

THE LAST BEACHLEY BOY

A COLLECTION OF POEMS
BY
BRIAN ELKS



I was watching a program that noted the fact that from a particular old campaign there were very few soldiers remaining alive. It made me think. One day there will be only one 'Beachley Boy' left. What will he say in final salute? Perhaps something like this?

The Last Beachley Boy

We stood together, youthful comrades all, bound fast
to each other by an esprit fiercely held. Great sporting
battles we did hold and stood in line abreast and
proud as any British Guards.

Now I look back on all the years of loyal service.
Alas for some there was to be no long life, they lost
it in their prime. But the memories cannot fade
for me, as my advancing years make the memories
of all the good days of our youth grow stronger.
Those far off days when we were full of hope and
the future held no fear, just the glory of living and
working side by side, bonded as brothers.

But those bright lads now have gone forever and,
though I see them plain, my heart can hold no joy,
for I am upstanding with my glass to hand, with head
unbowed in service to my country and all my friends.
I am the last Beachley Boy.

The Army Apprentices School at Beachley Camp near Chepstow, where I trained as a young lad, was closed by yet another short-sighted government decision in the 1980's. During my service I rarely met a Warrant Officer in my Corps who had not started as an army apprentice. Many N.C.O's and Warrant Officers, and a good many commissioned officers as well, had started their careers in these establishments and were the heart of the Army. These words are my heartfelt lament at their passing into history as must inevitably happen.

LIFE

The currency of life has so many varied strands,
Weaving, winding, binding as the universe expands.
And in that countless setting each man and women is a mite
Their part and struggle overlooked and so often lost to sight.
Look forward is our watchword but looking back cannot be wrong
For tomorrow will not happen lest some yesterdays live on.

A PRAYER

If there's a God somewhere please let him see
That all our lives are fraught with misery.
But if God is there give grateful thought
For love that's shown and can't be bought
And happiness derived from simple wondrous things
Like flowers, kindness and for hope that brings
A joy in living and the spirit to survive unbowed
Through twists of fate and so can let a man feel proud.

Bestow upon each traveller through life freedom from fear
And make the bluebells bloom every year.

The two poems above were written for the novel "May the Bluebells Bloom". The life story of James and Edith Gander of Lewes, Sussex.

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JESSIE

Walking with her head held high,
So graceful, though the years go by.
A smile that makes a brighter day,
Her kiss, that lightens up the way.
The years slip by, where do they go?
Soon autumn's here, then March winds blow,
But for me the summer's always here,
My Jessie.

Written for my wife, Jessie. Published in the book of poetry "Dazzled by the Moon" in 2003. 'If you look at the sun you will be blinded, if you look at the moon you will become a poet'

THE FAMILY TREE

Look back through bygone times to see what you can find,
A Wagoner, a carpenter, perchance a vicar with an open mind!
Fatherless a child is born, no man there to buy a shawl.
A dead-end, so frustrating, like a high brick wall!
How did the mother cope? You hope there was no hate.
More brown and faded photos, all standing by garden gate.

Weddings, christenings and births that made a day seem bright,
Recorded by official hand, their mark because they could not write.
What were they like those folk who beckon from the past?
Ancestral lines can vanish but keep on, remain steadfast,
Soon names jump out and you are on the track again.
Oh dear, see there, the fever multiplies a family's pain.

The more you look and search appreciate fate's merest chance,
By which you hold your life—illuminated by a backward's glance.

Published in the book of poetry "Songs in the Silence" in 1999.

ROCK THE BOAT OF LIFE

You can't do that. Not here.
The voice sounds cross, though almost sincere.
At least I thought it did.
My mind went blank but then it cleared.
Why not it asked?
But questions were not required I feared.

'No Entry' said the sign. Keep out of here.
A sign of authority it was clear.
Trespassers will be prosecuted.
My thoughts were stubborn I do re-call.
Is that so?
But the endless barbed wire said it all.

Don't answer back. Don't question me.
The finger points and wags. I am authority.
Do as you're told, we know best.
My mind rebels and searches for a riposte filled with wit.
Bollocks!
Oh, how I hope that rocks the boat of life a bit.

Published in the book of poetry "In This Life" in 2004.

THE VERY BEST

Some are born to greatness.
A very few to bravery.
One or two will find fame.
Some can laugh away all fear,
While many will labour with a tear.
But the very best are those like you,
Who were born and lived—to give.

Written as a tribute to my mother and read at her funeral service. Throughout her life she did, like so many other "Mums", give so much to her family. So much given and so little asked in return.

LEAVING HOME

Should you forget what you were like when growing up,
I will not.
Should you wonder what the future holds for you,
I do not.
For life's troubles I will share with you, the happiness as well.
So will I forget as life unfolds new days for you?
I shall not.

