# PETER DIGGLE (1921 – 2010)

The origins of the Sydney Smith Association date back to 1986, and an urgent appeal for funds to help save All Saints Church, the centre of the working life of the Revd Sydney Smith while he was rector at Foston parish from 1806 to 1829.

While the fundraising proved successful, and showed the continued popular appeal of Sydney many generations after his death, for many of us there was even greater significance. For this would be the first time that Peter Diggle came into our lives.

Once the immediate needs of All Saints were assured, it became clear there was a continued and wider appetite for an organisation that championed the timeless quality of the good Reverend's writings. And so, through the work of Peter Diggle, was born the Sydney Smith Association …

*On behalf of the SSA, Alan Bell writes:*

Major Peter Diggle was known to the Sydney Smith Association as its genial founder and quietly efficient administrator, but the range of his interests and achievements may have come as a surprise to members who heard the tributes made at the crowded funeral service held in St Mary's Priory Church, Old Malton on 17 March 2010.

**All Saints: the earliest portion dates from the first half of the 12th Century. Copyright Stephen Horncastle**

The village, on the fringes of Malton, and only a few miles from Foston, is where he was brought up: his father was land agent to the 7th Earl Fitzwilliam. Peter was very much a Yorkshire man, and as a teenager played rugby for his county with his mother cheering him from the back seat of a chauffeur-driven Rolls-Royce.

He was educated at the recently founded Stowe School, and then at Trinity College, Cambridge, where he spent only two terms before being called up for war service. He was commissioned into the 2nd Battalion Grenadier Guards in 1941. Blast damage to his eyes following an explosion meant that after convalescence he had to spend much of the war on administrative duties, but he fought at Arnhem. Later he stayed on in the army and in 1948 saw action in Malaya. He was also stationed in Germany, where he was able to ride with many of the leading German dressage trainers; horses became a major interest. He resigned his commission in 1952 and became a director in the Bradford wool trade, then somewhat in decline.

He married Sylvia in 1959, a marvelously loving relationship that included the celebration of their golden wedding in 2009; they had two sons, Richard and William, born in 1961 and 1962. It led also to shared interests in later business enterprises, including an excursion into the hosiery business at the time of the invention of women's tights. Then finally there was for twenty years a successful venture in the then under-regulated industrial diamond market, for which he devised respected standards that have achieved international recognition. And this involvement in the diamond market in London and Switzerland was complemented by Sylvie's professional skill with gemstones. It was an unusual business for him to undertake, but it proved a success. Having in 1968 also introduced the Diamond Investment concept (an investment programme to hedge against inflation and currency devaluation) he retired after twenty years in the business.

There were many other interests, of which – characteristically - little was heard. He was for ten years when living in London a prison visitor at Wormwood Scrubs, and in the 1960s, prompted by his Stowe schoolfellow and Brigade of Guards colleague Richard Carr-Gomm, he worked as a fund-raiser for Abbeyfield homes. Thanks to Peter's determination three of these retirement homes were set up in Harrogate, where he became patron of the Harrogate branch of the Abbeyfield Society.

**Robert Runcie with his gargoyle at St. Albans Abbey 1979**

On his final return to Yorkshire in 1979 he settled at Thornton le Clay, in the parish of Foston. He did a great deal to help the local community and especially the parish church, always much in need of funds. It was there (as Adam Fergusson put it in his fine address at Peter's funeral) that 'Peter took Sydney Smith to his own heart and planted him in everyone else's'. 1995 saw the 150th anniversary of Sydney's death, and it was right that the local church's most famous rector should be properly

celebrated. This was done aright, and in proper style. Peter was able to ask another of his wartime regimental colleagues to assist – no less than Lord Runcie, recently retired from the archbishopric of Canterbury, who happened to be a keen student of Sydney's writings. Other celebrations took place that year, and it gradually became clear that there was widespread interest in possibly forming a society. The moving force in bringing together various groups in Yorkshire, Somerset, London and Edinburgh, was Peter Diggle's. The Association took formal shape at meetings held the following year. The rest, as we can say, is history. It is clear that the Sydney Smith Association would not have started without his prompting, and could not have survived without his careful administrative guidance. We shall miss him greatly. May he rest in peace.

*On behalf of the family, Adam Fergusson delivered the following address at Peter's Memorial Service:*

Why Peter Diggle had so many friends was perhaps because he himself would not have believed how much they admired and loved him. They admired him for the good things he did - so often by stealth - and for the enterprises he undertook. His charity was active: he was for more than ten years a prison visitor at Wormwood Scrubs. Under his patronage three Abbeyfield retirement homes for the lonely were set up in Harrogate.

They loved him for his unfailing courtesy, straightness, sense of fun and kindness - yes, and for his modesty too. But kindness, I think above all. Like Abou Ben Adhem, he might have said, 'Write me as one who loves his fellow men.'

He was always disposed to *trust* his fellow men, too, if he could. Yet he recognised the fraudulent, the disingenuous, when he saw it: you would have to be aware of human frailty if you were a diamond trader – as he was for almost twenty years. So that, when anyone fell below his own high standard of behaviour or expectation, his disappointment would be more philosophical than surprised.

I have seen some of the letters that his friends have been writing since he died. The recurring adjectives tell their story – kind, caring, wise, generous, interesting, interested.

'Memories of his twinkling eyes and mischievous smile spring to mind as I think of him,' runs one. 'His charm and good looks, old fashioned courtesy and entertaining company are a rare commodity these days and he abounded in them all'.

And another: 'A remarkable person to talk to with a rich personal history and full of stories and intellectual insights. An hour in conversation with Peter was a rich experience …'

Exactly right. And many of us must be finding those well-known words of William Cory's *Heraclitus* appropriate now:

'I wept as I remembered how often you and I,
'Had tired the sun with talking and sent him down the sky …'

Peter told many stories, typically against himself, and in those careful, measured syllables we shan't forget. One was of his mortification, playing rugger for the Yorkshire Schoolboys XV, when his mother would cheer him on from the back of a chauffeur-driven Rolls-Royce.

