

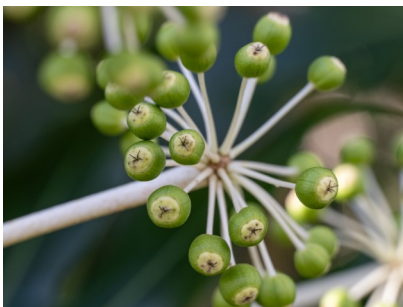
Easter Newsletter

March 2024

Hello friends,

In times of transition and change I often find myself looking back through the early Pilsdon newsletters to find reassurance and encouragement. Please don't think me strange but sometimes I imagine Percy Smith (who started this Community with his wife Gaynor in 1958) speaking directly to me, helping me see the bigger picture and offering words of wisdom and encouragement. Words written in letters, from sermons and spoken in documentaries and interviews, from decades ago, continue to feel relevant as we make decisions about how to run the community, what to prioritise, and how to be real with each other.

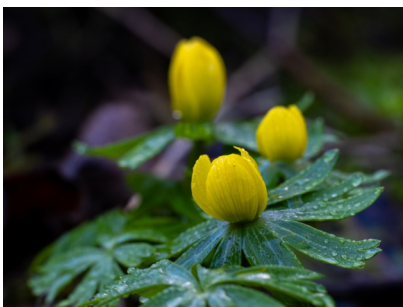
Percy, Gaynor and the rest of the Community grasped from the beginning, writing in the April 1959 newsletter, that "there are no easy answers, no ready-made solutions, and that there can be no tidy completeness, no finished plan or set pattern", as they end with words from T.S. Eliot:



*There is only the fight to recover what has been lost
And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions
That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss.
For us there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.*

We are here to do the trying.

Over the past year Pilsdon has welcomed much, but has said goodbye more, and we are at present a small but perfectly formed gathering of around 15 people. Those of us who remain have been learning to deal with the disappointments of comings which have turned into goings, and an uncertainty about the shape of things to come. We are learning how to live in the provision of everyday, but all the while allowing our imaginations to explore creative possibilities for the future.



None of this is new to Pilsdon. Over its 65 years it has weathered many dramatic twists and turns, and been through times of little deaths and waves of renewal. All the while we make attempts to pray and be shaped rather by the rhythmical time of God and not some secular idea of success and failure.

I have been enjoying the podcast *Living Myth* of late; by applying a mythical perspective to the current state of the world it invites listeners into ways of seeing in Kairos time, perhaps a more hopeful and active way of managing these uncertain days. In a recent episode the mythologist Michael Meade suggests that "a Kairos period often begins with crises that break time open and break down our usual patterns of life. Although radically disorienting, such moments can be transformative, even revelatory as hidden potentials of life become more visible. In that sense, Kairos can be seen as "awakened time" - as opposed to "lived time" - moments in which we can awaken to a greater sense of the world and our place in it".



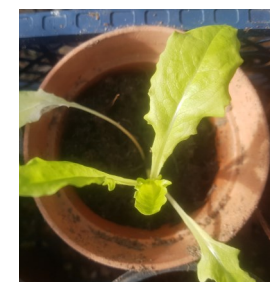
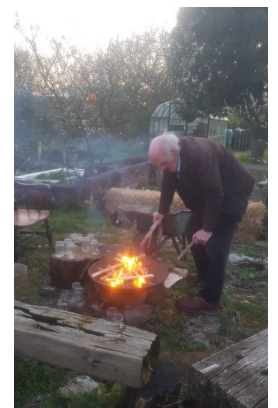
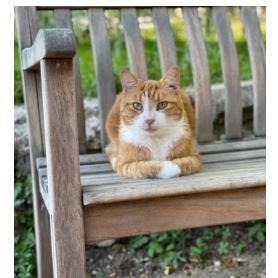
Pilsdon has always been a gateway into a more awakened life. At this time, more than ever, both in the community and in our wider world, there is a pressing need for us to all live in a more awakened way. Alive to our responsibilities, but not overwhelmed by them. As we journey towards Easter we are able to articulate this path to awakening not as a path of ascent, illumination is rarely to be found on the mountain tops, but as a path of descent, as Jesus modelled for us, by “the way of the Cross”. This is the Christian journey to Resurrection.