Written for my daughter Sarah on the occasion of her 18th birthday as she stepped out into the world.

REMEMBER

Come November the eleventh upon the eleventh hour,
Wear upon your breast with pride a crimson poppy flower,
And put aside two minutes of yourself in contemplation,
For all are heroes now who served our nation.

This and the next two poems were written to illustrate the novel 'My Heart and I', a story set in the Great War of 1914-18.

FOR THOSE OF COURAGE

The dearest thing on earth that man possesses is his life,
Should he stake or gamble it in war or bloody strife?
But can men hold back while others take the risk alone,
Coldly weigh the risk of death and then their pride disown.
Not for those of courage.

And should the gamble fail what of those they leave at home,
What happiness for them, a future bleak, the seed unsown?
But can women cling while others take the risk alone,
Blindly hold their men at home and then their pride disown.
Not for those of courage.

When life is done and tomorrow faced with daunting fear,
Pride dissolved and swept aside, whose memory stands clear?
Only those of courage.

WILL YOU REMEMBER THEM?

Whispered stories told lest we forget the past,
Threadbare memories teased out, recalled at last.
Tales of bygone misty days --- so faint remembered.

Take time to reminisce with cups of tea and talk,
Family and old friends passing by, a lifetime's walk.
And to be there once again ---- so well remembered.

Those long ago their happiness and sorrows fading fast,
Men and women dancing by, shadows from the past.
Recollections from the heart --- with heartfelt thanks remembered.

Please, will you remember them?

LIGHT a CANDLE

True charity in mankind is not a natural state,
Nor is goodwill, nor kindness and so will stay,
Jealousy, cant, greed, prejudice and pointless hate,
That blinds so many to a better way.

How can reasoned attitudes shine forth,
When selfishness stops horizons getting sunlight,
And mindless people reject all arguments of worth,
And so lose them for a future time again to fight

Millennia have passed and more will pass in pain,
For slow progress is our natural human state,
So jealousy, cant, greed, prejudice and hate remain,
But HOPE says time must lead all to a better fate.

Light a candle for HOPE.

This poem was written to illustrate the novel 'Light a Candle', a story set in the religious turbulence of the 16th century. We are still hoping.

DON'T GO DOWN THE PIT, SON

A miner's life is hard you see,
Your body scarred by cuts of blue,
Work in the light to set you free,
So stay on top where the light is true.
Don't go down the pit, son,
Don't go down like me.

The cables snap and the tubs run free,
Bodies broken, battered and blue,
In the dark you cannot see,
So stay on top where the light is true.
Don't go down the pit, son,
Don't end up like me.

The cage can drop, falling free,
Bodies bleeding, more cuts of blue,
The lights go out, nowhere to see
Please God save us for the light that's true.
Don't go down the pit, son,
Save yourself for me.

My father spent all his working life as a miner, he told me many, many times I must not go down the pit. When a miner got a cut, the coal dust made a permanent blue scar like a tattoo. My father's body had many 'blue' scars. This poem was written in his memory and to illustrate the book 'Come Back, Dinky Bumstead?'; a story of our life together when I was a boy. I miss him still.

GIVE ME THE CHILD

Parents show a child the way, so by example lead,
Minds guide and shape, so as a shepherd heed,
To encouragement and hope, love and measured care,
Children are your gift to life, do not stint or pare.
Sow harmony, fair discipline, the essence of good bands,
Direct and hold all young life, precious in your hands.

Parents should remember this throughout a childhood span,
'Give me the child and I'll give you the man.'

This poem was written to illustrate the novel 'Give Me the Child'. The story of my Grandfather's life from 1885 to 1950 and his role in the miners trade union in their struggle for a decent life in the Kent Coalfield.

DOES REASON RULE?

'Obey me, Conscience,' demanded the King, 'I will heed you no longer unless you serve me well. Kiss me, I bid thee.'

'Nay by Christ!' retorted Conscience, 'Dismiss me forever unless Reason serves also. Or die I would rather.'

'Be ready to ride then,' quoth the King, 'and fetch Reason here. For he shall rule in my realm, my counsel to hear.'

'If the Commons assent not,' did Conscience reply, 'it cannot be.'

'By him that was racked on the cross,' cried Reason to the King, 'if I rule not in your realm then rend out my ribs!'

'I assent,' spoke the King, 'by St Mary my Lady, when my council comes of both Commons and Earls.'

'Then I am ready,' said Reason, 'to remain with you ever, if Conscience be your counsel there can be no better.'

'This I accept,' said the King, 'God forbid us to part, for as long as I live, let us three rule together.'