Another was from war-time. He had been commissioned into the 2nd Battalion of the Grenadier Guards at the end of 1941 and was to be a soldier for eleven years. His eye had been damaged by an explosion on a training course – so much so that he started learning Braille in case he went blind – and was convalescing in London. There, he maintained, he single-handedly kept the Four Hundred Club solvent. There must be some truth in that. His good friend and fellow-officer Peter Carrington recalls that, because Peter's father was then Provost Marshall (the Army officer in charge of the military police), he was always usefully informed in advance which night-clubs were about to be raided and should be avoided. That, says Lord Carrington, made him even more popular in a mess where he was already recognized and appreciated as a character.

**Lord Carrington, arriving at Downing Street last year, for the unveiling of a new portrait of Margaret Thatcher**

Peter caught up with his regiment in 1944 after the Battle of Arnhem, was in action in Malaya, and again saw service in Germany – where his great love of horses and hunting had first flourished. His travels continued after he left the Army as a major in 1952. His years as a wool trader, based in Bradford, took him especially to Australia, where he took up polo.

But his most successful foreign adventure was surely to Germany in the late 1950s, when he met, and afterwards duly brought home, Sylvia von der Lancken.

Peter and Sylvie. Their golden wedding was last year. For half a century, I doubt whether any of us has ever thought of the one without the other.

They went together like the horse-and-carriage in the song (I shan't suggest which was which). And, as when Peter went into investment diamonds and Sylvie set about becoming a top gemmologist, their mutual affection, understanding and support was evident to everybody.

They shared the qualities I have described. We saw that when they lived in Trevor Street in London; then in Ladyburn in Ayrshire, where my own young children regarded

them as a wonderful and unusually indulgent *extra* uncle and aunt; and finally in Thornton le Clay where Peter took Sydney Smith to his own heart and planted him in everyone else's.

These were three places where Peter and Sylvie successively created their exceptionally attractive, extraordinarily hospitable houses, and where they brought up Richard and William.

How proud he was of Sylvie, and of their two boys, and of what Richard and William have made of their lives. He will live on in his grandchildren.

That closeness of Sylvie and Peter has never been greater, nor I believe more inspiring, than in these last difficult months after Peter's energies began to fail, and when Sylvie's life-long care for him remained so necessary and constant. Their love, heaven knows, was huge.

**'I doubt whether any of us has ever thought of the one without the other'**

May I add, on the subject of heaven, where he has undoubtedly gone, that I don't think Peter subscribed *exactly* to the trumpets-and-*foie-gras* vision of that place, found in the Sydney Smith aphorism. But he did once tell me that his greatest worry was that he might arrive there only to discover there was no suitable knife with which to open the oysters.

How appropriate, how moving, that this service has been held here where he grew up, and that he is to be buried at Sydney's own church at Foston.

We are so happy to have known him. But we say goodbye with much sadness; because by a simple subtraction sum, we fear that *this* world will be a less loving, less kindly place without him.

*And finally, in* Sitting By Peter*, the co-editor of the* Newsletter *Frank Collieson recalls a strikingly rewarding friendship that was borne of the frustration of modern technology:*

Fittingly, I was recruited to the Association over a glass of red wine in a Cambridge college; soon after, a fun-filled AGM weekend in Edinburgh convinced me I had done the right thing, and before long (as is the way of such societies) I found myself invited to take on the editorship of the *Newsletter*.

Fine, but how to cope with the not-so-new technology when I was still enjoyably fluent with the old: Olympia portable, carbon papers, those ribbons …?

No problem for Peter Diggle. He gave me lunch at his delightful Old Brewery, not quite twelve miles from a Yorkshire lemon, and it was that day and on several subsequent editorial sojourns that I appreciated just how aptly named Peter and Sylvie's house was – for their hospitality was warm and boundless. And Peter's computer skills struck my manual mind as boundless, though his tirades against his machine were generally more than warm.

Sitting by Peter and his computer while dictating to him proof corrections to the *Newsletter* proved a lesson in good-natured tolerance: to a man of such pronounced views my corrections could have appeared nitpicking and unimportant, but he was generous enough to say how much he had learnt from me: when a colon rather than a semi, round bracket against square.

When I went off to bed, perhaps gently shaking his shoulder as he dozed for a minute, he would carry on, working often into the night or early in the morning to ensure a clean set of page-proofs beside my breakfast boiled egg. None of this ever drew a complaint from him, even when he was dead tired, and he was quick to pass on any congratulatory comments about a completed *Newsletter*; in his last year or two he would complain only about his diminishing grasp of detail.

I couldn't have known a kinder man than Peter, or been luckier as a recipient of his and Sylvie's affectionate hospitality.

**The Sydney Smith Association Newsletter**
**Issue 15 May 2010**

## OUR UPCOMING AGM WEEKEND IN YORK 11/12 SEPTEMBER 2010

Some of the most historic buildings in York will be the focus of the coming AGM, all of them well known to Sydney. These include Bedern Hall where the weekend commences on 11 September with a buffet lunch from 12.15pm and AGM from 2.15pm. The hall dates back to the 14th Century, when it was the refectory or dining hall of the College of the Vicars Choral who sang services in the nearby Minster.

One feature associated with the Hall, sadly now no longer visible (but which would have tickled Sydney), was a bridge linking the college area with the Minster Close so that the vicars could travel easily between the two, and avoid the great unwashed.

Following lunch and the AGM, members are invited to attend a guided tour of nearby Mansion House, followed by tea. York's Mansion House was the first official mayor's residence in England. Built in the 1720s in the fashionable Palladian style with a budget of more than 1000 pounds, no one is sure who its architect was. Suggestions include the artist William Etty and the designer of the Assembly Rooms Lord Burlington.