We might wonder what that means for us personally this Easter. But we also might wonder what that means for Pilsdon. As we sit in the dark, in the unknowing, in the uncertainty and the disappointment, what is it that we need to do. Might it be, as it has been for me over the past few months, a time to come “to ground”. The poet David Whyte talks about disappointment in these terms, and presents us with a choice: do we choose to experience it as a wound which makes us “retreat from further participation”, or do we choose to see it as “a friend to transformation [...] just the initial meeting with the frontier of an evolving life, an invitation to reality, which we expected to be one particular way and turns out to be another, often something more difficult, more overwhelming and strangely, in the end, more rewarding”.

Our experience of life, then, can be shaped by *how* we see, and *what* we choose. And perhaps by awakening to the reality, as the disciples on the road to Emmaus following the Resurrection eventually did, that Love was walking by their side all along.

Sometimes this recognition comes as a revelation, but for the most part it feels as though this turning aside from all that seems to occupy and overwhelm us is the slow work of a lifetime. At Pilsdon we work on this recognising together. We encourage each other to see things differently, and we help each other choose new patterns; sometimes carefully, sometimes insensitively, sometimes unknowingly. These interactions with others can infuriate us, but if we allow them time it is in fact in the messy reality of relationship that our resilience can be built up. We catch glimpses of all the ways this “living together” helps us get back on our feet.

As we rise to our feet, however, we run the risk of forgetting what this *grounding* has done in us and for us. So, we have to think too of ways to remember. Not recalling the trauma or suffering of the descent, but enabling the new perspectives, realisations and insight found in it to shape our life as we move forwards. This is the contemplative invitation: to experience life with a new freedom. As Thomas Keating says, “The process of spiritual growth is like a spiral staircase. It goes down, and it also goes up. Every movement toward the humiliation of the false self, if we accept it, is a step toward interior freedom and inner resurrection. This new freedom is not control; it is the freedom not to demand of life whatever we used to feel was essential for our particular *idea* of happiness”.



I have been busy boring the community with the ever-present parallels I see between our life here and The Lord of the Rings. It is about fellowship, and being with each other as we bear the burdens of life together. As I have been reading, it is the singing of ancient songs that different characters recall, especially in times of difficulty and distress that strikes me most. Like the psalms they are a mixture of lamentation and praise. They help the characters remember, and give them hope that they belong in a bigger story.

Over the last couple of weeks James and I have been grateful for the stability and consistency of those faithful guests who have lived here for many years, for our wonderful volunteers, and for all of you who have loved for this community, prayed for it and donated your time and money to keep it where it is. Your support, and your sharing of stories about this community contribute so valuably to this remembering; these are the songs that keep Pilsdon vital and alive.

This remembering is important as we look ahead too. In one of the interviews done for the oral history project we undertook in 2018, a former Head of Trustees, John MacAuslan recognized the risk that the community experiences every time there is a change of Warden, but also the need that nobody should try to keep the community exactly where it is. He said:

The old order changes and so it should, but there are some deep principles that I felt ought to be retained and I felt that it was really important to make sure there were always people who remember them and who were prepared to do something to give them life. New life, perhaps, but life.

So, we are here, we are trying, and we are continuing to give the songs of Pilsdon life with our own imperfect voices.

As we look ahead, and imagine what Pilsdon needs into the future, we ask you to join with us as we seek new members, and a new warden to lead this community. If you feel moved by the invitation of this community, or you know of others who are searching for a way of living their faith which is radically hospitable, vulnerable, inclusive and open-hearted then do get in touch with us here. We want to welcome others to this path, to help us give life to the vision of Pilsdon which was born 65 years ago.

James and I are holding the community for now, with Jane our wise and compassionate Operations Manager, and a group of wonderfully supportive trustees. There is a lot to do, but we have a deep hope that a new season is unfolding around us. In the meantime we keep reminding each other that Love has been walking alongside us along the way.

We wish you a very peaceful Easter,

Mary



JOE'S JOURNEY

I first came to Pilsdon in around 2010 for 8 months, aged just 21. I then spent a year at the follow-on place at Brook House, where I went to college and worked for an Arboriculture company, qualifying as a tree surgeon.

The reason I came to Pilsdon then is the same reason that I have returned now; abusing drugs and alcohol has been a repeating regular pattern of mine, and I've been in and out of homelessness and prison as a result. I was slowly spiraling out of control, with no stability, battling with substance abuse. I know that there is support out there, but I did not know how to approach finding it.

