



Heritage

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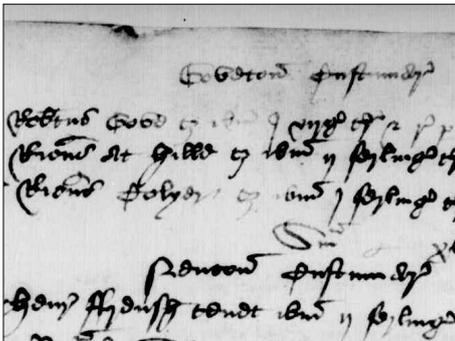
Journal of the Ottery St. Mary Heritage Society

Including...

A soldiers Tale - The History of William Pike p3



Goveton Postscript - p4



Reading and Playing - Coleridge's childhood in Ottery - p6



and...IT spot
Local heritage events information
and more...

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FROM THE CHAIRMAN

In the Spring issue of the Journal I wrote of yet another building which had been earmarked as a possible premises for an Ottery Museum. The Town Council identified a substantial structure to the rear of the proposed Sainsbury's supermarket site which we were hopeful could be made available. However, we later learned that our hopes had been dashed yet again and, not for the first time, we are back to square one. It was only a suggestion after all; the search continues.

Our monthly members' meetings continue to be well supported and your committee continue to locate guest speakers who deliver high quality presentations to entertain us. Thank you to the members who turn up to arrange the seating, the equipment and refreshments, and of course pack it all away afterwards. Your generous efforts do not go unnoticed, and they contribute so much to a successful evening for everybody.

You will see in this issue details of our summer outing to the Hunter Flying Club on June 16th, the day after our AGM, and more visits are in the pipeline. Perhaps now is the time to remind you to write in your diaries the date of the Coleridge Anniversary Lunch which will be at the Tumbling Weir Hotel on Saturday October 23rd. Full details will be advertised nearer the time.

Our Journal editor, Chris Wakefield, has been extremely busy on a number of fronts this year. We are grateful for his efforts to prepare our new website: (www.otteryheritage.org.uk). Entries

on this site are growing apace and it's well worth a visit for those of you on line. Chris is also fronting the 'Coleridge Memorial' initiative, a community project to secure a more fitting commemoration for STC, the most famous and accomplished Ottergian of all time. Not content with all that, Chris has recently produced for the Society a publication on medieval tax lists - 'The Lay Subsidy Returns, 1327 and 1332' - and last but not least, you will note he is our guest speaker for the November 16th members meeting. Testimony, if any more were needed, of the efforts put in by your committee members to keep the Society active and interesting.

Finally, I must close with some sad news about one of our Society members. Jeff Woodley passed away in April; you will recall his excellent talk about the Woodley family's involvement in The Ottery Brickworks, and we are most fortunate to have on file the DVD recording of his Oral History Interview for the Parishscapes project. A continuing reminder of a most entertaining character, sadly missed by all who knew him. Our condolences to Jeff's family in their sad loss.

Robert Neal

Letters, articles or any other
submissions to the Journal can be
emailed to
otteryheritage@googlemail.com

Editorial

Two of the Society's trustees have so far chosen to remain with pen and paper in preference to the (almost) ubiquitous personal computer. I was reminded to remember that fact at a recent meeting, and, thus chastened, I thought to find out a bit more about the consequences of the digital revolution for the work of historians.

The last time such a quantum shift in communications technology took place was in the 15th century with the invention of moveable type and the printing press. Books survive in varying degrees according to the quality of their manufacture, but there are still books around in good condition that were written in the 9th century. Some of the earliest printed work is also still around, and that too, in good condition. Can we trust the new technology to deliver equal reliability and longevity?

Not really, according to one source - no less an authority than the Optical Storage Technology Association, who say (in an online article) that it all depends, but in general a new cd has a shelf life of 5 to 10 years. Once recorded the question of how long it will last comes up, and this has been carefully analysed, with a couple of ISO standards to it credit and much home-grown testing by the manufacturers. Historically, manufacturers have claimed life-spans ranging from 50 to 200 years for CD-R discs and 20 to 100 years for CD-RW. The article ends with a salutary warning - "It is important to remember, however, that nothing lasts forever and that technologies inevitably change". They conclude that the technology is good enough to last long enough, and will "allow for seamless transition to the next generation".