**The Mansion House is home to many treasures including York's great sword of state, dated 1416, which once belonged to the Holy Roman Emperor Sigismund**

Dinner that evening will be at Bedern Hall at 7.30pm, followed by a talk given by SSA trustee Professor Graham Parry entitled, The Dark Side of Sydney Smith – his Trespasses and Misdeeds.
On Sunday at 11.30am members

are invited to attend Choral Matins at York Minster immediately followed by catered lunch at nearby Grays Court, probably the country's oldest continually occupied house. Grays Court – just a stone's throw from the Minster - has impeccable links with history as diverse as the first Norman Archbishop of York, the Blue Stocking Club, Laurence Sterne, William Wilberforce and the Great South Sea Bubble.

Please note that dinner on the Saturday has to be limited to the first 60 persons applying. The longest walking distance is between Bedern Hall and Mansion House, roughly 700 yards. Additional information can be found at the following websites: www.bedernhall.co.uk and grayscourtyork.com which include relevant city centre maps. There is comprehensive accommodation information at www.visityork.org, a seven-days-a-week enquiry line on 01904 550099, but first-among-equals in local accommodation would have to be the Grange Hotel, an excellent family-run, four-star venue that hosts our regular York-based SSA luncheons.

Members may also be interested to know that the AGM coincides with the York Book Fair (www.yorkbookfair.com for more details). Details of the AGM programme and costings are in the enclosed application form.

## OUR CHAIRMAN HONOURED

We warmly congratulate Randolph Vigne on receiving an honour from the South African President at the annual investiture in Pretoria in April 2010. The Order of Luthuli (Silver) is awarded for 'a meaningful contribution to the struggle for democracy and human rights' and is given in the name of Chief Albert John Luthuli, president of the African National Congress from 1952 to 1967 and recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1960. In an interview with South Africa's *Financial Mail* after the ceremony, Vigne said it was clear that change was coming to the country. 'We were brought up to believe there'd be a bloodbath, but the reverse occurred with Mandela's release and the "Rainbow Nation". But the honeymoon is over and public debate is now shifting to the kind of society South Africa will be ... Poverty is the elephant in the room.'

## THE AGM WEEKEND AT BATH 26/27 SEPTEMBER 2009

*Graham Parry writes:* The weekend for the Annual General Meeting at Bath was unusually well chosen: blue skies with towering white clouds, and a slight touch of autumn in the air. There was an agreeable mood of anticipation as forty or so members descended upon Bath, with time to look around one of the most

architecturally rewarding cities in the country, and the opportunity for social diversion.

Bath was built for pleasure: that is the impression that immediately strikes one as one walks around the historic centre. True, many of those who came here came to recruit their health, and taking the waters was a vital part of their regime, but one can see from the character of the buildings that from the mid-18th Century onwards the emphasis shifted to social amenity. With the completion of the Assembly Rooms, designed by John Wood the Younger, in 1771, and the amplification of the baths into grand social spaces in the Roman manner, the stage was set for the elaborate courtesies of the Bath season, as unique to England as Carnival was to Venice, which reached their perfection in the reign of George III. Here Sydney Smith came briefly in 1797 and 1798. As a fairly young clergyman, he would hardly have been central to the proceedings, but he would have had a glimpse of the style, elegance and *bon ton* of the age.

**The Circus was John Wood the Elder's final project. He died in 1754 less than three months after the first stone was placed.**

The buildings still preserve that style and elegance. The people who fill the streets have lost their sense of style, and modern dress looks tawdry and utilitarian against the fine stone settings of the city. However, as if by instinct, the members of the SSA had remembered the old codes of the place, and had turned out in stylish mode for the annual reunion. The venue was Wood's Brasserie, which catered for our needs most satisfactorily. Following lunch, there was a walk through the streets to the Circus, where we were given a talk by Amy Frost, from Bath University, on the strange mixture of Roman and Ancient British motifs that haunted the imagination of John Wood the Elder, as he designed this most beautiful of architectural schemes. Memories of Stonehenge and the Colosseum were elided in this scheme, which combined allusions to the Druidic religion of the Ancient Britons, the healing properties of Bath waters, and the long Roman presence in Aqua Sulis (Bath) which had made it part of the civilised world of antiquity. (All this we know from the book that Wood wrote about his intentions.)

Edified by this lively and very well informed presentation, we walked on to the Royal Crescent, to take in the splendid panorama and appreciate the clarity and intelligence of Georgian town planning. We then entered No. 1 The Crescent, the house on the end of the great semi-circle, which has been restored to its probable condition in 1790. This restoration has been done to a very high standard: the decoration and furnishings really do encourage the imagination to visualise the social life that went on for so many decades in these interiors, and the paintings on the walls evoke the manners and dress of late Georgian polite society. For their conversation, read the plays of Sheridan!

Next on the programme was a gathering for tea and the AGM. This was held in a neat little Gothick chapel of 1785 built for the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion, a breakaway sect from Wesleyan Methodism. The Countess made herself the chief medium for introducing Methodism to the upper classes, so her chapel in Bath was an important recruiting centre. The home of the Countess (Selina Hastings) was adjacent to the chapel, and this pretty villa and the chapel together form the 'Building of Bath Museum'. At the AGM, the members were told that the problem of finding officers for the Association was now acute, with Peter Diggle having to step down because of poor health, and Randolph Vigne wishing to relinquish the role of chairman. The situation was retrieved by Sydie Bones' willingness to take on the role of Secretary, working in conjunction with Dorothy Williams as Membership Secretary, Arnold Arthurs as Treasurer, and Charlie Charters as editor of the *Newsletter*. There was discussion about the future direction of the Association, which concluded with an affirmation of the status quo: that is to say, a programme of visits to places associated with Sydney Smith, lunches for members where organisers could be found, occasional talks, along with a desire to enlarge the *Newsletter* as a medium of communication between members. The meeting noted that there must soon be a serious debate about the future of the Association: where will it be in five or ten years' time? The advancing age of the membership and the difficulty of finding the necessary volunteers are factors that cannot be overlooked.

