THE SYDNEY SMITH ASSOCIATION

NEWSLETTER

Issue 11

May 2006

At Sydney's Grave: Kensal Green, September 2005
(see page 6; photos: Graham Frater)

The Sydney Smith Association

Aims

To perpetuate the memory and achievements of Sydney Smith
To cultivate appreciation of the principles for which he stood
To support the churches connected with his career
To help in the preservation of manuscripts and memorabilia relating to him and his family
To arrange periodic events, receptions and services in keeping with his inclinations

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The Sydney Smith Association Newsletter
Issue 11 May 2006

'I feel', said Sydney, 'as if I had lost a limb and was walking about with one leg; but none pities the description of invalids.'

The limb referred to was his daughter Emily who three years previously had married Mr Nathaniel Hibbert, a young barrister, and the son and heir of George Hibbert, Esq. at Munden House, Watford. And it is here on 4 June 2006 that we are being entertained by Henry and Kate Holland-Hibbert and will be given a talk by Michael Knutsford. **Details and an application form enclosed.**

Stuart Reid wrote: 'Sydney Smith, like most brilliant Wykehamists, proceeded to New College Oxford. He stood third on the roll for admission as a scholar at the election held on 5 February 1789. At the end of his second year of residence he obtained a fellowship.'

Many thanks to Mary Beaumont for arranging that our **annual AGM meeting** be held in Sydney's old stamping ground at New College on 18/19 September 2006 where we will be wined, dined and accommodated and be given a talk by Dr Mark Curthoys of the Oxford University Press. **Details and application form enclosed.**

Membership

Response to our request for an increased subscription has been most generous as indeed has been the number of members who have opted to pay by standing order; this saves administration much time and money. Would those members who pay by other means please note that subscriptions are due on 1 March and it would be appreciated if those who have not yet paid would do so without further prompting. Cheques should be made out to The Sydney Smith Association and sent to The Hon. Treasurer, Sydney Smith Association, Belgrave House, 46 Acomb Road, York YO24 4EW.

London Lunches

These are held in the delightful Boisdale Restaurant in Eccleston Street, close to Victoria Station each January, April, July and October. Although most of our regular lunchers are based in London and the home counties, we are delighted to welcome members from all over, and often do. Since the last *Newsletter*, Deirdre Bryan-Brown had us all guessing the perpetrator of 'A Sydney Smith Scandal' (6 July 2005); on 5 October, our Chairman, Randolph Vigne, stood in for a special guest who was detained by the parliamentary bell; his enjoyable talk 'No Boxes in the Chaise' will be printed in the next issue. On 11 January 2006, Deirdre once again dug into her library of Sydney memorabilia and read his witty and sensible 'Advice to his Parishioners': this prompted our most recent speaker, Professor Tyrrell Burgess (5 April), to ask, 'Was Sydney a Democrat?' [London lunches are arranged by Mary Beaumont: 020 8318 3388.]

York Lunches

After many years of happily lunching at King's Manor in York, we were offered a delightful private room by Jeremy and Vivien Cassel at their Grange Hotel in Bootham; we had an excellent lunch there and are well looked after by their welcoming staff. We are most grateful to them for making this possible. At recent lunches topics have included 'Sydney Smith Association – Past and Present' by Peter Diggle; 'Contemporary Smiths' by Richard Marriott; and 'On Being Mrs Sydney Smith' by Dorothy Williams (printed in this issue). Our lunches are always well attended but any member is welcome to apply to Mary Rose Blacker, Huttons Ambo Hall, York YO60 7HW (01653 696056).

South West Area Lunch

On 28 February, Shrove Tuesday, 19 members of the Association from Devon, Dorset, Somerset and Wiltshire met at the New Inn at Halse for the third February/March 'dark days' lunch.

The theme, suggested and introduced by Norman Taylor, was 'Feast and Fasting', though, as Lord Knutsford later commented, there's not a lot to be found in Sydney's writings on fasting! However, the balance to the generally accepted view of Sydney as a *bon vivant* and lover of food, was an underlying seriousness and depth of thought, which Norman was anxious to emphasize. We reflected on Sydney's conviction that digestion was the 'great secret of life' while busily tucking into whitebait, liver and onions, steak pie or pasta and, in some cases, the pancakes which the chefs had agreed to provide. While we may have strayed from the theme before long, there was no doubt about the degree of animation in the exchange of views. We hope the London lunchers would have approved!

The proximity of the New Inn to Combe Florey meant that a large number of us were able to go on to the church where, thanks to the persuasive efforts of the Churchwarden, Barbara Hawkesworth, we were not only able to look round the historic church, but inspect the appropriate register, complete with Sydney's signature, which she had obtained from the Records Office for the occasion.

Our afternoon ended with a privilege indeed: Mary Read had most generously offered tea – with cucumber sandwiches – at the Old Rectory, which was described as 'never a more delightful parsonage', and so it proved. Not only do we owe Mary our warm thanks and appreciation, but also Mary Goulstone, who nobly gave up her place at the lunch in order to help with the preparations. With three such kindly members in the village, Combe Florey must be as delightful a place to live in now, as it was in Sydney's time when, as he said, 'the body rejoices in the country'. We hope that all those who came had enjoyed a reminder of the Association which brought the meeting on 18 September in Oxford a little closer.

Jay Dawe

The Old Rectory, Foston

Jim and Sarah Walsh, who now live in the house that Sydney built, would like to build up a library of works relating to him and would be delighted to arrange for members of the Association to view them at a mutually convenient time. If anyone has any books or letters

that need an appropriate home or know of any that can be purchased, would they please contact Jim Walsh, The Old Rectory, Foston, York.

Sydney Smith Association website: latest news

The texts: with the help of members, especially in proof-reading, the site has continued to build up a selection of Sydney's texts. Many thanks to all those who gave their time to this onerous task. The initial selection will shortly be completed. The Google project, to digitize the contents of major academic libraries in the USA and the UK, will include the Bodleian and should consequently carry all of Sydney's texts in the end. This has relieved us of some real pressures..

Photographs: partly owing to Google, a new emphasis has been given to assembling pictures of the places associated with Sydney's life: Edinburgh is the next target for special attention. If members have digital colour photographs of locations not currently included on the site, I shall be most grateful for copies for inclusion: particular gaps at present include locations in London, Salisbury Plain, and Combe Florey.

