A portrait of Mary Whitehouse, naked and with five breasts, was commissioned by Sir Hugh Greene, Director-General of the BBC in the 1960s. She was a great trial to him, and he hung the portrait in his office to throw darts at. She had the last laugh because, with some relish and credence, she was able to claim credit for his resignation in 1969. The actual portrait has never been made public.

Those of us for whom the 1960s were salad days will remember her as the much-derided, self-appointed campaigner against the permissive society, particularly on television. As the ‘Queen of Clean’, she was easy to dismiss – and not without justification – as school-marmish, simplistic and unable to discern the wood for the trees. On the other hand, our present-day concerns as to the effect upon children of unlimited access to the worst of what is available on the internet suggest she might well have had a point. As a wise Australian once said: *“No one would wish for a return to puritanism, but the trouble with dismantling taboos is the inevitable unintended side-effects, collateral damage.”*

The rapper and the physicist

To lovers of melody, there is as little inclination to listen to the music of rap artists like Eminem as there is to the classical music of modernists like Schoenberg. Or, for that matter, to Schoenberg’s descendants, whose music sometimes finds its way into the repertoire of the fine Wells Cathedral choir. Melody to music is what the soul is to the body. Any musical genre that disdains or discards melody is as unacceptable to a thoroughgoing melody freak as is any philosophy that disdains or discards the soul to a convinced Christian.

However, rap music did come to, and hold, my attention briefly last week, though for non-musical reasons. In 2016, a Twitter scuffle broke out between a rapper known as B.o.B and an astrophysicist called Neil deGrasse Tyson. The rapper is a conspiracy theorist and member of the Flat Earth Society, whose views the astrophysicist took issue with and, indeed, refuted, though to little effect.

Unable to persuade each other to a change of mind on Twitter, they turned to rapping instead. B.o.B issued a ‘diss track’ against Tyson titled ‘Flatline’, elaborating his views about the shape of the Earth. In turn, the astrophysicist, thanks to his own rapper nephew, Stephen, responded with a ‘diss track’ titled ‘Flat to Fact’.

It was the astrophysicist who eventually concluded the public spat with a charitable final tweet to B.o.B: *“Duude — to be clear: being five centuries regressed in your reasoning doesn’t mean we all can’t still like your music.”*



St Peter ad Vincula, Tollard Royal, Wiltshire

Medieval enlightenment



Wells Cathedral viewed from the Bishops Palace moat

In that final tweet, as well as elsewhere, the astrophysicist implies that belief in a flat earth belongs to medieval times. He is dead wrong. The Middle Ages were far, far more sophisticated and enlightened than he supposes. To live within sight and earshot of the architectural triumph that is a medieval cathedral, and to visit daily its gloriously stained-glassed, star-roofed, elongated octagon of a Lady Chapel for early morning worship, is proof enough of that. To wander each week its aisles and ambulatories, talking to awed visitors and sharing in their delight and wonder, likewise. The Middle Ages were very, very far from being the Dark Ages.

Eratosthenes, librarian in Alexandria

Almost all educated medieval Europeans, Christian theologians (such as Thomas Aquinas), and Islamic scholars knew the Earth to be a sphere. So too did

sailors like Columbus, who had no fear of falling off the edge of the Earth, though they did miscalculate how large the globe actually was.

As long ago as the 6th century BC, Pythagoras and fellow Greek philosophers postulated a round Earth. In the 3rd century BC, the ancient Greek polymath and chief librarian at the ancient world's most famous library in Alexandria, Eratosthenes—a mathematician, philosopher, poet, geographer, astronomer, and music theorist—calculated the Earth's circumference with remarkable accuracy using shadows.

The influential 20th-century paleontologist and evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould reminds us, "*There never was a period of 'flat Earth darkness' among scholars, regardless of how the public at large may have conceptualised our planet both then and now. Greek knowledge of sphericity never faded, and all major medieval scholars accepted the Earth's roundness as an established fact of cosmology.*" There was scarcely a Christian scholar of the Middle Ages who didn't acknowledge the Earth to be a sphere and even know its approximate circumference.

No cause for despair

It can be disheartening when our children or grandchildren turn their backs on the faith we hold so dear. We should never despair; seeds dispersed in desert places can remain dormant and ungerminated for decade after decade, until favourable conditions occur.

Present

On the flyleaf
of my confirmation present:
"To Wendy with love
from Nanna. Psalm 98"

I looked it up, eventually -
Cantate Domino.
I knew the first two verses
and skimmed the rest.

Thirty-five years afterwards,
at evensong on Day 19
the choir sings Nanna's psalm.
At last, I pay attention

to the words she chose.
O sing unto the Lord
a new song. Nanna,
it is just what I wanted.

(Wendy Cope)

Home