

Letter from Australia

Peter Dormer started with the Holy Cross Church, when at the original Betham Infants School in 1936. Peter, who lives in Australia, has recently been in touch with Neil. Here are 4 of Peter's e-mails, in which he casts his mind back through the years.....

Dear Neil,

I apologise for adding to your emails, but hope you can put me in touch with somebody who could take a couple of photos to send on line for me. Namely the German Stain glass Good Shepherd window (1) in the original church and another possibly more difficult, if it is still in the glass display, the record of all Rectors from Radbert de Saleby. I made another version of that with a simple illuminated initial around a painting of the original church, with a parallel column showing the historic events the Parish and those Rectors lived through. I would have lost it, and all our things when our home here in the Mt Lofty Ranges, was burnt to the ground in the 1980 Ash Wed Fire.

I give my background if you or whoever is interested, and these details may just be of interest to someone. As we get older 'history' isn't just something that others went through, is it.

I started with the Church, when at the original Betham infants School with those very tiny high up windows, back in 1936, before the new Church was built. I remember all the timber coming from Canada, and in the war, even as a youngster, actually helped in the building. I later regularly serviced the new organ pump for years when a choir boy in the new Church.



I did love the old Church and remember ploughing through deep snow to open it and warm it up for the early weekday service, then being the Altar Boy.

My days as choir boy were wonderfully rewarded by being chosen to represent the Parish when a representative was called for, to form a truly 'London choir' at the Royal Albert Hall to mark the end of the War in Europe. It was indeed a grand concert, with all the boxes filled with the Heads of State of the Allied Countries and decorated with their flags. It was a very special evening and I only wish it was on film, but filming those days was very limited, often short lived, or gathering dust somewhere. At times I now know the feeling! The rehearsals alone, were amazing both at the RAH, and other famous places in London, like the Brompton Oratorio, and I value the experience. We had to sing solo in rehearsals, and the old RAH acoustics could devour even the finest singers. A scary experience that I found only Gigli could handle without amplification in my many post war visits to see many vocalists, who had to resort to microphones. RAH subsequently had to work hard on those devouring acoustics, didn't they

I shall always be grateful as a simple lad from Greenford. The Good Shepherd picture that I spent many hours beside for Weddings made a big impression on me as a very young choir boy, but to jump to life in Australia, when in 1958 I joined the ABC here, and as Assistant Prog Executive, I had the pleasure of looking after Archbishop Geoffrey Fisher before we made recordings with him. I got to know him well as he often came to Adelaide to visit his son, who ran Scotch College here. We shared memories of Rev Donald Harris and Ronald Dix and a grand fellow who helped me and the Parish through those dark days of the War, Rev Michael Peck (2), who later married Fishers niece. I found Fishers talent for knowledge of his team similar to the good Captains that I served under in the Fleet Air Arm. A talent indeed.

I have a job remembering my own name these days! Well do forgive my meandering, and may I wish you and yours the very best.

How absolutely shattering to read that that lovely German stained glass of The Good Shepherd has been stolen. I hope someone has a photo tucked away somewhere.



When I contemplated on that window as a child it gave me a life changing idea, I could not believe that Jesus would eat the lamb he held lovingly in his arms, and at about 9, I decided to stop eating meat, I didn't know then if I would die if I went without meat! but it seems to have worked. I didn't know anyone, at all, who was a vegetarian in those days and with the years of meaty 'Spam' in the war it wasn't easy. I think the young these days might question eating today's Spam. The world and words change don't they.

That window started me on a lonely journey indeed then, and it even worried my senior Officers when at about 22 in the Fleet Air Arm, I was very deeply questioned. Later about 27, I realise now, they wondered if I would order my 9 man Landing or Boarding Party to open fire with our killer machine guns when we were on immediate recall to go into Egypt over the Suez Crises. I am just so pleased I didn't have to make that decision knowing, as I do now, it was all just about money. Little changes through the centuries there, does it.

I must be getting old but one's confidence in the new world diminishes by the day. One felt safer in the blackout days in London when the threat was at 2000 ft, although I did see one V1, having lost height fly parallel and actually lower than the East side of the Flats we lived in, tipped gently away from the buildings by one of the brave Polish pilots from 303 Squadron Northolt, Oh for a camera!