Emails to the website: with many apologies, owing to technical difficulties in my computer software and Peter's (not the website itself), emails that have been sent to the site cannot be retrieved. A new regime will be available by the time you receive this *Newsletter*: this will allow us to respond to emails you send in from that point onwards, but not to retrieve any that were sent before 30 April 2006.

Forthcoming events: the site will shortly contain a separate file on the Association's forthcoming events for the year; this should make it easier to look them up, and make bookings.

Graham Frater

IN MEMORIAM - ANTHONY TROWER

Anthony Trower died on 5 December 2005, aged 84. A London solicitor with a long family connection at Lincoln's Inn, he was one of our earliest recruits to the Association, proud of his own family's link with Sydney Smith, who refers to 'Aunt Trower' from time to time in his early correspondence. 'Cocky' Trower (as he was known to his friends) and his wife Joan were keen attenders at Association events, particularly the London lunches. His genial presence will be greatly missed at our gatherings. After the Sydney Smith plaque was unveiled at Woodford parish church in May 2000, the Trowers entertained a large party of members to a memorable lunch at Stansteadbury, their ancestral home near Ware. Afterwards they showed us round the delightful little estate church, St James's Stanstead Abbotts, where a memorial service to our host was held on 6 January 2006.

Alan Bell

There was a fine obituary of 'Cocky' in the *Daily Telegraph* for 2 January 2006: not 'Cocky' to them, but 'Anthony Trower: SAS operative, lawyer and landowner who saw off a series of developments that threatened his country estate'. Given Alan Bell's

reference to the memorable lunch with the Trowers in 2000, members who were there - and those who regret they weren't - will enjoy these 'local' paragraphs which we are pleased to quote from the *Telegraph* obituary:

'He lived in Hertfordshire, at Stansteadbury, the spacious Queen Anne-fronted house that had belonged to his family since the 19th century. Each morning he would walk across his fields to the railway station, and leave his gumboots in the signal box, where he kept his shoes for work. He always sat in the same seat on the same train, opposite the same man; halfway through the journey they would swap newspapers - and not once, it was said, did they ever exchange a word.

'On the farm at Stansteadbury....Trower kept the oldest herd of Guernsey cattle in the world outside Guernsey itself. Walking home from the station one day, he saw a straw stack on fire, and hurried to help extinguish the blaze, hanging his suit coat on a fence. After the fire had been put out he found that one of his Guernseys had chewed through the coat, leaving teeth marks on his silver cigarette case.'

Peter Payan reports on the memorial service on 6 January: Mary Beaumont and I travelled down by train to Harlow, then taxi, but subsequently discovered that Roydon station which daily stored Cocky's gumboots is only five minutes' walk away across the fields. Expecting a small church and standing room only, we made sure to be early (St James's Stanstead Abbotts is well described in Simon Jenkins's *England's Thousand Best Churches*). We were the first visitors to go in and the first to sign the fine attendance book, representing the Sydney Smith Association. It was very cold. We sat by a stove, and when this was moved we moved with it. Remembering the warm Trower hospitality when we all lunched there, we were very glad to repair to that welcoming house which rapidly filled to bursting with family, including a swarm of beautifully mannered grandchildren; one of them, a charming teenage granddaughter, seemed not to have heard of the family's connection with Sydney, when I said that I had not heard it mentioned during the service. Eventually we found our way to Joan and to Philip, Cocky's brother. Joan told us how glad she was that after all the illness of the last three years Cocky had died in his own bed. She was very pleased to see us and appreciative of our coming. It had been a perfectly happy day, filled with love, remembrance and anecdote. Mary and I were very content to have been part of it.

Our AGM Weekend in London 23-25 September 2005 by Peter Payan

Our weekend began on Friday evening when forty dined at the Athenaeum Club in Pall Mall on marinated salmon, noisette of lamb, and pear and blueberry flan, more than sufficient to dispel lingering doubts as to London Club food. In the early part of the evening we heard an entertaining talk on the Athenaeum and Sydney's connection with it from Nicholas Younger, a member. (I might myself have become a member had I succumbed to the advances of an elderly gentleman who once promised to put me up on condition that I vote with him against the election of women.)

The occasion also gave an opportunity to inspect the first volume of four of a recently acquired set of the works of Robert Burns 'with an account of his life' (1803), bearing Sydney's bookplate with his motto: 'Faber Meae Fortunae' and his address, 56 Green Street, Grosvenor Square. There is a handwritten dedication: 'To Mrs Sydney Smith with Alexander Gordon's affectionate regards December 1st 1805'. Gordon was the son of Lord Aberdeen, an Edinburgh pupil who remained Sydney's friend. Alan Bell told us that this was a 'true' Sydney Smith book, not one left to him by brother Courtney. 'True' in a sense no doubt, but surely it was Catharine's to start with!

At All Souls' Cemetery in Kensal Green next morning there were twenty-six at the AGM, held in the sober surroundings of the Dissenters' Chapel. (If during the weekend Sydney turned ever so slightly in his grave this would have been the moment.) A member of our Association, Henry Vivian-Neal, presided over the occasion as Chief Guide of the Friends of Kensal Green, but having lost his voice deputed a lively and well-informed lady colleague Signe Hoffos to tell us of the nineteenth-century cemetery movement, All Souls' itself and its distinguished occupants. There followed an excellent buffet lunch taken in warm sunshine sitting on appropriate pieces of marble, after which we were led to as many memorials as time would allow. Those who later elected to visit the catacombs (space for 4000 coffins) were especially grateful to have been thus fortified.

All Souls' is one of the seven 'hygienic' cemeteries opened around London between 1832 and 1841. An attraction of being interred here lay in its having been chosen by Princess Sophia (d.1848), George III's daughter, and her brother the Duke of Sussex (d.1843). Here lies Sydney, and in the same grave his wife Catharine, daughter Saba and son Wyndham. They are surrounded by an army of eminent Victorians such as Thackeray, Trollope, Wilkie Collins and Isambard Kingdom Brunel. The Smith memorial looks neglected and is not easy to identify. We shall take steps.

In the evening ten of us enjoyed a convivial dinner at the Boisdale in Eccleston Street, owned by a member of the Association and the site of our regular Sydney Smith luncheons. Those who had not been here before were delighted by its rich interior and friendly service.

On Sunday morning we attended Sung Eucharist at St Paul's Cathedral, and sitting well to the front of the congregation experienced the full grandeur of the newly refurbished interior. We coped fairly well with unfamiliar hymns and modern music and were pleased to hear Sydney quoted from the pulpit. In the course of a sermon given in St Peter's before the York assizes in 1824 he addressed the assembled judges to the effect that judges even of kings were fallible, but not the Judge of judges. Norman Taylor and I have so far failed to identify the quotation. Can any reader?