Through contact with Bob Edwards I was able to reconnect with Pilsdon and I found myself living back here, it has been my home now for 18 months. At first this shift in lifestyle made it challenging for me to settle; but it was stability, and safety and there were people surrounding me who wanted to help and who cared. I also recognized that if I didn't make some serious changes in my life that I would spend the rest of my 30s and 40s going in and out of prison.

Pilsdon helped me through my probation period. I came here under license, and was tagged. I had to go to weekly appointments and attend a course for a whole year. If I had been released to a hostel address, surrounded by people using drugs and alcohol, my hopes for remaining compliant with these probation requirements would have been small. I needed to be completely out of that environment for me to have a chance to turn things around. Ending my probation period in September 2023 signified the ending of this difficult period in my life.



Being at Pilsdon has given me time to think about the paths I've taken, decisions I've made, things that I have wanted to achieve, wanting a healthy and honest lifestyle. Whilst being here my ways of thinking have changed. I've stuck it out here at times because I knew good would come out of it. Rather than going on a whim when I felt bad, I thought about the consequences, repeating old patterns, and being more honest and open about how I am feeling. What's going on "upstairs" in my head, not dealing with it myself. I've learned more patience being here.

The Pilsdon routine helps, especially when you feel lost in chaotic ways of doing things. The variety of characters that you share your life with here makes it a special place. I've learned new skills and made good friends here. Laughing a lot throughout. Pilsdon made me believe in myself again, and think that I can turn things around.

So, after 18 months I will be saying goodbye to Pilsdon into a new chapter. A new home, being able to continue in the career of Arboriculture which means so much to me. Being at Pilsdon has given me the opportunity to think about who I want to be, and has given me a massive head start in turning my life around. The rest is in my hands.

Joe

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY– 2024

Holy Week Services:

Maundy Thursday, 28th March: The Washing of Feet at 8pm in the Church

Good Friday, 29th March: Stations of The Cross 12 noon, meditations in the church from 1-3pm

Dawn Service Easter Sunday, 31st March (With no public evening service)

Pilsdon's 66th Anniversary

Sunday 13th October



GRATEFUL THANKS

With so few members in January there was a real need to seek vital support in order to maintain the day to day running of the community. Each member holds significant responsibility for a wide variety of tasks throughout the week and working out how to plug the gap that formed was rather overwhelming. One solution was to cast our nets wide and ask anyone who could volunteer to get in touch, however with so few resources the time and energy needed to induct anyone new was only going to add to the increasing pressures. This meant we invited people who already had plenty of experience of being at Pilsdon and could land running (at speed!). Amazingly our targeted shout out to previous members and volunteers resulted in a flood of responses and offers of help. Some willingly stretched current commitments, adding extra hours and days, others booked in for specific dates or weekends, enabling days off to still be had, and general stability to be maintained.

There was genuine concern about whether it would be possible to support the work needed with an ever changing team of volunteers as we knew it would bring a certain level of disruption, but it's been delightful to benefit from the energy and enthusiasm they've brought with them in re-connecting with Pilsdon, sharing their entertaining stories of past events and being such a positive presence. They've been a great reminder of the power of encouragement and the hope that's generated from shared experiences in challenging times.

When Sue Langdon left the community in October I don't think she expected to be back alongside us again so soon! We are extremely grateful that Sue has been willing and able to support the community as a Chaplain for the next couple of months. She has been coming on Sunday's to take services and has been organising the rota for ongoing Sunday services which are being taken by Lucyann Ashdown, Andy Davey and Jonathan Herbert. She has been working closely with Lyndon Webb to arrange Holy Week and Easter services for us; we look forward to sharing this most significant of seasons with them here.

We just want to say a huge thank you to everyone who has been stepping in and helping us out. We know you've sacrificed so much of your time, given up other events and activities so you could be with us and have been so willing to fill in slots on the rota, get up at crazy times in the morning, drive guests to appointments, cook all sorts of creative meals and do all manner of other things. We're so grateful and couldn't have coped without you.

James

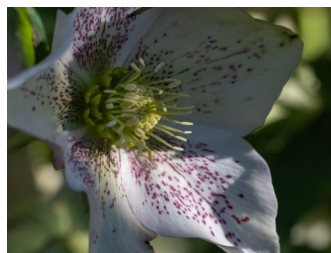
FAREWELLS AND GOODBYES

Pilsdon is used to comings and goings. We breathe in and we breathe out. These past 6 months, however, have seen more goings than usual. We have said goodbye to members: firstly to Lisselle, who was with us for eight months, and then to Nigel and Mary, who shared the Pilsdon life with us here for seven months. We are grateful for them, and their willingness to participate in the life of this community. They baked cakes, made butter, scythed meadows, milked cows, welcomed wayfarers, tended sheep, played cards, made us laugh, made us cry, and everything in-between. They all really loved this place, and what it represents in this world.