The message is clear then - if you have something important on CD that you want to preserve for posterity, make a new copy of it every 20 years. Conversely you can print it out onto an acid free paper, put it in an envelope at the bottom of a drawer and keep it dry. That should be OK for at least 500 years.

My non-computerised colleagues are clearly ahead of the game here. No matter how you look at it, new technology clearly doesn't last as long as old technology. (Full article at <http://www.osta.org/technology/cdqa13.htm> - sadly, only for those with computers).

Heritage Society Trustees

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Articles or letters can be emailed to the Journal at

otteryheritage@googlemail.com

www.otteryheritage.org.uk

Forthcoming Events

Unless otherwise noted, all the Society's meetings are held in the Institute, Yonder Street, Ottery St. Mary.

2010

• Mar. 16th (Tuesday) 7.30 pm

Slavery and Two Ottery Families

A talk on possible connections between Ottery families and the Slave Trade

Speaker: Gillian Allen

• Apr. 20th (Tuesday) 7.30 pm

The Plight of the Honeybee (in Devon)

An illustrated talk on the practicalities of present-day bee-keeping

Speaker: Roger Lacey

• May 18th (Tuesday) 7.30 pm

The Three Hares Emblem

An illustrated talk on the myths and mysteries surrounding this sign

Speaker: Sue Andrew

• June 15th (Tuesday) 7.30 pm

Annual General Meeting

followed by an informal event - Questions and Answers plus a Quiz

• June 16th (Wednesday) 10.00 am

Visit to the Hunter Club

Based at Exeter Airport, this business specializes in the restoration and maintenance of ex-RAF and ex-RN aircraft. Contact Chris Saunders (01404 812962) for further details.

• July 20th (Tuesday) 7.30 pm

Exeter's Medicine - People and Places

An illustrated talk the history of medicine in Exeter's hospitals

Speaker: Christopher Gardner-Thorpe

• September 21st (Tuesday) 7.30 pm

Murders in Devon

A graphic account of some of Devon's most notorious crimes

Speaker: Simon Dell OBE

• October 19th (Tuesday) 7.30 pm

Ottery's Tar Barrels

An illustrated talk on the history of this unique and ancient custom

Speaker: Andy Wade

• November 16th (Tuesday) 7.30 pm

Life, Death & Taxes in medieval Ottery

An illustrated talk on the everyday lives of medieval Otterians

Speaker: Chris Wakefield

2011

• January 11th (Tuesday) 7.30 pm

From Carthorses to Computers

the story of farming in the 20thC.

Speaker: Colin Pady

• February 15th (Tuesday) 7.30 pm

The Construction of Mediaeval Roofs

An illustrated talk with particular reference to St. Mary's Church in Ottery

Speaker: Simon Lowne

• March 15th (Tuesday) 7.30 pm

Mills in the Devon Landscape

An illustrated talk on the history and technology of milling

Speaker: Martin Watts



AGM - AN AUCTION!

At the end of the presentation by Vaughan Glanville at our meeting in February, he and Angela presented the Society with two beautiful pieces of pottery, designed and made by them at the Ark Pottery at Wiggaton.

The Trustees have decided to auction these two pieces (as illustrated) after the AGM on 15th June. The proceeds will be put towards the Heritage Centre Fund to continue building up our war-chest.

We hope you will all attend the meeting and enter the spirit of this auction, to help the Society with its ongoing fund-raising efforts.

More events

More forthcoming events that have come to our notice include:

Lunchtime Talks at St. Nicholas' Priory in Exeter:
"Devon Church Dedications"
 Wednesday, June 16th

Budleigh Salterton Festivals:
 Music and the Arts
 July 23rd to 31st

Feniton History Group:
 Exhibition of railway memorabilia to celebrate 150th anniversary of the opening of the London & South Western Railway line.
 July 18th.

Please watch out for posters with more details.

Thelma Hulbert Gallery (Honiton) from 29th May to 10th July 2010 - *"Earthscapes"* an exhibition revealing how 6 artists bring together Geology and Geography. There are also talks, workshops and a seminar.

Honiton Allhallows Museum
 Free Open Day
 9.30 to 4.30 26th June

Honiton British Legion Club:
 War Talk: From Spitfire to Buccaneer by John Pascoe-Watson
 Monday 21st June 2010 at 7.00pm.
 Admission £3.00

I shall be pleased to provide further information on any of the above (and possibly other) events that are brought to my attention. But do please look at the Sales Table!