The next event in this crowded day was the lecture, given in the chapel by the conservation architect David McLaughlin, who, standing in at short notice, gave us a powerfully felt talk on the disasters visited on Bath since the war by the City Council and its planning department. Taking us through a number of case histories and illustrating his points with photographs that made the heart sink, he told a tale of noble buildings destroyed, of opportunities squandered, and of monstrously ugly modern constructions intruded into Georgian or Victorian settings with unbelievable insensitivity. 'The Sack of Bath', as it is known in architectural circles, was all too vividly confirmed, and we were left in no doubt that successive councils have been the perpetrators. We were left in complete dismay at the ignorance, stupidity and

greed of councillors, architects and developers in one of the most beautiful cities in the kingdom.

We needed a drink after that, and headed back to the Brasserie for the annual dinner. Randolph Vigne as Chairman gave us an address, and proposed Sydney's health, and also the health of Peter Diggle, who was unable to be present. Conversation went on long into the evening.

Next morning, being Sunday, we went down to the Abbey to enlarge the congregation for morning service. The minister had been forewarned, so Sydney Smith was remembered in the prayers, although it was not entirely evident to those who talked with the minister afterwards that he understood the significance of Sydney's career. However, this was not the time for improving lectures. The Abbey was there to be enjoyed, the wonderful perpendicular vault to be marveled at, and the innumerable memorials and inscriptions to be absorbed.

After lunch, Michael Ransom led a party off to the outskirts of the city to inspect the Lansdown Tower, which was built for William Beckford in 1825-6 as his eyrie to survey his surrounding estates and take an overview of Bath. Beckford was the immensely rich eccentric who was able to indulge his every architectural whim and fancy. In middle age he built the vast and improbable Gothic fantasy of Fonthill Abbey in Wiltshire and, tiring of that extravaganza, he moved to Bath in 1823, where he built the Lansdown Tower as a new *divertissement.* Whereas Fonthill's spectacularly tall tower and spire famously collapsed in 1825, the Lansdown Tower survives, being much more solidly built, and it provided a fine farewell look at Bath.


**Of his architectural folly, William Beckford once said, 'it is a famous landmark for drunken farmers on their way home from market'.**

**MINUTES OF THE BATH AGM**
**26 September 2009**

The Chairman, Randolph Vigne, welcomed 37 members to the Museum of the Building of Bath, which hosted the meeting and provided tea with homemade cakes.

- Apologies had been received from the Hon. Membership Secretary, Peter and Sylvia Diggle and Charlie Charters.

- The minutes had been summarised in the April *Newsletter* sent to all members and a full copy was available to those attending the AGM. Adoption was proposed by Alan Bell, seconded by Mark Wade and approved *nem con*.

- Professor Arnold Arthurs, the Treasurer, reported that receipts for the current year so far totalled around £2030. After the expenses of the Bath meeting there should be a balance of about £4000, which would allow for donations in accordance with our charitable aims. A donation had already been made to Heslington church to commemorate the 200th anniversary of Sydney's arrival there in 1809. Acceptance of the financial report was proposed by Bob Peers, seconded by Timmy Forbes-Adam.

- The Treasurer reminded members that the SSA benefits financially if they fill in their tax details when paying subscriptions and hoped more would do this in future. Under Charity Commission rules Trustees must be elected annually. They were listed in the minutes and proposed by Ashley Jones, seconded by Robin Price and elected by the meeting *nem con*.

- The Chairman thanked Sydie Bones who would now be taking over as the Association's Secretary from Peter Diggle. She now becomes a Trustee *Ex-Officio.*

- The Chairman mentioned the Association's appreciation of Peter Diggle's immense contribution and sent the best wishes of the meeting. It was good to hear that Dorothy Williams had agreed to take over membership matters.

- The Chairman noted that the Editor, assisted by Frank Collieson, had done a fine job in producing this. He wished to discuss possible improvements to the look of the *Newsletter* and invited comments. Members mentioned the problem of increased costs and Graham Parry, who is involved in a Ruskin journal, agreed to look into this.

There followed a discussion on whether the Association should aim at increased membership. Peter Payan pointed out that younger members would be needed for the running of future administrations. Alan Bell said the October 2009 issue of *The Book Collector* would carry an article by himself on Sydney Smith. Offprints could perhaps be made available for publicity and to prospective members. Members discussed the sad possibility that the Association might have to wind down at some future date. Robin Price asked if the membership form could be put on the website. The Treasurer undertook to raise the matter with Philip Chapman. James Milligan suggested the Association might attempt to influence teachers and lecturers to explain Sydney's work and even include relevant questions at exam level. Another idea was that members could approach local U3As, who draw on their own membership as volunteer speakers.

- Michael Ranson circulated order forms from Faber for the recently republished Hesketh Pearson biography and Auden's *Selected Writings of Sydney Smith* (which are also included along with the *Newsletter*.)

- Alan Bell asked members to express their thanks to Michael Ranson for organising the Bath weekend, with its guided tours of architecture at the time of Sydney Smith and of No. 1 The Crescent, with lunch and dinner at Woods Brasserie. And finally the Chairman thanked the Treasurer and all committee members for their work during the year including organising the lunches.

*We thank Adam Fergusson for the script of his scheduled talk,* Conservation, Sydney Smith and Arrogance, *which he was not able to deliver at the Bath AGM and print the major part of it here:*

What was the reason for the post-war explosion of amenity societies, antagonised across the country by the new brutalism? Many would ascribe the vandalism of old towns and cities such as Bath - vandalism by destruction and demolition, or by the construction of the unsuitable in places of beauty - to philistine ignorance in the pursuit of profit.

But, time and again, the problem is arrogance. The arrogance in this case of those architects - employed and rewarded, of course, by the developer or the town planner - architects who determine in what shape of packing-case, cylinder, or rabbit hutch people shall live; who determine what cityscape, townscape or landscape should be sacrificed to their whim. We have lost fine buildings, seen fine areas despoiled, because money spoke louder than conscience or than taste: that was regrettable but comprehensible. We all know there must be development, and often that it needs

compromise. What sticks in the craw is being told that architects with impressive initials know best.