The poem 'Piers Ploughman' was written in the 14C by the cleric, William Longland. The modified extract above 'Does Reason Rule?' was used to illustrate the novel 'An Uncivil War'. A story set in the English civil war, 1640 – 1649, the great conflict between King and Parliament.

LEST WE FORGET

So many of those brave spirits who saw us through the darkest days of war have gone into the deepest night, though unwillingly embraced, for life was ever sweet as they did know right well and lived it to the full, because it was their time.

No matter what their sacrifice they never asked that we should stand in grief forever nor did they envy us the better life to come, or weigh a debt to be repaid for us to carry as a mortgage on our future, for these were their freely given gifts to us.

Their true legacy is the nation that we are today, unconquered, standing free and proud liberally endowed with justice in an unjust world. There is no Cenotaph for them unless it is their courage, deeds and honour that we remember now.

What shall we hand on? What fine example shall we set, for surely there is greatness yet. For ours is still a land of hope and glory

----- Lest we forget.

Written for the book 'Come Back, Dinky Bumstead', a story set in the years 1940-45 and of my life then and the events surrounding it. This poem is my tribute to all those unsung heroes who gave so much that kids like me should have a future.

This poem was also submitted in the following format for a poetry publication, so that it conformed to the rules regarding the number of words and the number of lines, re-titled as Sixty Years On.(the year 2005 being 60 years on from 1945 when WW2 ended)

SIXTY YEARS ON

So many of those brave spirits who saw us through the darkest days of war have gone into the deepest night, unwillingly embraced, for life was ever sweet as they did know and lived it to the full, because it was their time.

No matter what their sacrifice they never asked that we should stand in grief for ever, nor did they envy us the better life today or weigh a debt unpaid for us to carry as a mortgage on our future. These were their gifts to us.

Their true legacy is the nation that we stand today unconquered, standing free and proud. Liberally endowed with justice in an unjust world. There is no Cenotaph for them unless it is their courage, deeds and honour we remember.

What shall we hand on? What fine example set? For surely there is greatness yet. For ours is still a land of hope and glory.
.....Lest we forget.

BRIAN AF ELKS, OCTOBER 2004.

OLD FRIENDS PASSING BY

Should I feel heart-ache as old friends pass on by
How else, for they will all be greatly missed.
Should I feel anger as old friends pass me by
To leave me here to mourn their passing.
Must I lament as old friends pass me by
When my mind is filled with smiling faces.

Shall I weep as old friends walk on by
When it is their laughter fills my thoughts.
For did they not live lives so very rich
With courage, humour and such joyful hope.
So should I feel sorrow as they pass me by
No, they would not ask for sorrow or regret.

No weeping, anger, lamentations would they want
What use are those when you must celebrate a life..
I am in mourning as old friends pass me by
Dressed in black to mark the day but in my heart
It is the courage, humour and the joyful hope
That reigns - and will sustain me to the end.

Yesterday I heard that my good friend Percy Cox had passed on. He had served and been badly hurt in WW2 but he never gave in; neither did he lose his spirit or sense of humour. He was severely wounded in France, not long after D-Day. Many a day we shared a joke together as we battled nature on our adjoining allotments and observed the frailties of human life going on all around us. Like so many of his time he had given much and expected nothing in return. He supported his old comrades to the end and never missed an Armistice Sunday.

The wartime guns had ruined his ear-drums and he wore a tiny hearing aid. One day on the allotment he lost it and we crawled all over, shouting out 'can you hear me!' then waiting for the bloomin' thing to echo. We did find it in the end but we nearly died of laughter, and sore knees, before then. "I daresn't go home without it," said Percy, "otherwise I shan't hear what the missus is saying. Mind you I always turn it off when I get home so I can have a bit of peace an' quiet."

I will miss him. Brian Elks, December 2005

OLD COMRADE'S GRACE

Lord, bless this meal we will eat together, for we stand here in the name of comradeship. Continue to inspire in these old soldiers assembled here this evening, the will to work today, tomorrow and every new day for a better world, because the vanguard of all our future hopes are now vested in our grandchildren and those to follow.

We thank you for our daily bread and the good fortune that has coloured our years and favoured us with long life. Bless those who stand here this day and bless those, our comrades, who could not come and those special men in your care who live on in our memories.

Each year the old boys of the year 1950 intake at Beachley, Chepstow, spend time together. For many years from 1953 until 2000 we often went our separate ways but the old ties of comradeship and friendship drew us together again, to share once more for a few hours the golden days of our youth. I thought we needed something a little more than the old 'For what we are about to receive.....'.



A late summer's afternoon bt the church of St. Mary's Thame