Chris Saunders (01404 812962)

IT spot

Devotees of the IT spot will recall my advice on Google Books as a source of unusual and out of print publications on Ottery (Journal No.31) To emphasise the fact, can I direct your attention to <http://www.archive.org/details/cu31924028187676> (should all be on one line if or when you key it into your browser) which takes you to an internet archive page offering "The Manor Book of Ottery" by Catherine Whetham. This was originally published in 1913, and has been out of print for many years. It does appear occasionally on ebay or Amazon, but why bother paying £40 (the cost of the last copy I saw for sale) when you can read it online or download a perfectly good facsimile in pdf for free. MBO is a particularly useful source because of the transcription of a 1680(ish) survey of the parish which it contains. It also has an interesting summary history of Ottery as an introduction.

The actual writing of the book has a local setting too - it was written at Cadhay by the wife and daughter of the then owner William Dampier Whetham, "the result of a series of schoolroom lessons in local history" (from the Preface).

The ever estimable Frances Rose Troup was not impressed with their efforts, declaring that "neither the schoolgirl (aged 14), nor her instructress understood medieval Latin and its contractions, nor were they familiar with local history and names". It is still a very useful source for local history, and a sight easier than struggling with the originals in DRO.

There is a link to the source from the Society's website - look on the Historic Documents page under Resources.

editor

Letters, articles or any other submissions to the Journal can be emailed to otteryheritage@googlemail.com

Goveton Postscript

Anyone exploring Devon's historical records will not get far before encountering the monumental scholarship of some of our eminent Victorian historians. One among many names that crops up regularly is Rev. George Oliver.

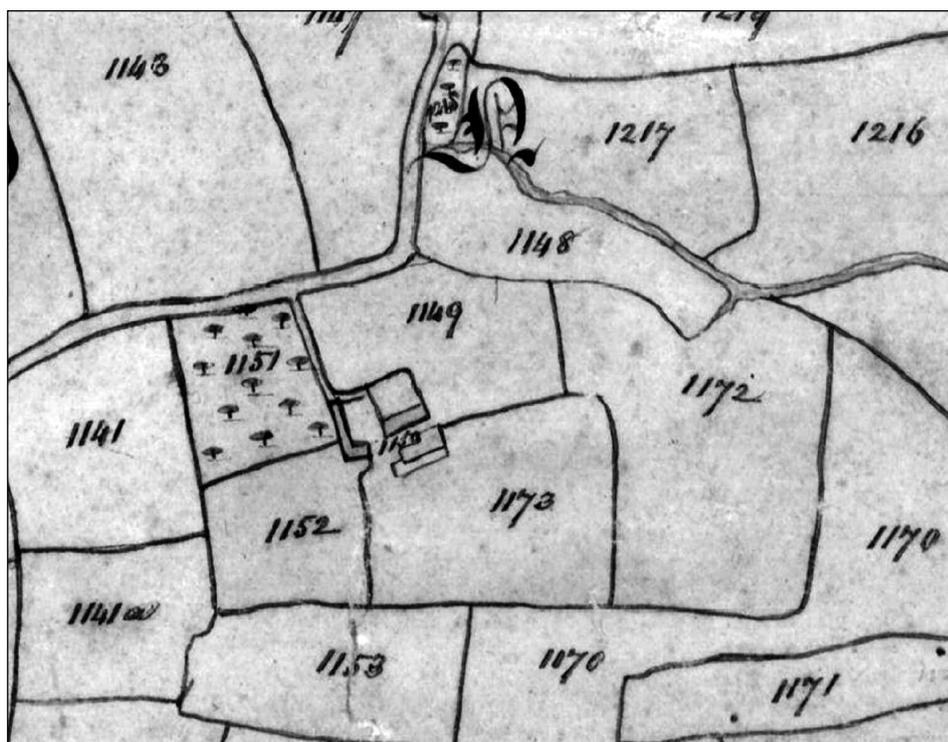
In 1820 he published the "Historic Collections relating to the Monasteries of Devon" - a guide to monastic foundations in the county. In 1846 he upgraded this publication to the truly magisterial *Monasticon Dioecesis Exoniensis*, with the modest subtitle 'being a collection of records and instruments illustrating the ancient conventual, collegiate, and eleemosynary foundations, in the counties of Cornwall and Devon, with historical notices, and a supplement, comprising a list of the dedications of churches in the diocese, an amended edition of the taxation of Pope Nicholas, and an abstract of the chantry rolls'.