We have also said good-bye to several guests who have filled this place with their weird and wonderful sense of humour, psychological insight, and community-hearted presence. Joe's experience of life at Pilsdon, in this newsletter, gives you an idea of all the hard work that guests do when they are here; the practical work of the farm and garden holds us all as we examine our life choices and patterns. This is community life at its healthiest and most healing.

We have lost several treasured Pilsdon friends this year too; people for whom this community was a huge part of their lives. Alex Kelly lived at Pilsdon from 2012-2015 and he thrived here. As his brother told us last week, "the best years of Alex's life were spent with you and the entire family will be eternally grateful". Cheryl Evans lived here from 2015-2018 and brought much creativity and musicality to the community. She was a kind and caring person who will be greatly missed.

As our former Warden Sue Langdon preached recently, "in this life we are bound by time and space and feel the limitations of being in a human body. A constant feeling of homesickness inside ourselves is often expressed in the way we search for happiness. Most mystics (every human being!) will go to endless lengths to feel 'at One' with everything and then try to bring this experience back into their daily lives". We are fortunate enough at Pilsdon to share life with ordinary mystics who understand the limitations of their human bodies, but who are able to taste a sense of freedom whilst living in this place.



Our long standing friend Doreen Pinney died earlier this year. Doreen had known Pilsdon pretty much since its beginnings, sang in the choir and supported the community in various ways. In recent times we have fond memories of her coming with her sister Betty to our Sunday evening services. Her daughter Caroline encourages those of us who knew Doreen to remember her "up-beat smile. Smiles are loving and forgiving, they exude good cheer and welcome, they endear and inspire, most importantly they are kind and are the most simple and touching form of communication amongst us— most of all I think she would have wanted that".

Pilsdon community, well what can I say!
 I'll write this poem about my stay.
 I turned up late on a Wednesday night,
 I think poor Salena had a bit of a fright!

See I was living in my car, it was freezing cold
 Pilsdon Manor! go there I was told.
 So I set off not knowing what lay ahead
 But the promise of warmth and a nice cosy bed.

Thursday morning came, it was early for me
 There stood Mary and James with a hot cup of tea.
 I was shown around and told the ways
 Of the community where I'd spend a good few days.

I helped pull up nettles and round up sheep
 I felt the need to earn my keep.
 I rediscovered the creative me,
 All the while drinking shit loads of tea!

I met lovely people during my stay,
 I wish I didn't have to go away.
 But the weather has warmed I'll take my leave
 Though I'll visit again I do truly believe.

Thank you all for your kindness, I've had a lovely time
 Hope you like my poem, I love a good rhyme.

Emma

Is sorry the hardest word? I think saying NO can be much harder and the reality is at the moment that we are having to say no to new guests coming to Pilsdon. I listen to peoples stories when they ring in and it is heartbreaking to keep saying no, whilst trying to keep the hope alive that they may be able to come in the future. I am looking forward to being able to say Yes and hopeful that we will be able to do that soon.

Jane



A word from our Chair of Trustees...

I am not sure if it really can be Easter any minute as the greyness of the weather doesn't seem to presage the message of renewal and rebirth. But we know it will come and the extra rain we are having will be watering our trees and filling our reservoirs.

As Chair of Trustees, it has been my privilege to work with my wonderful fellow trustees, Chris, Els and Tim, to care for Pilsdon. We are so very lucky to have James and Mary, and Jane in the office, who have taken up the challenge of nurturing the Community at this time when we are without a Warden. Nigel Fry came as a Member with his wife Mary in July 2023. He stepped into the post of Warden on Sue Langdon's departure at the end of October but the many challenges of family and community life made things difficult for them both. We miss Mary's care of the community as a Member alongside Nigel's Wardenship for that short period. We wish them well in the future.

We have also been joined by so many volunteers who have come for days, and sometimes weeks, to help out. The call of Pilsdon stretches far and wide, as it always has! And those whose home is Pilsdon have continued to keep that rhythm maintained, much as it was in Percy Smith's time.

Wishing a blessed Easter to all who hold Pilsdon in their hearts,

Amanda Streatfeild, Chair of Trustees.