I have a letter from John Betjeman, that doyen of conservation, saying exactly that: after some exhilarating exchange in *The Times* letters column of the early 1970s about the presumptuousness of architects, developers and planners – 'Keep it up! Attack those arrogant charlatans!'

**John Betjeman: 'Keep it up! Attack those arrogant charlatans!'**

Sydney Smith would no doubt have put it more memorably. Hesketh Pearson records that there was no arrogance in him; but he had a fine nose for detecting it in others, exposing it elegantly, amusingly - but ruthlessly. His architectural interests, so far as I know, were limited. He planned and built his own vicarage at Foston. He alluded to the dome of St Paul's (in the context of stroking a tortoise). And his famous comment on Brighton Pavilion may well have dismayed its progenitor. But the notion of conserving old towns was for a later age.

Bath was the *cause célèbre*. The outcry that we created then, when acres and acres of Georgian rubble lay in great swathes across this city, when more and more so-called 'comprehensive development areas' were planned, when huge, hideous, shapeless blocks were already rising (all carefully clad in reconstituted Bath stone) and when it was proposed to drive a four-lane motorway through the town, partly along its riverbank, diving underground to by-pass its centre and re-emerge below Royal Crescent, that outcry became national.

One problem was that the old conservation policies didn't work. Grade 1 buildings were safe. Grade 2 were often safe. Bath had 2000 in these categories. But for a house to be listed Grade 3 (which advised careful consideration before pulling it down) was an invitation to destroy it before it was upgraded. And Bath had once had a thousand of these - and hundreds more which would have been statutorily protected anywhere else. Bath also had many energetic developers, a complaisant council, and a city architect, whose aim, as he said himself, was to give the young people of Bath the same facilities as were enjoyed in Bracknell New Town.

The City Council, understanding how controversial its policies were, and browbeaten by its own planning department, engaged the services and (above all) the authority of a member of the Royal Fine Arts Commission to give it advice - Hugh Casson, ARIBA of course, and later *Sir* Hugh, CH, KCVO. Two other RFA Commissioners - Owen Luder (of the Southgate shopping centre, now re-

demolished) and Sir Frederick Gibberd (of Bath Technical College) - had already contributed to the wholesale modernist uglification of much of the old town, and Casson was naturally of the same kidney.

When the battle was over - though these battles are never over - much had changed. As the result of the Bath experience, it became possible to designate a 'conservation area' - in which a whole street, a whole district, a whole city could be included and protected. Grade 3 conservation was abolished, and Grade 3 buildings all became Grade 2, which needed a public inquiry or ministerial permission to overturn. Bath's motorway tunnel plan was abandoned - there would after all be no 'city with a hole in its heart'. It had been the argument of the Bath Preservation Trust (75 years old in 2009) that old buildings could be as cheaply renovated as demolished and replaced. Bath's condemned buildings and streets - those that had barely escaped the bulldozer - were indeed restored and are lived in again. And Bath is worth seeing and enjoying, not just for its marvellous set-pieces like its crescents and squares, the Circus, Pulteney Bridge, the Pump Room and the Abbey, but for all the little artisans' houses, the crooked lanes, and the felicitous little Georgian doorways and corners and vennels that provide the setting for the rest, and conjure up what life was like in Jane Austen's Bath two centuries ago.


**1940s postcard painting of Robert Adam's world-famous Pulteney Bridge completed in 1773. The bridge was completely restored in time for the 1951 Festival of Britain**

The lessons of the battle for Bath were quickly applied elsewhere - Edinburgh, York, Salisbury, London all declared conservation areas. New conservation societies and trusts had been springing up ever since the war, but now they took fresh heart. And the Bath example was quoted across Europe - the conservers of Venice, Brussels, Utrecht, Paris and Istanbul all returning to the battle.

My own involvement in the problems of Bath started in 1972 when - as a feature writer for *The Times* - I was sent here by the editor to see what was going on. The article I wrote about Dr Howard Stutchbury, the city architect, and the attitude of his planning department towards preserving old buildings caused something of a sensation. I quoted him verbatim: 'If you want to preserve 18th-Century artisans' houses, you will have to find 18th-Century artisans to live in them.' He had allowed

the city's fire department, anxious to test the fire-resistant qualities of Georgian buildings, to set fire to an empty listed terrace house overlooking the Avon (by definition, it had to be one in good condition).

However, what really made me see red was the discovery that he was about to demolish Bath's real tennis court in Morford Street - the only 18th-Century one in Britain, and one of only two in the world. The area where it stood, he said, could not be 'comprehensively developed' unless it came down; and the 'needs of history' would be better served, if they were worth it, by putting up a plaque on the spot.

By chance, the court was unlisted. I went to the Department of the Environment to suggest it be spot-listed. It was too late for that - and the departmental secretary advised me, perfectly seriously, that the only way to save the court was by shaming Bath council into changing its mind. And that is the background to the book called *The Sack of Bath* first published in 1973, republished with an addendum in 1989, and (as it has become something of a classic polemic, greatly to my surprise) to be published once again in 2010. The council had second thoughts. Dr Stutchbury moved on. And the real tennis court still stands.

This talk was to be about Sydney Smith as well as Bath and arrogance. I have barely mentioned him. Well, as to Sydney's connection with this city (though I defer to anyone here with better knowledge), I think it was nothing remarkable - everyone who was anybody then came to Bath at some time, Sydney first because his parents had settled here for a few years in the mid-1790s. That was the occasion when theoretically he *might* have met the young Jane Austen here, who *might* theoretically have based on him Henry Tilney, hero of *Northanger Abbey*, whose talk and sense of humour were so extraordinarily like Sydney's. He was visiting and writing from Bath again about the time of Trafalgar in 1805. And Combe Florey is of course tolerably close, but by the time Sydney was given that living in 1829, Jane Austen, on the merit of whose novels William Whewell said he had heard Sydney dwell with eloquence more than once, was dead. What Jane Austen wrote about Bath - in those few short chapters in *Northanger,* set in Bath - has left us much more aware of its follies and foibles than Sydney ever did.