Included in this book is a summary of a much quoted rental of Ottery parish from 1381. The list of customary tenures therein shows one such called "Cobeton", which turns out to be a misreading of "Goveton". A later transcription by the redoubtable Frances Rose Troup in the 1930s corrects the mistake, but her notes and the rental itself remain unpublished - (an omission the Society will put right in the near future).

So we can now add one more chapter to the Goveton story which was the focus of the Society's archaeological investigation in the summer of 2008. Previously we had documentary evidence dating back to 1440. The rental puts this back another 60 years, but more importantly it tells us that the

estate was occupied by three farmers - Robert Good who occupied 64 acres and paid 10s rent; Richard at Hille, who had 32 acres and paid 5 shillings, and Richard Colyer, who had 16 acres and paid 2s 6d. Goveton was thus an estate of around 112 acres, and probably included what is now Raxhayes Farm, as well as land closer to Alfington. It is tempting to put Richard Colyer into the Goveton Farm location that we excavated in 2008. The six plots immediately contiguous with the remains of Goveton Farm make up a 16 acre area within a well defined boundary (although of course the house he would have occupied would have been earlier than the one we found there). Richard at Hille could easily have occupied what is now Raxhayes. Options for the location of Robert Good's 64 acres is a much tougher proposition. They could be almost anywhere to the southwest of Alfington.

Chris Wakefield



Transcription group begins publishing

The planned publication of Ottery's local records begins with the launch of the first in the series - "People and Places in 14th century Ottery St Mary - The Lay Subsidies of 1327 and 1332".

Looked at in detail, tax records can open a window on life in Ottery over 600 years ago. This is a must for anyone interested in family and social history in Ottery during the Middle Ages.

The new booklet will be available to members from the sales stall at our regular meetings (£3) or by post from Chris Saunders, Myrtle place, Gosford Lane, Ottery St Mary EX11 1NA, Devon (£3.50 inc P&P or send first class stamped SAE - cheques to Ottery Heritage Society please).

The next publication, due in the late summer, will be an interesting collection of 16th century wills of notable, and not so notable Otterians.
editor

below: Goveton Farm on the tithe map. The five plots surrounding the farmhouse make up a 16 acre holding or farthing. This may well be where Richard Colyer lived in 1381. (map courtesy of East Devon AONB)

THE TALE OF WILLIAM PIKE - Part One

Several years ago, whilst searching through a list of medals for sale by one of our leading Medal Dealers, I spotted a group of medals to a William Pike, of Ottery St Mary, Devon. This sparked my interest and, on my next visit to the National Archive at Kew, I obtained a copy of his Service Record. This is his story.

On the 3rd of May 1838, William Pike attested for Her Majesty's 40th (or 2nd Somerset) Regiment of Foot. He gave his place of birth as Ottery, his occupation as Labourer, and his age as 20 years. He could not read or write, signing the papers with an "X" (his mark).

A search of the International Genealogical Index shows a William Pike, the son of Robert Pike and Elizabeth Bending, was baptised in Ottery St Mary on the 21st December 1817, and it seems likely that this is our William. The various ages given in his Service Record on enlistment and on discharge at the end of his service do not match exactly with this baptism but this is not unusual in such cases, especially when one remembers his illiteracy. Anyone who has sought to trace their family tree will be very familiar with the vagaries of such records!

A large percentage of the men who "took the Queen's Shilling" and enlisted in the Army were Agricultural Labourers, most never having strayed far from the village where they were born and the people that they knew. Many would have gone to the nearest big town to enlist, perhaps their first visit to that place. The regiment which they joined was often purely dependant on which Recruiting Sergeant was in town at the time.



From then on, everything was new, everything an adventure.

As new recruits, they would first have been sent to the Regimental Depot for training. Everyone they met, from fellow recruits to the rest of the "regimental family", were strangers, with whom they had to live and associate. New bonds and friendships had to be forged. Discipline was harsh and for many recruits a severe "shock to the system". Many must have had second thoughts about a military life but there was no "cooling off period", their future was decided.