Some of us had gone home at different stages in the weekend but a few remained for lunch in St Paul's crypt. This was the end of a successful meeting. Peter Diggle's arrangements were impeccable, the weather was perfect, and nothing disturbed our harmonious communion with the spirit of Sydney Smith.

SYDNEY AS CLUBMAN

Sydney Smith at the Athenaeum by Nicholas Younger

[Nicholas Younger's talk during dinner was so fully researched and detailed - dealing as it did with the origin of London clubs in the old seventeenth-century coffee houses, the formation of the Athenaeum in 1824, the Club's Rules, its new building by Decimus Burton opened in 1830 - that we are faced, given the limits of our *Newsletter,* with an undesired editorial situation. We must, however, with apologies to the speaker for the seeming ruthlessness of our excisions, reproduce in the main sections that relate to Sydney and his membership.]

Nicholas began by thanking Peter Diggle for his introduction and saying that for his talk he had consulted two histories of the Athenaeum as well as a lecture given by Sir Alcon Copisarow in 1999 to mark the 175th birthday of the Club. Sir Alcon contrasted his warm welcome on that occasion with an introduction he had received at another dinner when the chairman had said: 'We would have been content this evening with a less distinguished speaker, but we couldn't find one.' Nicholas was mindful too of Sydney Smith's description of the Scythians' response to those who speak too long at occasions of this sort: 'As soon as their grandfathers became old and troublesome, and began to tell long stories, they immediately ate them.' Perhaps it is fortunate that we already have a generous dinner before us.

At the Athenaeum it was not unknown for three-quarters of the prospective candidates to be rejected on one election night. One black ball required ten votes in favour to overcome it. Had Sydney Smith been proposed as a member in this way, and there is no evidence that he was, is it difficult to imagine that some of his enemies might have made his progress sufficiently uncomfortable to deny him entry. Many now famous names suffered this indignity. In the event it was Rule II which secured his membership: 'It being essential to the maintenance of the Athenaeum…that the annual introduction of a certain number of persons of distinguished eminence in Science, Literature or the Arts should be secured, a limited number of persons of such qualifications shall be elected by the Committee.'

Clearly, one cannot imagine a more suitable candidate. The Athenaeum itself might have been invented for this very purpose -- 'to cultivate literature on a little oatmeal'. Secondly, it must have been common knowledge that with his appointment to the canonry at St Paul's in 1831, he would be spending more of his time in London. A large proportion of his friends were already members, including George Howard, Francis Jeffrey -- witty as Horatius Flaccus -- Tom Moore, Samuel Rogers, Walter Scott, Lord Lansdowne, Macaulay, etc., and there will have been no shortage of supporters. 'When the Whigs came to power in 1831,' says an early history of the Club, reproducing the Briggs portrait, 'Lord Grey [also a member] made Sydney Smith a Canon Residentiary of St Paul's and in the following year he was elected to the Athenaeum, and was, for the remainder of his life, one of the most devoted and assiduous of its members.' One of his biographers, Stuart Reid, describes him as being 'extremely popular within its walls'.

I hope nothing I have said will give the impression that the Club's founders intended it for the aristocratic and the wealthy, because I don't believe that to be the case. The qualifications for membership were primarily scientific, literary and artistic attainment but there was also provision for liberal patrons of the arts which allowed the inclusion of a small number of non-practising nobility. I was amused by a story which illustrates this point, related by Macaulay in a letter to his sister. Two members of the Club were sitting in one of the dining rooms admiring a fine table set at its centre. One, Sir Francis Chantrey, asked the other, Samuel Rogers, whether he remembered the time when the table was being made. Rogers said that he did; indeed, he remembered instructing the carpenter as to how it should be done. 'What about you, Sir Francis?' 'Oh yes,' said Sir Francis, 'I remember the occasion. I was the carpenter.'

The purpose of the Club was to encourage the association of individuals in the scientific, literary and artistic world, in part to stimulate new ideas and initiatives, and in part simply to enjoy themselves. Is this not rather similar to the ideals of the Sydney Smith Association? Is it not fitting, then, that we should be meeting at the Athenaeum here tonight and putting these ideals into serious practice?

Sydney's Other Club by Michael Knutsford

In thanking Nicholas Younger for his amusing and detailed talk about the Athenaeum, Michael Knutsford spoke of Sydney's membership of his other Club. He explained that he drew information from *Recollections of Past Life* by his great-great-grandfather Sir Henry Holland, who married Saba Smith as his second wife. Through his appointment as a Canon Residentiary of St Paul's, Sydney divided his time between Somerset and London. His usual routine was to be at Combe Florey for about four months only, spending the remaining eight months of the year in London. Life there appealed to him so much more than the country and he was soon dining out eight or nine times a week. Catharine was wearied by the social round and thankfully returned to Combe Florey for an increasing amount of time.

Seven years after joining the Athenaeum, Sydney was elected to *The Club,* emphatically so named. This was founded in 1763 as a highly prestigious dining club by Johnson, Burke, Reynolds, Goldsmith and Garrick among others; Henry Holland was a member at the same time as Sydney. The Club, said Michael, has maintained ever since with undiminished reputation. One can imagine Sydney being in his element. Always a *bon vivant*, he relished and responded to the provocation to put forth wit, wisdom and learning: every dinner was vivified by his presence. Bored by his Somerset neighbours' lack of intellect, Sydney revelled in The Club while in London. It is sad, therefore, that he was a member for only six years until his death in 1845.

'DEAREST KATE...'

Biographers often ruefully confess that they were unaware that someone else was at work on their subject. Publishers can get rueful too: about fifteen years ago no fewer than three lives of Trollope were nearing publication at the same time. But no ruefulness is called for in the *Newsletter* office: we are greatly pleased to have two good contributions on Mrs Sydney. Readers will recall that Peter Payan started the ball rolling with 'No mere appendage', a London lunch talk which we printed in Issue 10. He promised something more substantial for No.11 and has delivered: but while he was writing, Dorothy Williams was working away on *her* agreeable lunch talk 'On being Mrs Sydney Smith' which she gave in York on 8 February 2006. So we are twice blessed, and tempted to print SPECIAL CATHARINE NUMBER on the front cover...

