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FROM BEHIND THE STAIRWELL BALUSTRADE

September to October 2026



High Altar - Wells Cathedral

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>

(668) “This and That” - 6 September 2026

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



George Herbert's Church, St Andrew's, Bemerton, Wiltshire

‘Ours is too cynical an age to believe in sanctity...’, writes Helen Cooper in a review of John Drury’s book, *Music at Midnight: The Life and Poetry of George Herbert*. ‘Without ever saying so’, she continues, ‘this book is a reminder that it may be possible.’

A 17th Century Good Samaritan

Why is the book’s title, ‘*Music at Midnight*’, though? It comes from a story in the very first biography of George Herbert by Izaak Walton (1593–1683).

The devoted parish priest and poet, George Herbert, was walking to Salisbury from his vicarage in Bemerton to make music with friends when:

*“.....he saw a poor man with a poorer horse, that was fallen under his load: they were both in distress, and needed present help; which Mr. Herbert perceiving, put off his canonical coat, and helped the poor man to unload, and after to load, his horse. The poor man blessed him for it, and he blessed the poor man; and was so like the Good Samaritan, that he gave him money to refresh both himself and his horse..... his musical friends at Salisbury began to wonder that Mr. George Herbert, which used to be so trim and clean, came into that company so soiled and discomposed....but he told them the occasion. And when one of the company told him, ‘He had disparaged himself by so dirty an employment,’ his answer was, ‘That the thought of what he had done would prove **music to him at midnight**; and that the omission of it would have upbraided and made discord in his conscience....”*

The tale has been distilled into verse by a poet of today, R S Gwynn. The last 4 lines are particularly pleasing:

Music at Midnight

After Walton, [for W. Brown Patterson] by R.S. Gwynn

*Mr. Herbert entered, so befouled with mud and shit
His Tuesday consort, ready with their silent lutes,
Were all aghast, save one who asked, with a wag’s wit,*

*‘Crawled you here from Old Sarum’s pits or on worsen routes?’
He said, ‘I came upon a poor man and his horse.
The wretched beast had fallen underneath its load;
I engaged to right him and set both upon the road,*

*And the hour going, in this fair state resumed my course.
I tell you this as fact. In all humility
I take no credit for the deed yet must confess
Had I not stopped today for them I could not bless,
In faith, the wafer and the wine. Thus this shall be
For me, music at midnight, sweetness to my sense.
Now, gentlemen, time flies. Let’s tune our instruments.’*



Salisbury Cathedral

Rest in Peace, Neville MacFarlane



St Mary's, Old Dilton, Wiltshire

I received the following email last week, it speaks for itself:

I am sorry to tell you that the "curmudgeonly old schoolmaster", Neville McFarlane, died this week peacefully at home. Ironically for one so entirely devoted to one woman in his life, he had five ladies present at the time, and a sixth had just left after spending an hour chatting quietly to him. When people question what the value is of a long period bed-bound, increasingly dependent on others and incapable of even holding a spoon or cup, I can say that there is a purpose if we pause to reflect.

Dad was surrounded by the best of humanity in his final months; people who had their own difficulties in life but nevertheless cheerfully gave tender care and attention to him. I used to check on him via Ring cameras when I couldn't be there with him; the day before he died the lady from the pharmacy walked in with some medication. Seeing him at rest, she talked quietly to him, knowing that he could often hear. She watered his flowers and adjusted his bedclothes with great tenderness. She had her round of deliveries to make, but stopped to give a touch of kindness. Knowing that she herself had recently had devastating blows in her own life, I was humbled to witness this. It made me realise that our actions, however seemingly small, can have great impact. Dad even had a regular visit from a horse poking his head through the window, ridden by a lady whom none of us have met or spoken to, but who knew he would appreciate the act.

And so, could I ask you to remove dad from your mailing list, knowing that, from such a bizarrely tenuous connection and strangely thanks to Covid in part, you provided him with thought, with humour, and with spiritual support for his final years right until last weekend. Thank you so much, Jane

A Lambretta scooter

An email in response to two of last week's photos of a remarkable medieval church that Diana and I visited recently and loved:

St Mary's church at Old Dilton is where I first worked. As a young 16 year old I cycled over to help a roofer replace the wooden pegs for the slate tiles. I think I was paid something like 4 shillings an hour, and by the end of the school holidays I was able to buy a Lambretta motor scooter. My pride and joy! Last year I took my wife to look around the church, having collected the huge key from a neighbouring home. Thank you for reminding me of those days back in the very early '60's.

We live some way from this place of my first labours, but I vividly recall the quaint language on some of the graves! A habit I long practised on my visits to churches, and especially war graves. Nearly 70 years ago - but it set the work ethics for a lifetime, while still appreciating church buildings and their place in our community. To be at peace and at the feet of God, where we the human race belong.



Georgian box pews, St Mary's, Old Dilton