Even watching that aerial mine drift down to the river pub, The Load of Hay, as a young lad, it was part of life then. But with the lack of men left in London in the '40's, I was properly trained at nine years old to put out magnesium incendiary bombs, and at that age I built wooden shutters from rabbit boxes from Australia to cover our back windows. We had to make the best of it as we had no garden for in-ground Anderson and neither could we have an indoor Morrison as we had no ground floor.

Watching it all going on from our upper windows on a heavy Blitz night and the Barrage balloons around Hyde Park being set on fire by tracers from enemy planes, although not frightened, because at that age one is eternal, but that child did decide not to bring up a family in London, and probably accounts for us living in our own 15 acres in a conservation area. We can handle the Bushfires when one has the room and builds accordingly. We sadly lost the owners of The Load of Hay that night (please see page Ed.) but some gypsies survived under the tree that the parachute got caught up in. A couple of us local children did go down early morning before school, to collect parts of the parachute and straps, that was the only things we could afford in those days! I had the thick main silk straps and with my own Shrapnel collection area, as I was the only one who could climb up the water pipes to get onto the roof of all those flats opposite what was The Granada, these were, I suppose, the equivalent of the show off Ipods of today at school!

However safety on the streets, even here in Adelaide, has changed for the worse. I think we should instill responsibility earlier than we do now. I had to work on six days a week in a hellish job when still 14 and I certainly wouldn't want that, but to call them children up to 18 is absurd. A similar disaster has occurred with our Aborigines here, when they lost their defining early change to adult and responsibility.

I really believed after the war that lessons were learnt, wars would end, and real human progress would be made. It seemed that way with the 1951 Festival, with which I had some close connections, was to bring 'light' back to our London that had a job to lift itself from those dark wartime London years. Thank goodness there are many good folk like yourselves, but greed has spread like an infection, not helped by things like drug consumption of course.

I do hope the positive advances of which there are so many, far outweigh the negatives. I worry that Mammon runs the show on this planet, playing on the human vulnerabilities. I really would like to know what that Good Shepherd would have to say today. I learnt from him to value LOVE above all, and Love, as one moves towards the 'Light', illuminates, or is it 'educates us' to be more sensitive and spiritually advance. That other 'Sun' as our Light in cold darkness is the obvious analogy, and it was small wonder they said "Lighten our darkness " was it.

I feel great sorrow these years as never before, as we move towards Easter, not far away, for Jesus who saw his Abrahamic faith even in his day losing the plot with Mammon and its bedfellow corruptive power, but even worse he has had to look upon 2000 years of very divergent followers in his name.

Please forgive the ramblings, but I will be 80 in May and am surprised how we sometimes have to look back to see where the path of life is leading us. My dear wife Margaret, like so many these days is doing great things on family trees and I think we are very fortunate to be able to get a better feel for our ancestors difficult times.

But one very dear friend, the late actor Roger Hume who stayed here in the Hills with us while performing his one man "Old Herbaceous" at the Adelaide Festival Theatre many years ago, wisely pointed out to me that it wasn't many generations back, that for most folk their world ended at that 3 mile vision limit, while now we see and hear so many things as they happen around the World.

Maybe that is why life is limited? Most of us would find the changes too much!

Please feel free to use any of that material if it is of interest and make the contact available if anyone wants more. Many thanks again and thank you for the good work you have applied yourself to in this world, and forgive any errors and omissions in the above.

Due to that total wipe-out we had with the first Ash Wed Bushfire in 1980, all our early photos were burnt. This below must have been returned from others. A dear past friend said the lesson to be learnt was that "we often only really own the things we can give away"! I think he meant that too often, our possessions tend to own us.



Peter, Margaret and Mickey on their Golden Wedding Anniversary, 7 years ago.

Same day 7 years ago, Son-in-law Gavin on the right has his own studios in the Adelaide Hills

We started this in Bushland 53 years ago, cutting tracks with a pick axe. We have committed 90% of the 15 acres to Heritage Bushland and the native animals whose ancestors have lived in it for thousands of years.