BRINGING CATHARINE TO LIFE by Peter Payan

In biographies of Sydney by Reid (1884), Pearson (1934), Bullett (1951), Bell (1980) and Virgin (1994), his wife Catharine's appearances are scattered, usually short and invariably telling. Few of her letters have survived, but she wrote a memoir of their life for her grandchildren, dying before it was complete. Its homely style tells us much of her warm, cheerful nature, common sense and intelligence. A good deal of Catharine's 'Narrative' has found its way into Saba's outstanding *Memoir* of her father; I do not know if it exists in a separate form.

I have concentrated what she has to say, quoting freely from the authors mentioned so as to create a short account of the family's life up to their arrival in Foston fourteen years after the wedding. Sydney has been allowed to withdraw a little from the limelight in which, for us at any rate, he is usually bathed. These are years of often severe financial difficulty, early professional successes and setbacks, much moving about, and the arrival of children. Familiar milestones, which never found Catharine wanting.

'Sydney Smith, Clerk, A.M. of New College, Oxford, and Catharine Amelia Pybus of this parish were married by licence on July 2nd, 1800, in the parish church of Cheam, by Henry Peach, Rector.' So runs the official record, but it might have been otherwise.

The Relations

The letter in which Sydney announced to his father his intention of marrying Catharine Pybus conveys quiet certainty that he has found the woman he wants and needs; yet the irascible Robert Smith refused his request for a small allowance with which to start married life and was outraged by the proposed marriage settlement, which put Catharine's own money safely beyond his reach. He later wrote to Sydney: 'I never will forgive and shall never forget your d----d selfishness in so tying up your Wife's fortune, as to put it out of your power to assist your Father!!!' (In the purchase of an estate.) Catharine later wrote at length of her father-in-law: 'An extraordinarily retentive memory, a great gossip; knew who everyone had married, whose lands had been sold or exchanged and from what cause; in short the operations of the whole social world seem'd known to him.' He was so

full of anecdote 'that he became everywhere an astonishment and admiration'. His dress was 'coxcombically homely, as if purposely to contrast the external appearance with the cultivated and eloquent mind that shone out whenever he spoke'. He 'delighted in making conquests: no woman was ever more vain of them'.

She believed that 'he liked me as much as his selfish nature was capable of loving anyone who did not minister to his own comforts'. In any case she had her own family problem: the marriage was strongly opposed by Catharine's self-important brother Charles, indignant that a sister of his should throw herself away on a penniless nobody. This led to a complete and final breach between brother and sister; they never saw each other again. 'I believe he once loved me almost to adoration... I believe he now abhors me as much as he once idolized me.' The significance of these words is worth pondering.

Her courage did not fail her, and she was supported by her mother: 'I was twenty two, and my mother said that if I chose to forego the comforts and luxuries to which I had been born, I alone was to be the sufferer; and that of my ability to decide upon that which would best constitute my happiness there could be no more doubt than of my right. She had but one wish - that I should be happy. She had long known and loved Sydney, and if to marry him was my resolve, she would not oppose it.'

Catharine Defends her Decision

'Now, dear children', remarks Catharine in old age, 'this is not a decision for you and others to follow. There never before was, and never again will be, another Sydney!!' She adds that her resolution to marry him was not so rash as at first sight it appeared to be; for to her, in her youthful assurance, 'it was impossible but that his success should in the end be perfect'. Such a mind, such versatility of talents, 'such a bold and fearless love of truth, such an ardent love of human happiness that no feelings of selfish prudence could control, must eventually break through all obstacles and gain for itself honour and distinction. And so it did!'

First Home and First Child

The home to which Sydney brought his young wife in the autumn of 1800 was a neat and attractive little house, 46 George Street, Edinburgh, and the letters written from there are full of enjoyment and fun. In the spring of 1802 their first child was born. The infant Saba thrived from the first, but Catharine took many weeks to recover, helped by a change of air.

From Burntisland, the other side of the Forth, Sydney wrote: 'The little town hitherto only celebrated for the cure of herrings will I hope in future be equally so for the cure of wives.' His Kate was restored by sea bathing, a quiet summer and a short tour to Loch Lomond and the West.

The Move to London

The little family left Edinburgh for London in August 1803. Sydney took this step with 'great heaviness of heart', knowing he was leaving many true and influential friends. Saba knew that her mother was more ambitious for him than he was for himself.

Catharine wrote: 'Now, dear children, this is the only decision of my whole life (except that of my Marriage) of which I am really proud!! I strongly opposed his remaining permanently in Edinburgh: where as an Episcopalian Clergyman he was only tolerated (and considered but as a Dissenter); he could hope there for no professional advancement: Pupils, as well as health to attend to them, were both uncertain, I earnestly exhorted him to settle in London where I felt sure of his success.'

The journey of about a fortnight was made easier by the kindness of Mr and Mrs Hicks Beach who lent their chaise. Catharine, in low health after her second confinement, nursed her sick child Noel all the way, but he relapsed and died in December, prompting Sydney's sad reflection that 'the life of a parent is the life of a gambler'.

Settling in London

They made their home in a small house at No.8 (now 14) Doughty Street. On the recent death of her mother Catharine had inherited some valuable pearls, but unselfishly insisted on their being sold to ease the family's finances and pay for work on the house. She spoke of Sydney's 'comical anxiety lest mankind should recover from their illusion and cease to value such glittering baubles before they could be sold'.

In her old age she wrote simply: 'I took the pearls to Rundell and Bridges, and sold them for £500. This was converting them to a much more useful purpose, and all we most wanted was obtained.' Some years later she saw them offered for sale at fifteen hundred.

The Making of a Preacher

Sydney hoped to become financially independent through preaching, but finding a place to do it was not easy. When he was thwarted by the rector of St James, Piccadilly, Catharine was outraged. Even forty years later she would write: 'A prohibition so timid, so mean, so heartless was perhaps under all similar circumstances never before pronounced!'

Yet Sydney's sermons could transform a chapel's reputation: the Berkeley Chapel in Mayfair, 'in spite of its advantageous position, was nearly deserted', wrote Catharine. 'In a few months, not a seat was to be had! Ladies & Gentlemen often standing in the aisles during the whole Service.'

His greatest success, the lectures on Moral Philosophy delivered at the Royal Institution and listened to by up to 800 people, filled her with delight: 'He was no longer unknown!! He was universally courted! Everyone was pleased and proud to make his acquaintance!' Catharine retrieved some of these lectures from the flames to which their author had consigned them.