Once trained, many were sent straight to India. For country lads, the hustle and bustle of the docks, the huge ships coming and going, the noise and the smells, must have been both exciting and awesome. The long voyage to India, around the Cape, notable for its overcrowded conditions, poor food, the heat and the boredom. And on arrival, India was a totally different world to the one that they had left and were used to. Different people, different customs, different climate, different religions. Only the Army was constant, a way of life with a system and customs which took care of the soldier's

every need, a system designed to operate wherever the Army was stationed.

Army life was not for everyone but for those who adapted quickly to their new situation, who could accept the discipline and harsh conditions, the dangers of battle and disease, and the long periods of inactivity and boredom, the Army was a good master. Many signed on for further periods of service, often completing over twenty years total service, with a pension to cushion their later years. And experiences and stories to tell which must have ensured many a free pint in their local tavern when they returned home.

William Pike was such a man. He served for a total of twenty-six years, returning home in 1864. In the meantime he had served in India, Australia and New Zealand.

In following issues of Heritage I will tell you more of his story.

Jim Woolley

Mill update

The mill information I promised in the last issue was largely a result of a conversation with Martin Watts - an acknowledged expert on English mills and milling. It occurred to me then that it would be far better if you had the story from the horse's mouth so to speak, so mill fanatics will be pleased to learn that Martin will be giving a talk at the March (15th) 2011 members meeting. More details on the events list on page 2.

Editor

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Reading and Playing

Coleridge's childhood in Ottery

(This is a slightly shortened version of the talk given at the Coleridge Anniversary Lunch in October 2009.)

NB the cover picture is of Hartley Coleridge, STC's eldest son, at ten years of age. One might imagine there would be a likeness - Editor.)

Ottery is a lovely town - nestling into its little hollows, homely, friendly, and the collegiate church on the hill still symbolizing a light not to be hidden. Ottery is a place to feel settled in, or to settle into. It is of course different from Coleridge's day, but not so different, not so changed as to be unrecognizable; we can still feel the continuity between then, the late 1770s when Coleridge was a child here, and now, nearly some 250 years later. We, of a certain age, like that sense of continuity. We can still wander down through the fields, along the side of the Otter and look into the Pixies Parlour, and though the initials that Coleridge and his brothers carved into the rocks have gone, others have taken their place. There, in 1793, Coleridge led a troop of young ladies, and wrote a poem pretending he was the prince of pixies, welcoming them to his cell, and crowning one of them, a certain Miss Boutflour, the Fairy Queen - and Coleridge, being something of a playful flirt, noticed the rather still, quiet presence of this girl, her 'white - rob'd Purity of Soul' as he called it, and was determined to warm her up a bit, and as the last line of the poem says, 'Extract a Blush for Love!' History doesn't tell us whether he succeeded, but he was just down from Cambridge, where he had taken to drinking and womanizing with a kind of guilty gusto, so he wasn't very likely to have taken No for an answer.

The household into which Samuel Taylor was born consisted of up to a dozen people, mostly older brothers, coming and going at different times. It was a household under various and considerable pressures - his parents also ran a boarding school for some twenty boys - but his mother was a great manager, and it is unlikely that he, the youngest child, noticed these pressures unduly. For his first nine years Coleridge lived in circumstances that were as normal as normal ever is. He

had a mother and a father at home, an older half - sister, Elizabeth or Betsy, around the house, and companions in Nancy - five years older, but, as he later imagined her, 'My playmate when we both were clothed alike'; and Frank, just two years older, whom he would describe as 'the hero of all my little tales.' So young Sam had the streets and the fields to play in, the river to bathe in, companions to play with, and a family around him. All should have been well.

But, sadly, it wasn't. Coleridge wasn't happy in Ottery. He wanted to be happy here, and thus he became deeply divided in his attitudes to this place and its people, and he would later look back, especially in his some of his poems, and try to discern that he had had some kind of happiness in and around the town. But most of his more honest accounts reveal a very different story. And why he wasn't happy tells us something of what he was as a boy, and what he became as a man.

The simplest, and bleakest, account of his childhood, was written down in 1799 by William Godwin, the author of *Political Justice*, published in 1793. Godwin was then hugely famous, or infamous, in his early fifties, and yet something about the boyish 26 year old fascinated him, as it fascinated almost everyone else. So he jotted down Coleridge's life as Coleridge told it to him over supper, and a few telling phrases sum up his nine years in Ottery:

The youngest son, & on that account treated by the nurse - maid of his next older brother, as an intruding rival - beaten and sickly, takes refuge in early & immoderate reading, particularly the Arabian Nights - accustomed only to the conversation of grown persons, he becomes arrogant and conceited.