Yet it is fitting that our Association should visit Bath *en bloc*, as it were, simply because Sydney himself knew it when it was the Las Vegas, the fun city, of its day, when Napoleon's Continent was only sporadically available for Britons' recreation, and when the beautiful Georgian town was still growing,

– *Adam Fergusson held staff positions on the* Glasgow Herald *and* The Times *before winning the previously safe Labour seat of Strathclyde West for the Conservatives in the UK's first intake of directly elected MEPs in 1979.*

**SYDNEY AND JANE by Randolph Vigne**
**From a talk at a Boisdale lunch**


**1871 engraving of the rectory at Steventon, home for Jane Austen for much of her life, and a possible connection with Sydney.**

We were told that Sydney and his family stayed at 5 Edgar Buildings and, in the closing months of 1797, at various addresses with the Hicks Beaches, whose son Michael he was tutoring. The Austens were nearby at the same period and some of us visited the house next door, now the Jane Austen Museum. So proximity and date suggest that they might have met, also because the Hicks Beaches were friends of the Bramstons of Oakley Hall, Deane, very near the Austens at Steventon in Hampshire. The claim, made tentatively by both Lord David Cecil (see 2004 *Newsletter*) and John Sparrow (*Independent Essays,* 1963) is usually based on *Northanger Abbey,* Jane's first novel, written in 1798-9 (but published only posthumously in 1818) when a meeting with Sydney would have been fresh in her mind. Of its thirty chapters, eighteen are set in Bath where, in the Assembly Rooms, Catherine Morland meets the Revd Henry Tilney, his sister Eleanor and their father the General, and is invited to visit Northanger Abbey, where much fun is made of the popular Gothic novels of the day. John Sparrow quotes Jane on Henry Tilney's looks and gives several examples of his conversation, which have echoes of Sydney's wit, with what Brougham called his way of 'placing ordinary things in an infinitely ludicrous point of view'. Henry Tilney makes sport of Catherine's reference to London:

> 'You talked of expected horrors in London – and instead of instantly conceiving, as any rational creature would have done, that such words could relate only to a circulating library, she [his sister Eleanor] immediately pictured to herself a mob of three thousand men assembling in St George's Fields; the Bank attacked, the Tower threatened, the streets of London flowing with blood, a detachment of the 12th Light Dragoons (the hope of the nation) called up from Northampton to quell the insurgents, and the

gallant Capt. Frederick Tilney, in the moment of charging at the head of his troop, knocked off his horse by a brickbat from an upper window. Forgive her stupidity. The fears of the sister have added to the weakness of the woman; but she is by no means a simpleton in general.'

Perhaps too 'cluttered' for Sydney's style? asked Randolph. Certainly a good shot at it, but not enough to overcome the lack of hard evidence that Sydney and Jane ever met. A further aspect that might be explored is the likeness of the overbearing, devious General Tilney not to the usual suspect, General David Mathew (Jane's brother James's father-in-law) but to Sydney's father Robert Smith, who made life so difficult for his sons.

## MEMBERSHIP and GIFT AID

Thankfully, most members pay their subscriptions by Standing Order for which we are very grateful as it saves time and money. Would those members who pay by other means please note that subscriptions were due on March 1 (£15 single membership, £20 joint membership.) Cheques should be payable to The Sydney Smith Association and sent to the Hon. Treasurer, the Sydney Smith Association, Belgrave House, 46 Acomb Road, York YO24 4EW.

Members are encouraged to join the Gift Aid scheme by which the Association is able to reclaim tax on subscriptions and donations. A form is enclosed with this *Newsletter* that will cover all current and future subscriptions starting from January 2010, eliminating the need to fill in a form each year. Please complete this Declaration and return it to the Treasurer at the above address: the additional revenue raised is of significant value to the Association. The Trustees wish to thank all members who kindly elect to join the scheme.

## IN MEMORIAM - JAY DAWE

*Sydie Bones writes:* Members of the Sydney Smith Association, especially those who live in the South-West, will be saddened to learn of the sudden death of Jay Dawe who died at the age of 82 on 4 September 2009. Jay had been introduced to the Association by Revd Norman Taylor and to Sydney's writing by Norman's book *Twelve Miles from a Lemon*. She had enjoyed meeting other members in York, Winchester and Oxford, and it was her idea to introduce a West Country luncheon into the Association's calendar, enjoying the hunt each spring for suitable locations. These events, now firmly established, have combined good food with lively discussion, taking us to interesting places including Combe Florey, Mapperton and Wells Cathedral, with Jay invariably at the centre of animated conversation. She

endorsed Sydney's opinion that 'life is to be fortified by many friendships'. We have been privileged to be her friend.

– **MICHAEL GRIFFITH CBE, DL**

*Alan Bell writes:* Michael, who died aged 75 on 27 June 2009, was a staunch friend of the Association, and a familiar figure at our London lunches. We knew him as a well informed reader of Sydney's works and a supporter of his view of country living, but few could have known the full range of activities that made him so prominent, particularly in Welsh rural life. He farmed in Clwyd (where he was Vice-Lieutenant of his county), and was a huntsman and a National Hunt amateur jockey. He had been president of the Council for the Preservation of Rural Wales and worked for many similar organisations, rural, medical and educational. For some time in the 1990s he was a prominent member, decisive and independent, of the British Library Board. We shall miss him greatly.

## SOUTH-WEST IN SIDMOUTH

*Sydie Bones writes:* Loyal members of the Sydney Smith Association in the South-West met in Sidmouth for their annual luncheon on Monday, 12 April 2010. Sidmouth was a holiday resort much favoured by Sydney and his family: he described it as a 'marine paradise' where he rented a house so close to the sea that 'the noise of persons chattering French on the opposite coast is heard, and flatfish and mackerel have been known to leap into the drawing room…' Our meal was served in conventional style, in the Victoria Hotel overlooking the sea, and conversation flowed in Smithian tradition, ranging from the teaching of history to the state of the fabric of Combe Florey Church, both of which appear to need urgent attention. Ralph Rochester had chosen some pertinent extracts from the *Collected Works* (1845) to share with us. This quotation, from a speech given at the time of the Reform Bill, is a fragment that could as well be part of today's election rhetoric: 'Is it possible for a gentleman to get into Parliament at present, without doing things he is utterly ashamed of …'

The joy of his words lie in their pin-pointed relevance, as much to our 21st Century as to Sydney's Georgian society; and the delight of sharing his wisdom with true companions is one of the joys of membership of the Association.