She would read a sermon through and then discuss it with him just before he set off to give it, though Saba knew that once her father had made up his mind as to what he ought to do he did it, come what might. On one occasion, sure that certain family friends would be present who would see themselves as his target, Catharine pleaded with him to substitute another sermon. He declined and she proved correct. The friendship was broken (though mended many years later).

Social Life at Doughty Street

This was a joyous affair. Invitations to the simple homely suppers given weekly by Catharine and Sydney were much sought after; twenty or thirty were invited and came as they pleased. Old friends and new, rich and poor would gather even if there was only one dish. Francis Horner, an old Edinburgh friend, referred to one such occasion as 'the happiest day I remember to have spent'. Saba shrewdly observed that though brought up in wealth and luxury her mother was soon taught by Sydney's affection for her 'to second him'.

Holland House

Shy and diffident though they must at first have been in the vastly different surroundings of Holland House, Sydney never sailed under false colours. 'I well remember, when Mrs Sydney and I were young, in London, with no other equipage than my umbrella, when we went out to dinner in a hackney-coach, and the rattling step was let down, and the proud powdered red-plushes grinned, and her gown was fringed with straw, how the iron entered my soul.'

That Catharine found her feet and gained the affection of Lady Holland is evident from a lively message joined to one of Sydney's letters in 1810: 'Dear Lady Holland, I shall be the envy and admiration of York when I put on your pretty gown, and the shawl over it. Either wd. produce these effects, both will be irresistible. It is very good of you to have thought of me, and I am very much flattered by it. I am now a smart married woman instead of being a shabby widow, as I was before the arrival of 2 such fashionable articles as *Sydney* and your parcel. I have got on the shawl, and must take leave in order to have another look at myself. I remain dear Lady Holland yours very truly, Catharine Amelia Smith'.

Departure for the North

The death of William Pitt and promotion of Lord Holland led to Sydney's being offered the living of Foston-le-Clay near York in October 1806. He was not obliged to move north immediately, but in June 1809 Sydney, Catharine, Saba, Douglas and Emily (born in 1805 and 1807 respectively) set out in all they could afford, a small phaeton drawn by one horse, their belongings travelling separately.

On arriving in York Catharine was in despair: 'Never shall I forget the heart-sinking pain felt on arriving in a hot [June] evening at a dirty inn in York! The streets narrow, close and dusty, no appearance of inhabitants, but a few tired artisans returning from their day's toil, and with the feeling that there was not one human Being within 200 miles who cared whether or not I lived to see the next day's sun!!'

The Smiths their own Architect

At first they lived at Heslington, just outside York, but by early 1813 Sydney was hard at work building a rectory at Foston. Catharine described how this came about: 'Sydney sent for an architect, told him the sort of house he wanted, and begged for plan and estimate. It was three thousand pounds. We both knew what we wanted and the number and size of the rooms we wished to have. "Cannot you take your rule and compass, and so arrange

these by a scale so that we can do without this great man?" said Sydney. We sat in judgment over our plan, hired an excellent carpenter and mason, and our house was begun: when finished we had not made *one mistake*!'

Typhus

Later in the year there was a family health crisis. His brother Robert had gone down with typhus while returning from a visit to Sydney, and was on the verge of death. His wife begged for Sydney to come to his aid. Catharine was mortified: 'Never can I forget the distress this occasion'd me! I had 3 Children, and in a short time was to be confined. To risk the life of my husband by his thus encountering a disorder so malignant as this fever had shewn itself to be, and where no real good could come from it, did appear to me like Madness.' Sydney was not swayed, and set off with no confidence that he would return. Both brothers survived.

Being without Sydney

On the occasion of an earlier absence Catharine wrote to their old friend Francis Jeffrey: 'We have been a sad house of invalids here, but we are all cheering up at the prospect of Sydney's return. The other day poor little Douglas was lying on the sofa very unwell, while Saba and I were at dinner; and I said, "Well, dear little Chuffy, I don't know what is the matter with us both, but we seem very good-for-nothing!" "Why, mamma," said Saba , "*I'll* tell you what the matter is: you are so melancholy and so dull because papa is away; he is so merry, that he makes us all gay. A family doesn't prosper, I see, without a papa!" I am much inclined to be of her opinion: and suspecting that the observation would please him quite as well as that of any of his London flatterers, I despatched it to him the next day.'

Yet Catharine knew her husband well. She was to write of his 'moments of dreadful despondence', which 'sunk his commonly buoyant spirits to a most afflicting degree'. In a letter to a friend, she writes: 'There are few people perhaps more nervous than he is & more alive to all the indescribable agitations that a very anxious & a very eager mind gives birth to... When in London he sometimes keeps a letter from home half the day in his pocket unopened, fearing lest it should contain ill news, yet too nervous to venture on the certainty that would follow reading it... This is a piece of secret history that perhaps he would not care to own.'

The Move to the Rectory

Sydney and his family, five persons since the arrival of Wyndham in September, moved to the newly built rectory, the first house they had ever owned, in the spring of 1814. It was a great undertaking, described by Catharine:

'A tremendous winter and long-continued frost for eight weeks stopped all our work both within and without the house...In its half-finished state we were obliged to flit, and such a flitting it was! The bedding - the last thing left at Heslington (with two or three chairs and a table) - we slept upon on the ground the last night, for the bedsteads had been carried off the day before to Foston. All up at five - a cold March morning - to liberate the bedding, which was to be removed to Foston for the next night.

'A closed carriage was hired to convey me and Wyndham (now six months old, but never before out of the house in which he was born), and the three other children and Annie Kaye [a young woman who came to them at 19 as a nurse and became a friend and general factotum]. We set out after the children's dinner at one o'clock...We had made our way about half-way up to the house, when it seemed very likely that we should get no further.

'The field - there was at that time no road up to the parsonage, or only a rough one - had been so much cut up by constant carting that the carriage stuck fast. I got out with the baby in my arms, but soon lost my shoe in the stiff clay, and so walked on without. There were no doors to the drawing room, but I remember, in spite of it all, there was a very merry tea-making upon some of the boxes piled up in the drawing room.'

Getting there

Reid imagined this scene of arrival: '...the unexplored wonders of the strange house, and the hurrying servants flitting to and fro through the dimly-lighted corridors. The blazing fires in the drawing-room casting a ruddy glow on the tear-stained faces of the tired but excited children, and sending dark shadows to dance fitfully against the vacant walls.

'The kind mother busily preparing a hasty meal for the hungry young travellers, while her husband arranges boxes and bedding for its luxurious enjoyment, laughing gleefully meanwhile over the episode of the lost shoe, and mischievously pretending to be grateful for his wife's escape from imaginary pitfalls of a more alarming kind.'