That is it: the next paragraph moves onto Christ's Hospital, where he was just as unhappy, and as we shall discover, for much the same reasons. Other accounts fill out this picture, and though the energy and ebullience of Coleridge's writing occasionally seem

to disguise the bleak truth a little, his childhood misery is his constant theme. For instance, he opens his account of his life from three to six with the paradoxical 'My Father was very fond of me, and I was my mother's darling - in consequence, I was very miserable'. That misery he then ascribes to the nurse-maid's rejection of him, as in Godwin's account. He saw himself as an 'intruding rival'. There is a raw truth in these words: the last and sickly fledgling in an overcrowded nest, to be booted out so that Frank could survive.

We know who that nurse-maid was - Molly Newbery, whose death is recorded in the parish register on 21 July 1819, when she was 82. She was living at The Flexton, the market-place at the top of Silver Street, and interestingly, also the place to where Betsy, Coleridge's half-sister, eventually returned from Exeter, after her husband Jacob Phillips died. She and Molly had spent many years together as John Coleridge's second family grew up around them, and we can reasonably speculate that they were sufficiently fond of each other to live together, or close by each other, in old age.

Coleridge constantly gives Molly a bad press - 'For Molly, who had nursed my Brother Francis, and was immoderately fond of him, hated me because my mother took more notice of me than of Frank...' (1). He and Frank fought over food - one of the several pressures the family was subject to. Frank hated Sam 'because my mother gave me now & then a bit of cake, when he had none - quite forgetting that for one bit of cake which I had & he had not, he had twenty sops in the pan & pieces of bread & butter with sugar on them from Molly, from whom I received only thumps & ill names.' Those thumps are perhaps the beatings referred to in Godwin's note. That letter was written in 1797. He believes that Molly taught Frank to spurn him, and in 1805, lonely in Malta, hearing the bells ringing on a day of festivities, he wonders why he always feels so alone on fair days and holidays, and remembers, 'That by poor Frank's dislike of me when a little Child I was

even from Infancy forced to be by myself...'(2). Some thirty years later, and within two years of his death, he wrote that it was Molly's jealousy, 'and the infusions of her Jealousy into my Brother's mind' that resulted in his being, in earliest childhood, 'lifted away from the enjoyments of muscular activity – from Play – to take refuge at my mother's side on my little stool, to read my little books and to listen to the Talk of my Elders – I was driven from Life in Motion to Life in thought and sensation.'

This division he makes between life in motion, and another life in thought and sensation, is absolutely central to what Coleridge becomes as a poet, a thinker, and a man. Don't, by the way, think that he means what we mean by sensation; it's not, for him, the external stimulus of the senses; it is rather the sense of life arising from the stimulation of the mind or heart or intellect – the quality of feeling that we know when we find ourselves deeply involved in a book or a discussion. Life in motion was the life he always felt he lacked, or didn't have enough of – and he came to associate it with the powers of poetry – remember the desolation of the Mariner when 'Down dropt the breeze, the Sails dropt down,/'Twas sad as sad could be' and the cheerfulness he feels when the wind breathes on him again, 'Sweetly, sweetly blew the breeze-/On me alone it blew.' The wind and the breeze are frequent metaphors of creativity in his writings. He loved other kinds of motion too, dancing for instance, though the puritan in him resisted it, and one of his earliest notes celebrates the exuberance of nature – he is on the Quantocks

*On the broad mountain - top
The neighing wild-colt races with the wind
O'er fern & heath-flowers - (CN I 213)*

The wild colts still race around the Quantocks – another continuity to be glad of. When later in life he developed this note, he called it 'a hymn of thanksgiving'. And with this natural exuberance he connected human emotion, and when that was, for whatever reason, suppressed in him or denied to him, then he turned to the workings of his intellect, to what he called in the *Dejection* ode, 'abstruse research' or in *Frost at Midnight*, 'abstruser musings'. This working of the intellect, away from motion and emotion, became his refuge when he

could not find his place in the immediate world; and this ability to retreat from people and situations that did not welcome him, he first learnt as a child – taking refuge by his mother's side, reading his little books on his little stool – and the reason for his having to retreat he always ascribed to Molly – her thumps and name-calling. It would be interesting to know what names she did call him, because it might tell us what she thought his problem was. But Coleridge is silent on that.