Any member who would like to receive details of future SSA gatherings in the South-West is requested to contact Sydie Bones, telephone (01297) 35525 or email sydie.bones@btopenworld.com

## LONDON LUNCHES

Four lunches are held each year, always on a Wednesday, at the charming Boisdale restaurant in Eccleston Street, off the Buckingham Palace Road exit of Victoria Station. This year's remaining dates are 28 July and 27 October.

Prices range from £23 for one or two courses with unlimited soft drinks to £34 for three courses with soft drinks/wine and coffee. Members are advised to meet between midday and 12.30pm and place their orders by 12.45pm to secure the speediest service. Cheques payable to the Sydney Smith Association are the preferred means of settling bills.

If you could like to attend, please contact Celia Moreton-Prichard on telephone (020) 88529636, giving at least a week's notice if possible.

## YORK

Once again, the Association thanks the owners and staff of the Grange Hotel. We continue to enjoy excellent lunches and are always made to feel especially welcome. For those interested in attending a York lunch, please contact Mary Rose Blacker, Huttons Ambo Hall, York YO60 7HW or telephone (01653) 696056.

## SYDNEY SMITH AND THE SCOTCH by Sam Taylor
## From a York lunch, March 2010

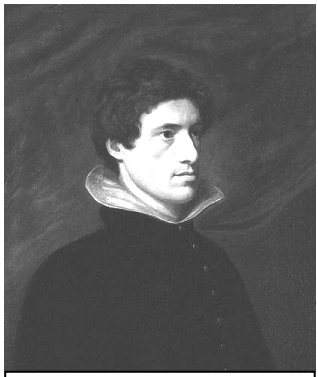
At the risk – or perhaps in the hope? – of offending Scots I have reverted to the earlier way of referring to their countrymen, the term that Sydney himself would have used.

Sydney made his first visit to Scotland in the spring of 1798 in the company of the young Michael Hicks Beach, to whom he was tutor. The original plan to continue Michael's education in Weimar had been abandoned because of the success of the French Revolutionary armies. The English universities were ruled out in favour of Edinburgh, which at that time enjoyed a better reputation for learning, so Edinburgh was to be Sydney's home for the next five years, as tutor to two Hicks Beach boys in turn.

He would have gone to Scotland equipped with the usual prejudices of the day regarding its inhabitants. Centuries of warfare and invasions (in both directions) had created a climate of mutual fear and hatred between England and Scotland. The English saw their neighbours as uncouth, speaking an alien tongue, attached to an alien religion, clannish (in the literal sense), quarrelsome, violent, drunken and none

too clean. Recent events had done nothing to soften this harsh image: the Act of Union had encouraged many Scots to enter England and, so the caricature ran, snatch plum jobs from the native English; in 1745 a Jacobite army led by Bonnie Prince Charlie had penetrated as far south as Derby, causing panic in the capital, an event still vivid in the memories of many people alive at the time of Sydney's visit to Scotland. So anti-Scotch prejudice remained, as vigorous as ever.

The educated were not exempt: Johnson's snide remarks about the North Britons are well known (they even found their way into his dictionary) and Charles Lamb, whose temperament was as gentle as his name, wrote, in about 1820: 'I have been trying all my life to like Scotchmen and am obliged to desist from the experiment in despair.'



**Hazlitt's portrait of Charles Lamb (1775-1834) who wrote, 'Lawyers, I suppose, were children once …'**

Byron, smarting from attacks on him in *The Edinburgh Review*, riposted with accusations of Scottish greed:

> Blessed be the banquets spread at Holland House
> Where Scotchmen feed and critics may carouse

Sydney's comments on his first sighting of Scotland as he crosses the border are predictable: 'The country was abominable, the inns bad, the *postchaises* dirty, everything indicative of vermin and want.'

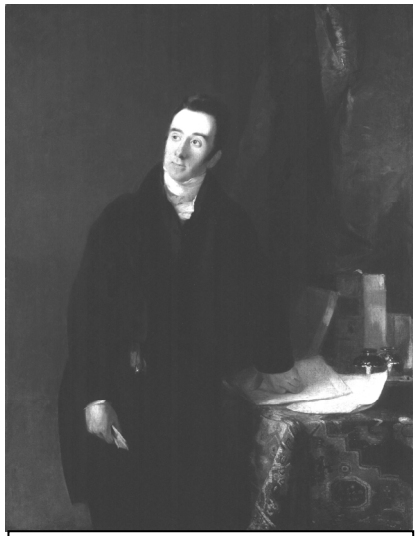
He characterises Scotland as: 'that garret of the earth, that knuckle-end of England, that land of Calvin, oatcakes and sulphur.' Later he wrote, 'No smells were equal to Scotch smells. It is the School of Physics. Walk the streets and you would imagine that every medical man had been administering cathartics to every man, woman and child in the town.' If Edinburgh was known as Auld Reekie, it was not down solely to the amount of coal burned in the city's grates.

There was a second Scotch stereotype: overlaying the bare-kneed Highlander brandishing his Claymore, there was now the dour Calvinist with his perpetual 'Thou Shalt Not …' He lacked a sense of humour (practically a hanging offence in Sydney's book): 'It requires a surgical operation to get a joke well into a Scotch understanding. Their only idea of wit [Sydney spells it *wut*] … is laughing immoderately at stated intervals.'

It is clear, however, that Sydney, once settled in Edinburgh, was obliged to modify his view of his hosts: his ambivalence is encapsulated in one sentence, 'Never shall I

forget the happy days I passed there, amidst odious smells, barbarous sounds, bad suppers, excellent hearts and cultivated understandings.'