Catharine continues: 'Large fires were kept in all the rooms day and night. The house-maid three or four times a day wiped the steam off the windows, which looked like ground glass, and wiped up the streams that came dripping down the walls on to the boards, for carpets at this early stage of our Robinson Crusoe establishment we had none.

'So very fearful was I that the fires should get low during the night that I used like an unquiet Ghost to go from room to room to see that they had burnt well... The living in this warm vapour was really not as unpleasant as might be imagined. No one suffer'd, not even the Baby or its Mother.' [In fact the warm moist air would have benefited anyone with a cough.]

'Summer was coming on, each day improved our condition, its gradual amendment was an affair of daily interest: and with dear Sydney's incessant activity and contrivance for hastening our comforts we all took a cheerful and earnest interest in these improvements. In time it became as perfect for its size as any reasonable person could desire.'

There had been no resident rector in Foston since the reign of Charles II, so the descent of Sydney and his lively family upon the village might have been seen as miraculous. But here they stayed until the move to Combe Florey fifteen years later, after which they never returned to Yorkshire.

ON BEING MRS SYDNEY SMITH by Dorothy Williams

We don't know what Mrs Sydney looked like. Somewhere, unknown to the National Portrait Gallery, there may be a likeness. A quest for the Association, perhaps? Sydney, writing to a friend, says that she 'has a good figure and *to me* an interesting countenance'; ...we can however now and again hear her voice in letters and in the *Memoir* written by their daughter, a breathless, hurried voice sometimes, underlinings and exclamation marks often... But as I look across from our windows in Heslington to the house where they lived for five years before moving to Foston, I wonder most about the 'daily-ness' of her life there and in the other houses that they shared together in the forty-five years of their marriage. Could she tell a turnip from a carrot? Was she as desolate as her husband over the dearth of lemons in Foston? On the occasion of their first dinner at Harewood House with the Lascelles family, were there words in the carriage on the way home? Sydney had been critical of the salads and had given some instruction on the matter, which was, as he himself says, considering it was his first visit there, 'a strong measure'. And when Sydney comments 'A joke goes a great way in the country. I have known one last pretty well for seven years', was Mrs Sydney called upon to pass that ultimate test of the loyal wife - to pretend that she had never heard it before? Did Mrs Sydney go to all those dinners at Holland House too, and if so, how did she cope with the terrifying Lady Holland? Sydney knew how - 'Sydney, ring the bell!' 'Oh yes!' he returned, 'and shall I sweep the floor?'

Sydney once famously compared marriage to 'a pair of shears, so joined that they cannot be separated; often moving in opposite directions, yet always punishing any one who comes between them'. Sydney was often gallant, even flirtatious (but never a philanderer like his father), and Mrs Sydney too sometimes made surprisingly free remarks - this in a letter to their friend Francis Cholmeley of Brandsby: 'If I make love to your gardener, do you think he will at the right time be induced to send me some of the seeds of my *beloved Angelica*?' Their tastes in music differed: she was a very accomplished musician, he loved to sing but hated opera and thought that 'nothing can be more disgusting than oratorio'. Holidays showed up different approaches to sight-seeing: Mrs Sydney loved reading guide books and wanted to see everything whereas Sydney had, he claimed, done the Louvre in thirty-two minutes. In 1837, on a month's holiday in Holland and Belgium, he records: 'I have seen between 7 & 800 large women without clothes painted by Rubens till I positively refuse Mrs Sydney to see any more.'

Ennui was often very near the surface for Sydney - he needed the stimulus of company and change. If solitary for too long he became melancholic - his wife seems to have been more even tempered. What they shared was far greater than minor differences of taste and temperament. No one ever came between them to be punished but whoever criticized Sydney or failed to show a proper appreciation of his qualities drew fierce reaction from his wife. She was the one who wanted to leave Edinburgh for London where his talents would be properly recognized, he gave her his papers so that she could dot his i's and cross his t's. 'He was perpetually coming to her with something for her sympathy and consultation; and richly did she deserve that happiness from her devoted love and

admiration', their daughter Saba writes. A friend who stayed with them wrote in her journal, 'He sometimes read aloud to Mrs Smith in the evening, when anything struck him. ... We had each our armchair, lamp and book in the evening and not much conversation when alone.' In the last few years of his life he writes to a friend: 'Mrs Sydney has eight distinct illnesses and I have nine. We take something every hour and pass the mixture from one to the other.'

In his otherwise wonderful biography Hesketh Pearson makes scarcely a mention of Sydney's Kate (for that is indeed how he addresses her in the letters he wrote her every day for three weeks on his visit to France in 1826) but he shall have the last word: 'They were a well-paired and happy couple and remained so for forty-five years until death divorced them.'

'You organists are like a broken-winded cab-horse: always longing for another stop'

Sydney's remark to the organist of St Paul's concludes Dr Ian Brunt's admirable programme (four pages of A4) of a concert entitled 'Twelve Miles from a Lemon' given as part of the Lanchester Early Music Festival September 2005 in Rowley Baptist Church, Rowley Chapel, County Durham. Ian Brunt (organ) and his co-performer Brian Stewart (flute), playing as the Hexham Collegium Musicum, devised this 'Recital of Music for Flute & Organ from Regency England on the Historic Chamber Organ by Henry Bevington (*c.*1820), with music by James Hook, William Walond, John Keeble, Samuel Wesley, William Russell, George Frederick Handel, and Johann Sebastian Bach, and with Contemporary Readings from the Writings of Sydney Smith (1771-1845), Canon of St Paul's Cathedral, London'. It must have been a delightful evening. Ian, clearly a Sydney fan, astutely sent a copy of his programme to Graham Parry in York: for apart from its fascinating text, it included images of Our Man (the Briggs portrait and the Foston statuette) and, what's more, a list of the five Aims of the Association and a contact address. Graham Parry's covering note to us said: 'It shows that people who are not even members of the Association still make use of Sydney, and that he still continues to give pleasure in remote places.' Yes indeed. Our best thanks to Ian Brunt and Brian Stewart for their melodious initiative, and warmest congratulations on an imaginative achievement.

A Diffident Note from Dorset

We gladly print this from Lyme Regis: 'If you think that there are some new members, unaware of *Twelve Miles from a Lemon*, perhaps you might possibly put a little advertisement in? Copies can be obtained from me (The Revd Norman Taylor, Shire End West, Cobb Road, Lyme Regis, Dorset DT7 3JP) for £16 including postage.' And some of our less new members may still be without a copy - so buy now from Dorset while stocks remain! (N.B. Readers report seeing this book on the Internet at twice Norman's price.)