And yet, was Molly really the villain of the story? Not in my view. I think the cause of his unhappiness lies as much in Coleridge himself, as in his circumstances. He proved to be an exceptionally intelligent boy exceptionally early in life. He was sent to a school, close to the baker's, run by 'Old Dame Key', the very image of Shenstone's Schoolmistress, he said. We don't know what he meant by that, but at the heart of Shenstone's poem is a woman inflicting often unjust corporal punishment on her pupils: could Coleridge have been beaten that early in his life? If so, it would explain why being beaten was at the forefront of his memory. However, whatever the cause, at the end of that first year at school, when he was just three, he says that he could read a chapter in the Bible. Not so unusual perhaps, but with it went a clear understanding of what he was reading, and this undoubtedly is unusual. Later, at Cambridge he was famed for reading all the political pamphlets of the day, and one fellow student says that the rest of them didn't bother to read the pamphlets themselves, because Coleridge could repeat them verbatim in the evening over a cup of negus, and then discuss their pros and cons; not just what we might call a photographic memory, but as he says of himself a 'Memory tenacious & systematizing' (CL I 71) And having started to read, nothing, it seems, could stop him. Coleridge describes simple cause and effect – Molly alienated him from Frank, took him away from play, forced him to sit close to his mother to avoid her thumps, and so he read. I think it's much more a chicken and egg question – that is, his reading alienated him from Frank, from his peers, and took him into a world beyond his actual age, and play then probably seemed rather pointless to him, compared to the excitement of his reading. And then he

found he couldn't play, and moped; occasionally, as he put it, his spirits came upon him, his animal spirits, his desire for motion, and he 'used to run up and down the church – yard, and act over all [he] had been reading on the docks, the nettles, and the rank – grass.' He was only five. This was his only form of play, and he was by himself.

He seems to have got into the Arabian Nights quite early, before he was six. The opening tale, which is the framework for the whole, is one of the darkest and most brutal, and Coleridge could not have read the many that he did without being conscious that they were all set against a background of perverse lust, ruthless slaughter and ever – impending doom. If the boy was in any way gaining an insight into human motivation via these tales, it would have been a terrifying realization. But it would also have been completely absorbing. To an adult, behind the unlikely and cruel framework of the stories, there is a touch of dark comedy. But children don't find it easy to make the distinction between a convention and a reality(3). What is more, the story is, in the terms that Coleridge perhaps meant, sensational, compelling, and even a revelation of what human beings are, and the forces they are subject to. How much more absorbing, we might think, than mooching about in the churchyard by oneself, knocking down the nettles, or attempting to play rather half – heartedly with boys who don't really want you there, and whose motivations seem petty by comparison with these wild tales.

And Coleridge's reading wasn't superficial. The tale that he specifies as giving him nightmares, 'the tale of a man who was compelled to seek for a pure virgin' – the phrase 'pure virgin' turns out to be no tautology: most of the virgins in the tale are impure of mind or heart – occurs some two thirds of the way through a modern single volume edition; an edition Coleridge might have read runs to some 12 volumes. Why that tale in particular gave him nightmares is difficult to understand, as it is one in which charm and honesty rule throughout – but it is also one which distinguishes between the superficial and the real sources of motivation, between appearance and reality. However, the disturbance that the young Coleridge felt was manifest

to his father, who took an action we would consider unwise these days – he burnt the books, not just a single book, but several – a violent and extreme action in itself, which must have reinforced his son’s sense that those volumes contained dangerous and forbidden knowledge. The effect this action has on him, though he hero – worshiped his father, is oddly parallel to the effect of Molly’s action: of hers he says, ‘So I became fretful, & timorous, & a tell-tale – & the School-boys drove me from play, & were always tormenting me – & hence I took no pleasure in boyish sports – but read incessantly.’ And of his father’s, in the same letter, he says, ‘So I became a dreamer – and acquired an indisposition to all bodily activity – and I was fretful, and inordinately passionate, and as I could not play at any thing, and was slothful, I was despised & hated by the boys’.

