

Paul Wigmore - a poet and writer of hymns who was inspired by Port Isaac

How I began to write verse: It began close to the onset of adolescence, that time of spots and sudden urges. The family was on holiday in Port Isaac, Cornwall. It had been a favourite for many years. I had stood at a window gazing at the distant sea, clouds and gulls and simply thought it would be fun to write a little rhyme about it. It never got further than:

***Clouds race like tattered rags
across Port Isaac Bay***

I kept it for years. I was proud of the tattered rags. From that time onwards I have found that completing a satisfactory bit of verse is the best tonic around. Putting words together in an unusual and sometimes enigmatic way can be like walloping a ball at table tennis and seeing it strike the last half-inch of table: you feel unbelievably good.

The actual production of work didn't start until my early teens, and it was always nonsense sparked off by things happening - and absolutely always for showing to an immediate audience - most often the people who were involved in whatever it was that had happened. I could never keep it to myself; it wouldn't have made sense. I was essentially a performer, very proud of what I had written and anxious to give others the benefit of my sheer brilliance.

This was the limit of my output until my my early 30s, when more substantial stuff emerged. In my forties and onwards it became more thoughtful, but still usually influenced by a place or an experience.

Some time in the 1970s the Choirmaster David Liff, a founding member of The Jubilate Group, came up to me after Morning Prayer and said he had just realised that very little existed in hymnbooks on what St Paul wrote to the Galatians about the Fruits of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22). Would I have a go at writing something about it that could be turned into a hymn? Set to music and sung as a hymn in a few weeks' time? The eventual hymn, which is in the form of a prayer, was set to the existing and wonderful tune, Lavendon, by the composer and friend, Paul Edwards. It began:

May we, O Holy Spirit, bear your fruit

And that was the beginning of hymn-writing. Since then some 130 have been published in a dozen or so books. For many of them the composer John Barnard has been responsible for both pointing out the need for hymns on certain subjects and composing the music. His compositions are frequently heard in radio and TV broadcasts of church services.

There was one excitement when I asked Sir John Betjeman, whom I knew fairly well, if I might use the first line of his poem Christmas in a new hymn. It goes:

The bells of waiting Advent ring.
Generously, he said 'yes'.

In 1981 I completed the cantata Samuel! for the Royal School of Church Music in Montreal. The composer

"One evening while I was reading to John Betjeman from one of his favourite writers, Harry Williams, he looked up at me and said slowly, 'You know, I can see you're a poet.'

Now, that sort of thing does wonders for a man."

was Dr Alan Ridout of Canterbury Cathedral and one day, during a rehearsal break, the subject of ordinary poetry came up and he asked to see what I had written. A week or two later back in England I put it all in a brown paper parcel and sent it. He replied, saying he liked it and suggested that I meet John Bishop of Autolycus Press. I did, and having read them he came to see me. He said he wanted to publish. I was stunned. Me? Published? We began discussing the design of the book, typography and so on. During the chat he surprised me by saying, 'Did you realise you mention trees an awful lot?' I did not. He said, 'I want to break it into two books, one for the trees and the other for the autobiographical sort.' There was more chat. As we shook hands on our Pinner doorstep I said, 'It's funny about the trees, isn't it.'

That phrase stuck with me and, in the lovely setting of Lady Betjeman's Hay-on-Wye home where I was house-sitting while she was in India, I sat down and wrote the poem, *It's funny about the trees*. I sent it to him and asked if he would like to add it to the collection. He did, and the phrase became the title he gave to the book. The second collection became *A Suburban Boy*.



In a couple of months, they were published. Most of them were sold at my readings in local church halls and schools. During the intervals and at the end of the readings our daughter Jane and I were at a table somewhere at the back; Jane did a brilliant job of the selling and I signed each copy purchased.

A friend's comment after he'd read them suggested that in fact my work was largely pastiche Betjeman. I bridled at the thought. Me? Imitating someone else's style? But he was right and my only consolation is that even respectable and famous poets and musicians have at least begun by copying the style of their own personal favourites. Me, I just carry on doing what I've always done.

Eventually a lot of Christmas carols emerged. It is a glorious subject to write about. One of the most frequently sung is No Small Wonder and it actually began because of a mental tic.

In November 1983 I had that annoying experience, suffered by most people now and then, a short, everyday phrase repeating itself in my head over and over again. The phrase was simply, 'small wonder'. Someone must have said it within my hearing. I longed to be rid of it. I wondered if just writing it down over and over again several times would do it. So I tried it. The sheet of repeated words made me aware of its simple waltz-like rhythm. (Try saying 'small wonder, small wonder, small wonder' aloud, keeping a steady, regular beat.) And in the hazy, stumbling process that is fancifully called 'inspiration', a poem emerged.