Sydney on Shakers

A friend introduces us to this gripping paragraph from the *Memoir*: 'There is nothing more characteristic than shakes of the hand. I have classified them. There is the high official,--the body erect, and a rapid, short shake, near the chin. There is the mortmain,--the flat

hand introduced into your palm, and hardly conscious of its contiguity. The digital,--one finger held out, much used by the high clergy. There is the *shakus rusticus*, where your hand is seized in an iron grasp, betokening rude health, warm heart, and distance from the Metropolis; but producing a strong sense of relief on your part when you find your hand released and your fingers unbroken. The next to this is the retentive shake,--one which, beginning with vigour, pauses as it were to take breath, but without relinquishing its prey, and before you are aware begins again, till you feel anxious as to the result, and have no shake left in you. There are other varieties, but this is enough for one lesson.'

A Sermon and a Sad Sequel

It was gratifying to report in Issue 9 (2004) that two new members (Christopher and Hanne Gray in Ireland) had joined us as a result of being handed a copy of the *Newsletter* at Combe Florey. In the anecdote below, Christopher records his attempt to pass on the compliment and win a new recruit:

In a recent book on *British Campaign Furniture: Elegance under canvas* I found an illustration of a Regency inlaid mahogany travelling rostrum which can be reduced in size for ease of transportation. The photograph is accompanied by a quotation from the satirist Francis Grose's 'Advice to the Officers of the British Army' (1783) directed towards regimental chaplains - and it sounds like Sydney in full flight: 'Never preach any practical morality to the regiment. That would be only throwing away your time. To a man they all know, as well as you do, that they ought not to get drunk or commit adultery: but preach to them on the Trinity, the attributes of the Deity, and other mystical and abstruse subjects, which they may never before have thought or heard of. This will give them a high idea of your learning: besides, your life might otherwise give the lie to your preaching.'

I drew this to the attention of an urbane and witty friend of ours, an ex-Army chaplain, who had appealed for a subject for a sermon. Shortly afterwards he wrote back that it had been a magnificent subject on which to preach to his congregation of assembled chaplains. He appealed for another suggestion. I was at a loss until suddenly it came to me: either he doesn't know of Sydney Smith, in which case he will be eternally grateful for the introduction; or if he knows of him only slightly, closer acquaintanceship might bring him into the Association. So I posted him two issues of the *Newsletter*. I expected a swift reply, but I was disappointed. The months passed with no word from him. Eventually at Christmas I phoned with greetings, only to be told by his distraught widow that he had died in September. A terrible loss for her, for Hanne and me, for congregations, and for the Association.

'One Smith in a Billion'

Norman Taylor writes: I enclose a chapter from a book entitled *A Clerk of Oxenford,* written by Gilbert Highet, an Oxford don who was asked to give some talks on literature for an American radio station in 1952. The written version was published by Oxford University Press, New York, in 1954. I had known of him through his *Art of Teaching* (Knopf, 1950), a delightful book; and then, when I saw this in a secondhand bookshop, I bought it, but never read it. The other evening I took it down from the shelf in an idle

moment and came across the second essay 'One Smith in a Billion'. Of course, much of this material is familiar to members, but I thought the beginning and end might be suitable for inclusion in your next number.'

Gilbert Highet begins: Probably you have noticed how some people - even when you have never met them - seem very attractive, almost seem to be friends of yours already. You remember their good qualities and forget their bad. You would recognize their faces if you met them. You can almost hear the tones in which they speak. The style of their talk and writing penetrates your mind. You enjoy thinking about them, and meeting them indirectly - even if they are far removed from you in time or space. You know them through a painting, or a diary, or a symphony, or a group of poems. It is impossible not to think with affection of Schubert, or Frans Hals, or Chaucer. They must have been delightful companions. I have three or four friends like that - friends whom I know quite well although I have never heard them talk, and have met them only through their portraits and their writings. One of them was a big burly fellow with a round, ripe voice. His name was Smith. He died over a century ago.

Almost everybody liked Smith. He was terribly popular. Even the coldest, hardest intellectuals, even the loftiest type of English snob, all liked Smith. Supreme tribute, his own family liked him. He married his young wife when he had no money and practically no prospects, only his own innate resources of health, vigour, and humour. Just after the wedding he collected his only capital, six small silver teaspoons, rushed up to his bride, and threw them into her lap, saying, 'There, you lucky girl, I give you all my fortune!'

She thought he was a little crazy, but she knew he was talented, she lived happily with him for forty-five years, and after he died she wrote a charming tribute to him addressed to her grandchildren:

> Such a mind, such versatility of talents, such a bold and fearless love of truth, such an ardent love of human happiness, must eventually break through all obstacles and gain for itself honour and distinction.

And then, in double-sized characters, underlined, she added: AND SO IT DID!
Vive Smith!

His first name was Sydney. He was a liberal English clergyman, and there is good reason to believe that he was the funniest man who ever breathed. Certainly he was the funniest man called Smith—and that covers a good deal of the human race, including Red and H. Allen. Sydney Smith was born in 1771 of a rich but wildly eccentric father, who educated him to the age of twenty and then did no more for him, except to pester him with threatening and begging letters - a character who would have fitted beautifully into a Dickens novel. Sydney went to one of the best schools in England, Winchester, and to one of the best colleges at Oxford, New College. Nowadays these two have the reputation of

producing rather quiet, correct, tight-lipped, rolled-umbrella characters. Either they have changed, or Sydney was a bold exception…

Gilbert Highet concludes: In many ways Sydney Smith reminds me of three other clergymen, all brilliantly witty: one was the Austrian priest, Abraham a Sancta Clara, who put more jokes into his sermons than would be possible anywhere except in Vienna; one was Laurence Sterne; and one was the dean who wrote baby talk and thought high politics, Jonathan Swift. No doubt the four of them are all talking their heads off at this moment, in a specially built annex to heaven. I can imagine them - hard, dry jokes from Swift, a flood of Viennese gaiety from Abraham, spouts of unfinished merriment from Sterne, and over-arching them all, sparkling and splashing like a Niagara of champagne, the torrential wit of Sydney Smith.