Molly gets all the blame – his father none. It’s odd, and of course it points to Coleridge not quite facing up to what was really going on in his life. My impression is that in fact his intense reading, his inactivity, is upsetting everyone in the household: he was completely unlike all the other Coleridge boys, especially Frank, whom he fondly characterizes as hating books, but who ‘loved climbing, fighting, playing, & robbing orchards, to distraction’ – Frank was a boy in motion, and we can see why he became the hero of all his younger brother’s little tales. Thus we can see Molly’s thumps and his father’s burning of his books as trying to achieve the same end – getting the young Sam up and moving, to make him behave like all other boys. But it simply wasn’t in his nature. He was, as he says much later in his life in respect of his brothers, ‘different in kind’.

We can see how much he was the boy he had made himself, rather than being made by others, when his circumstances changed radically after his father’s death, and he was sent to Christ’s Hospital. He saw this as a catastrophe, the home suddenly lost to him that he would never find again. But despite the depth of this feeling, his description of his early years at school in London exactly matches that of the boy in Ottery. Godwin’s

account of Coleridge’s school days begins, ‘treated with contumely and brutality’; and in the late autobiographical note he presents himself as, ‘Deprest, moping, friendless... from 8 to 14 I was a playless Dreamer... Conceive what I must have been at 14 – I had never played – I was in a continued low fever – my whole Being was with eyes closed to every object of *present* sense – to crumple myself up in a sunny Corner, and read, read, read –’. We know he had access to a circulating library, from which he took out two volumes a day, and he says he read through the whole catalogue, whether he understood the books or not. This was not a library of novels, but works of philosophy, theology, exploration and the emerging sciences – all before he was 15; when Coleridge said, at about the age of 24, ‘I have read almost everything’, this is often taken as hyperbole; but it probably shouldn’t be – almost everything there was to read, he had read.

But he was miserable, and his reading was both the cause and consequence of his misery. Happily, however, something rather wonderful happened to Coleridge when he was about 15 – he found a surrogate family, and fell in love with the oldest of three daughters, Mary Evans. He calls this time, from 15 to 19, just before he went to Cambridge, ‘the aera of poetry and love’, and it was probably the happiest time of his life. And with that emotion came physical motion – Coleridge learnt to play. He describes himself as bursting forth from his misery and moperly, and going off to swim with friends in the New River in London. By contrast, we never hear of his swimming in the Otter. Wearing wet clothes put him in the sick bay, but there he was tenderly nursed by one Jenny Edwards, only two years older than himself, the daughter of a matron, and for her he wrote *Genevieve*, his earliest love poem.

Once he had burst forth, once he had learnt to play, Coleridge in his happiest moments was always playful – ‘joyous’ is one of the words used to describe him, even in his old age. His notes and letters are full of puns, jokes and exuberant stories – he was a very good story teller – and circles of listeners

always formed around him. Two kinds of life went on in him; on the one hand he could read difficult works intensely for days on end – he once described himself as ‘sunk in Spinoza... as undisturbed as a Toad in a Rock’. But he was also a hugely energetic walker, exhausting or outpacing his early companions. He loved movement, and so he understood the value and importance of play, and delighted in his own son, Hartley, dancing about in the breeze like a faery elf – the very kind of thing that as a child Coleridge himself didn’t do.

And by way of a concluding reflection, I wonder whether this conflict in him between wanting to play on the one hand, and being unable to on the other, didn’t have some bearing on where he ran away to after the minced cheese incident with Frank, when, fearing a whipping from his mother, he struggled from her grasp and ran out of the house. He didn’t run out into the garden, or down towards the Pixies’ Parlour, but out of the front door, down the sunken lane, across the Chanter’s House fields, and so to the edge of the Otter, about a furlong, that’s some 200 metres, from Cadhay bridge. This is where the youth of Ottery come out to play and swim and party, and have perhaps for time immemorial. Of all the places Coleridge could have run away to, why there? We won’t ever know of course, but I just wonder if he wasn’t drawn to the place where if he could, he would have played, watching, a little enviously, the other boys of the town playing on the slope below him, and he longing for a life in motion, of which he had been deprived, not by Molly, not by Frank, nor by anyone else, but by his natural and astounding genius.

Graham Davidson

Notes

- 1) Coleridge Letters I 347
- 2) Coleridge Notebooks II 2647
- 3) I remember one of my children watching a cowboys and Indians film around 6pm one evening, long before the watershed, because the adult notion is that such films don’t contain ‘violence’ – but I was reminded that this is a sophisticated notion when she was horrified by the thought that the cowboys and indians were killing each other, and found it hard to follow my distinction between the making of a film and actual war.

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