We couldn't even get off the lane up our hillside until I started cutting in an access track by hand early in 1959. Margaret and daughter Anne at work below. We slept in that Hillman Husky when we could get it up a bit. The native animals were very inquisitive at night.

Always good to hear from you Neil, as I am sure you must be busy, however Margaret did want me to try to convey the impact Michael Peck made on my life.

A working class child in those days had to be moved quickly into those basic awful factory jobs as quick as possible, and the AEC still was making Bren Gun Carriers etc, and my job near the of the War at 14 was cleaning inside those massive surface grinder castings that had come as deck cargo from America. I had to use a powerful Kerosene spray and scraper to clean the protective grease from INSIDE, in the dark, during a freezing cold winter. I was soaked all day with that wet cold muck and had to cycle home saturated though the snow afterwards. I literally envied those 'chimney boys' I had read about in my Dickens, at least they were warm! Phenomena finally saved me from the job!

However, when I had to get a reference for a better job, which really did make my life better, the Father Michael Peck gave me an additional chat, the first words of praise I had ever heard. I almost looked over my shoulder to see if he was talking to somebody else! It remained a shock, but I think it must have helped me change and to look forward and upwards. It led to my some 7 years with the oldest Scientific Instrument Makers, Ottways in Britain, which then led to me being the youngest ever member of the Chief Inspectorate of Armaments, actually starting on my 21 birthday. Inspectors had always been very much older before that. That job took me all over the place and finally led me to Australia.

Ottways were founded in 1642 and I still have contact with the present family members. Nelsons telescope also played a role in leading me to my wonderful wife, a good story if you are interested and have managed to get this far, but I think I really owe thanks to Michael Peck, for starting me looking onwards and upwards, and you have given me somewhere to say it.

P.S. I failed to respond to your invitation on the 3rd of July. I wish I could make it, but I will try to be with you in spirit. At least I have some 9 hours time advantage from here, but being 10 years younger would have helped!

I do thank you and your son for photographing the Rectors List. It is so much better than my attempt to photograph through the glass in low-light back on our first return visit after 18 years in Australia. Anyway I was two Rectors short then!

Those days of Father Harris, and that open field before the New Church went up, really don't seem that long ago. I think I must be getting old! When I look at those Rectors of the past it is amazing how one now reaches back in time.

Even since 1936 with my parallel time column that I had on the version I made, we would not have been short of history, including many local events. Some were grey and scary but some lightweight, like our front window grandstand view over the crowds to see Gracie Fields standing up and waving in the back of an open car just below us when she came to open the Granada (3) , after we, for some time, had watched them cut out the hillside and build it. Much happier than later having the Ack-Ack guns firing over us, and the Searchlights lighting our rooms up from that turnaround in front of the then Granada.

I do appreciate your help and hope that some of my reflective chatter may be of interest to someone and I should be pleased to hear from anybody, particularly if someone still has a photograph of that 'Good Shepherd.'

My thanks again, it has been nice to reach back with love to those good folk and so glad you have made yourselves available on the internet. So much quicker than having to use all that sealing wax!

P.S. the Rectors List has printed up brilliantly and will soon be framed. PPS. Something different, I took the QTMovie attached over the pilots shoulder on one of my many flights with the Canadair SuperScoopers both here and in France where I studied them for their suitability here in Australia. I filmed this one to show our Hills reservoirs are plenty big enough to lift from. We did in fact operate them just a few feet apart, just enough to avoid Prop-wash.

Peter Dormer

(1)The Good shepherd stained glass window was stolen from the Old Church in 1989. Fortunately Johnnie had a photo of this window and Neil has e-mailed it to Peter.

(2) Michael David Saville: Peck was Dean of Lincoln from 1965 to 1968. Peck was born on 7 January 1914, educated at King's College Choir School, Cambridge, Sedbergh and King's College, Cambridge and ordained in 1937. He was a Curate at Holy Cross, Greenford until 1946 and then Vice-Principal of St Chad's College, Durham until 1949. Later he was Vicar of St Mark's, Mansfield and then Archdeacon of Portsmouth before his elevation to the Deanery in 1965. He died in post on 22 April 1968. (Wikipedia)

(3) The Granada cinema was opened in 1937. It closed in 1966 and it was then converted into Tesco.