[*Editor:* This is a superb discovery of Norman's, and sets us wondering how many such discoveries remain to be made in the several unread (as yet? - or might it be later than we think?) books on our own shelves. We gather from a Columbia University website that Gilbert Highet was born in Glasgow in June 1906, and hope we may honour his centenary by quoting from his felicitous essay on Sydney. He became a professor of Greek and Latin at Columbia in 1938 after teaching at Oxford for six years, and spent the rest of his professional career at Columbia, embodying 'the best of the Scottish and Oxford traditions' in classical learning. He died in 1978.]

York Lunch, November 2004: **Wit and Tolerance** by Ronnie Duncan
'If I could see good measures pursued, I care not a farthing who is in power, but I have a passionate care for common justice and for common sense.'
Of all Sydney's campaigns to redress wrongs none is more courageous than his fight, at the risk of his own prospects in the Church of England, for religious tolerance; in his own age, for Ireland and the Catholics. What would he have had to say about injustices in our own time: in Iraq, say, or in Palestine? His warning is already to hand. *'Depend upon it, all nations have some reason for their hatred.'*

Today I recall an event that took place not 25 miles from here almost 180 years ago. In May 1825 the clergy of the East Riding of Yorkshire gathered at Beverley to petition Parliament against the emancipation of the Catholics. The Vicar of Foston was not just alone in resisting the petition: he was even opposed by his own curate, Mr Middleton. Imagine the hostility of the assembled clergy! Here was a member of their own cloth speaking up for an impotent but still feared minority; an Anglican with the audacity to point out that Protestants had murdered, tortured and laid waste as much as the Catholics; had dared to assert that *'other sects may be right'*; even (the heresy!) that *'every religion is as fallible as human judgement can make it'*.

Sydney opened his address at the Beverley meeting with this sally: 'My excellent and respectable curate, Mr Middleton, alarmed at the effect of the Pope upon the East Riding, has come here to oppose me; and there he stands, breathing war and vengeance on the

Vatican.' Whether such wit diverted or softened his audience we cannot know but Sydney had no illusions about the outcome of the proceedings. He delivered a short if trenchant speech assuring his audience he was making it as brief as possible 'from compassion to my reverend brethren who have trotted many miles to vote against the Pope and who will trot back in the dark if I attempt to throw additional light upon the subject'. Courage indeed! But Sydney's crowning demonstration of tolerance took place before that meeting and in private. Mr Middleton, no doubt anxious as to his position, had asked him if he would resent the public opposition of his own curate. Sydney replied: 'Nothing would give me more pain than to think I had prevented, in any man, the free expression of honest opinions.'

Remembering Robert Woof

There was widespread sadness when the news came of Robert Woof's death last November. In our *Newsletter* 9 for 2004 Peter Payan wrote: 'For some, the English year holds few more piquant pleasures than the Weekend Arts & Book Festival held in Grasmere each January. Conceived and conducted by Robert Woof, Director of the Wordsworth Trust, it is a feast of many flavours, above all of good company and good talk.' Now Robert is gone, but the Festival continues vigorously: Peter was there again this year and says so. Chris Smith, Chairman of the Trust, announcing a memorial meeting in London, described Robert as 'a truly remarkable man'. And so he was: the embodiment of learning lightly worn; the generosity with which he shared his staggering but genial scholarship is an enduring inspiration. His own words now, thanking us for the *Newsletter*: 'To have penetrated the pages and not been "exploded" (to use Milton's phrase in *Paradise Lost*) by ranks of ironic Whigs is, I think, the achievement of the month. I shall write to Peter to thank him also for his kind words.'

In the media: Sydney seen and heard

1. *The Times Literary Supplement,* 9 December 2005: poet and journalist Hugo Williams devoted his 'Freelance' column to reflecting on Sydney's famous 'Low Spirits' letter to Lady Georgiana Morpeth.

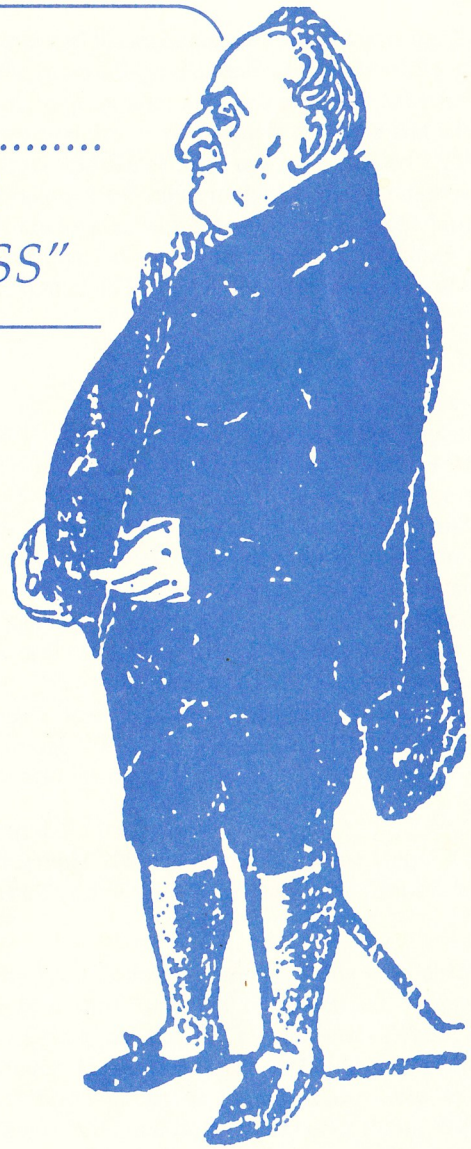
2. *BBC Radio 4,* Autumn 2005: Timothy West (surprise, surprise! - but who else?) read Sydney and Colleen Prendergast Saba in a short series of fifteen-minute programmes called 'Square Peg in a Round Hole'. By chance we recorded most of one of them, but we wanted more information for the *Newsletter*: How many episodes? Who compiled, who produced? Audience reaction? We put these questions in a friendly note to Talks Department, BBC Bristol, but answer came there none from Whiteladies Road. We regret to announce that on this occasion, Corporation failed to speak its piece unto Association.

*"Dearest Kate,**

.....

God bless you all

SS"



* Of his wife, Sydney wrote in 1810 to Lady Holland: 'Mrs Sydney begs her kind regards. I come up alone. Parsons wives never leave home in the spring -- ducklings to be watched -- a critical time.' But this spring she is relieved of her watch in what we fancifully think of as our SPECIAL CATHARINE NUMBER: two good articles give her long overdue attention. In a sense, we bring Mrs Sydney up to Town ....