

People – Butterley

Butterley, Nigel Henry Cockburn AM

Nigel Henry Cockburn Butterley (born 13 May 1935) grew up at 25 Hannah Street, Beecroft. His father Mr H M Butterley was the headmaster of Edgecliff Preparatory School teaching there for over forty years, travelling to school by train and tram. The father was also an officer of the Australian English Association and of the English Speaking Union. Both of his parents were involved with a number of literature societies in Beecroft. At least in 1930 the father conducted a Beecroft Branch of the Australian English Association in Beecroft in the Methodist (now Uniting) hall. His father had a good singing voice. His mother was interested in music and played the piano and violin. She was active in the community and the local Anglican church. She visited people at Chesalon (the local Anglican aged care facility) to play scrabble with them. She was a friend of Patrick White [1].

While his siblings (a brother, Harlin, went on to become Dean of the Anglican Cathedral in Hobart) attended *Arden* he went to Beecroft Grammar, a year at Edgecliff Preparatory and then proceeded to Sydney Grammar (also taking music at the Sydney Conservatorium) and in his final year there he topped the State in the Leaving Certificate in music – helped by having one of the questions being on one of his favourite composers, Bartok [2].

He was first taught music by Miss Cain, a local teacher of general music. After several years, when he was about nine, he took lessons from Miss Edith Shadforth Hooper at 170 King Street Sydney. Miss Shadforth Hooper had been taught for two years in Berlin by Madame Careno. His mother would collect him from school around midday and travel with him on the train to his lessons. They had sweet corn sandwiches in a city park before each lesson. Miss Shadforth Hooper introduced Butterley to Bartok and Hindemith, he learnt harmony and music theory and she encouraged him to compose.

Following the Conservatorium he went to work with the Australian Broadcasting Commission, helping out with its "Pianists of Australia" programme, as well as playing as an accompanist – where work was plentiful especially at eisteddfod and recitals. He remained at the ABC from 1953-1973. In the 1960s he also regularly played the harmonium for services in St Andrews Anglican Church, Cheltenham.

In 1962 he studied in England under Priaulx Ranier (1903-1986) to develop his skill in the twelve tone system [3].

In a 1967 article, Butterley said that (at that stage) he was a practising Christian who held as his creed the statement of J S Bach "All music should be to the glory of God and the refreshment of men." For some time he was the Choirmaster at St Alban's Anglican Church, Epping. As part of his interest in the social function of music in 1965 he wrote *The Cantic of the Sun* for a group of school children to perform at a UNESCO seminar on music in education. It was not initially successful because the co-ordination required of the individual parts was beyond the skill of the players. On the other hand his *Music for Sunrise* (1966) for diverse instruments for the children of Beecroft Public School was greatly admired and he said "the children play this with enthusiasm, flair and great success, not in the least disturbed by its aleatoric features or its dissonances." One of the pupils who performed in that concert Louise Baur (now Professor Baur whose story is elsewhere on this website) has, over half a century later, fond memories of performing it [4].

He lectured at the Newcastle Conservatorium between 1973 to 1991 and thereafter at the Sydney Conservatorium. In 1991 he was appointed a member of the Order of Australia in recognition of his services to music. In 1996 the University of Newcastle awarded him an Honorary Doctorate.

In one obituary it was said "in his early professional years, much of Butterley's activity was focussed around Beecroft the leafy suburb on Sydney's upper North Shore where he lived with his mother and sister. He co-founded the Beecroft District Music Club which featured local musicians performing new work, especially young composers for whom he became a mentor and guide and friend" [5].

In 2007 he was commissioned by St John's Anglican Church, Beecroft on the initiative of Catherine Bartho, to mark the centenary of the then current church building. The tune that he composed had come into his mind after hearing Vaughan Williams *Sine Nomine* on the radio. The words were written by Maryanne Samson and "the choir and congregation sang the hymn enthusiastically – even though the organist would have preferred his own harmonisation!" [6]

In discussions with Catherine Bartho he said that he previously had to leave Beecroft as, at the time of his departure, people in Beecroft were not yet ready for 'people like me.'

Upon receiving an inheritance Butterley moved from Beecroft and purchased in Stanmore where "now removed from the social strictures of Beecroft, the move encouraged him to be more open about his sexuality" as mentioned above to Mrs Bartho. He formed a relationship with the fellow musician and drummer Thomas (Tom) Kennedy who he met in 1981. Tom was involved in a near fatal motor accident in 1982 [7].

Butterley continued to compose with notable success and to the pleasure of many.

He died after a long illness in a nursing home on 19 February 2022 aged 86 years.

[1] Butterley dedicated his work *Golden Grove* performed by the Australian Chamber Orchestra in 1982 to Patrick White: D Marr (ed) *Patrick White: Letters* (Random House, Sydney, 1994) p 566.

[2] *Daily Telegraph*, 10 March 1946 p 4; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 December 1933, p10; Harlin Butterley, *Friends of Arden*, April 2009, p.20.

[3] *Tharunka*, 3 October 1967 p12

[4] *Tharunka*, 3 October 1967 p12

[5] V Plush, "Nigel Butterley has died" *Limelight* 21 February 2022. See elsewhere on the web site under: *Changing Times – Cultural Life – Beecroft Music Club*.

[6] Notes by Nigel Butterley forming part of the Papers of Nigel Butterley lodged with the National Library of Australia: <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-249144877/findingaid> accessed 7 January 2019.

[7] V Plush, "Nigel Butterley has died" *Limelight* 21 February 2022.