So, fairly pleased with the result I sent it to the composer and a good friend Paul Edwards. He wrote shortly afterwards, enclosing his setting. He said my letter and poem had arrived just as he was about to take his laundry to the local launderette, so he had taken it with him, plus some manuscript paper. After putting his clothes into the machine he had sat down opposite it, watching the contents going round and round as he worked on a tune. And that lovely tune emerged, shining.

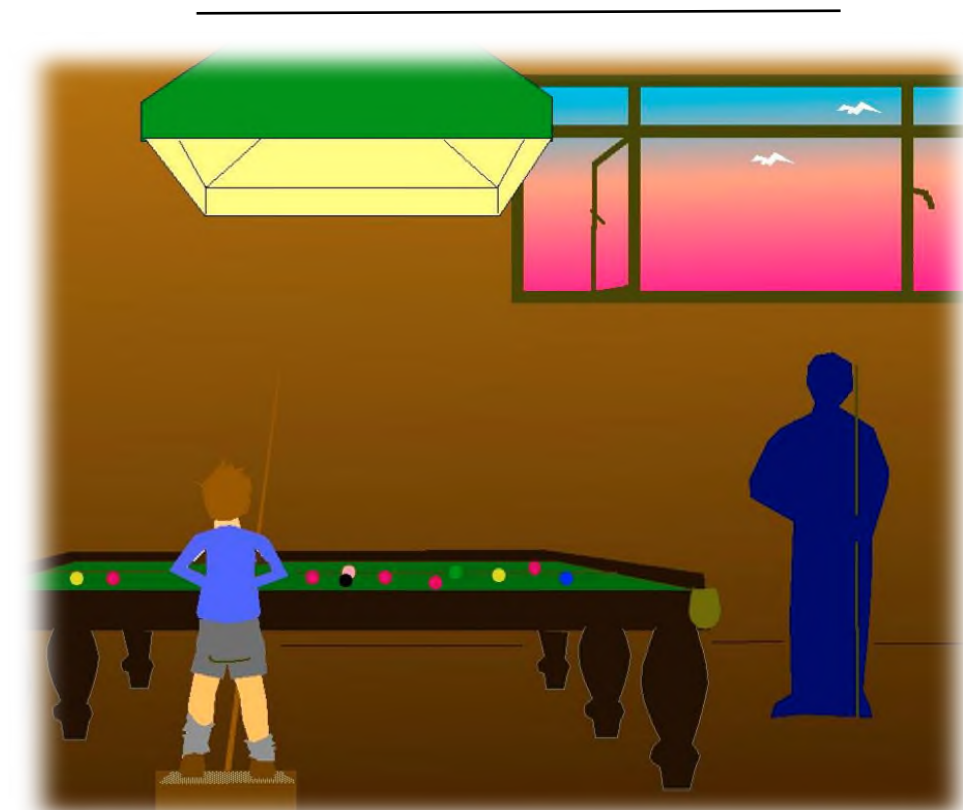
No Small Wonder seems to have been well-liked from the time it was published; it became the Publisher's best-seller; the Choir of King's College, Cambridge performed it for BBC Television at Christmas 2000 and my Performing Rights Society records show that it is being recorded and broadcast from cathedrals and churches round the world every Christmas.

Then, in 2008, I had the excitement of discovering that



the *BBC Music Magazine* had conducted a poll among fifty cathedral choir directors, organists or composers, asking each of them to name which they considered to be the five best Christmas carols, ancient or modern. Out of 50, *No Small Wonder* clocked in at No 19.

***Paul Wigmore
extracts from Musings, www.paulwigmore.co.uk***



Halfway down the narrow street, it stood,
There on the left, the Billiards sign hanging.
We were on holiday, my mum and dad and me.
Port Isaac again. I was six or seven; I loved the place,
The street that went cascading down to sand and sea
And all the boats, the little ones, the big,
All bobbing and swaying at anchor with seagulls
Sitting on their masts as if they owned the things.
'This evening,' said my dad, pointing at the sign,
'I'll show you how to play.'

Red balls there were, and yellow and blue,
Green and pink and brown.
He shoved them in a case.
I stared. He smiled.
'They're just for Snooker. We need these ones.'
A red, and two miserable whites.
I begged for the coloured ones. He gave in
And amid the haze of club members' cork-tipped fags
He taught me Snooker.