The last phrase refers to another, a third, Scotland, that of the Enlightenment. Its luminaries, David Hume, Adam Smith and William Robertson, international figures in their own lifetimes, were all dead by the time Sydney arrived in Scotland, but the spirit of bold enquiry and rigorous scholarship which they embodied still burned brightly. Attending lectures at the university and joining various debating and dining clubs, Sydney came into a circle of very clever and ambitious young men, amongst them Francis Jeffrey, Francis Horner, Henry Brougham and Henry Cockburn. They were all in their early 20s, lawyers by education, Whigs by inclination, all out to make a name for themselves and change the world.



**Francis Jeffrey by Geddes (1820). Jeffrey is believed to have written *The Edinburgh Review's* first article, Sydney the second.**

Four of them, Jeffery, Horner, Brougham and Sydney decided in 1802 to found a periodical which would serve as a platform for their views: *The Edinburgh Review.* The first issue contained articles on parliamentary reform, slavery and Catholic emancipation. It was an immediate success; for the next half century it was to be the most widely read and influential periodical in the English language.

The circle of friends Sydney joined at Edinburgh remained close to him for the rest of his life. They visited him at Foston, they exchanged letters. Sydney continued to mock them – there are frequent references to oatcakes and metaphysics – but it is all done with affection and without malice. What shines through is Sydney's appreciation of their 'excellent hearts and cultivated understandings': the Athens of the North had vanquished Auld Reekie.

## STAYING WITH THE SMITHS IN 1777

*Randolph Vigne writes:* In March 1777 a young woman called Rebecca Grose wrote to a friend at her home in the Isle of Wight about her visit to London. One letter was written from St Mary Axe where she was staying with her sister and brother-in-law and the other from the latter's brother's house in Sackville Street. This second host

and hostess were Robert and Mary Smith (née Olier), parents of five young children, one of whom was Sydney Smith.[1]

Alan Bell wrote of Robert Smith that 'he was an ill-tempered man who treated all his children badly', and of Mary that 'little is recorded of her though her generally poor health is sometimes alluded to'. Becky Grose's letters brings them into closer focus, at least as they had been in Sydney's childhood, both more and less happily.

Becky was herself unwell part of the time (and being bled – 'the relief was instantaneous' - by Dr Saunders, on the advice of 'Mr Woollaston, a nephew of Mr Smith's', apprenticed to Mr Prowting, the first apothecary in London). She enjoys

**'We heard a most stupid sermon from the Bishop of Bath and Wells … we were just as wise at the end as at the beginning'.**

musical evenings and is captivated by hearing Miss Harrup sing 'O for the wings of a dove', card parties (Hatchett and Whist, but she drew the line at 'Vinet Une, a most horrid gambling game') and visits to Maria's sister's school in Bloomsbury, where young ladies are taught dancing and deportment.

Other family members and friends are encountered – the Trowers (Robert's sister and her husband), the Vignes (Margaret was Maria's sister) who gave a large party in their house 'above Blackfriars Bridge' and several Oliers[2] and their Huguenot circle – Dubissons, Turquands and Nouailles. At church with the Smiths 'we heard

[1] Copies of the two letters were given to me by Mrs Avril Pedley, who has since published them, with others, in *A Georgian Marriage. The Family Papers of Sir Nash and Lady Grose, 1761-1814* (Wimborne Minster, Dovecote Press, 2007). The picture of the Smiths in Sackville Street is less happy than had appeared. Maria's 'ill-health' was in fact due to serious epilepsy, which perhaps accounts for her sons being sent away at such an early age.

[2] The connection between Robert Smith and his Huguenot in-laws, the Oliers, is highlighted in the wills of Maria's parents, Isaac and Maria Olier, proved in 1774 and 1781 respectively, abstracts of which have been published by the Huguenot Society in *Huguenot Wills and Administrations in England and Ireland, 1617-1849* (London. 2007). Isaac, of Bloomsbury Square, left household goods and one-fifth of five houses in Little Turnstile to his wife Maria (with affidavits by 'Robert Smith of Aldermanbury, merchant, and Christopher Olier, of the parish of St Bride's. gent'.). His widow Maria left to her son Christopher the Little Turnstile property and fifty guineas each to her daughters Margaret Vigne and Maria Smith. Her spinster daughters Ellen and Charlotte, 'executrices and residuary legatees', ten guineas each.

a most stupid sermon from the Bishop of Bath and Wells … we were just as wise at the end as at the beginning'.

Robert Smith emerges as improvident and boastful but courteous and amusing: 'I fear he lives away too fast. I know his creditors complained last year, for his expenses were £600 … but his answer was that no Gentleman could live on less … He was here yesterday and boasted that he had lost 4 guineas and a half in less than ten minutes the evening before at Lamb Skinett with some company at his house. I own I wish he had been silent on the subject.'

Later, she was pleased with Robert's 'usual politeness', and, more familiarly, 'that creature Bob sings so delightfully in the next room that I hardly know how to proceed. I wish the creature's mouth was stoped with hott plumb pudding.'

Becky is concerned about Maria who seems to have something lay 'very heavy on her mind' and later: 'Her little treasure was inoculated yesterday so that her mind is filled with a thousand fears … if any accident was to happen Maria's reason would give way … I think the dear girl begins to droop … complains of being drowsy and doesn't chuse to Eat.'

There is, strangely, no reference to Sydney, then six, and his three brothers, but we know they were sent to school in Southampton in 1777 – aged between seven and four, leaving only three-year-old Maria at home. She grew up a semi-invalid with spinal trouble, lived with the widowed Robert and was an intermediary between father and sons in their many disputes in later years. Becky's nephews at St Mary Axe 'set off on Friday last for Exeter leaving Becky's sister, their mother, disconsolate at 'parting with her children so many Miles'. It is good to read of a visit to the opera after which Becky never saw the two Mrs Smiths 'in better spirritts'.

All this against a background of war and depression. 'Here we are terribly in the dumps. Poor old England must now be ruined. The Americans seem to carry all before them.' Acquaintances, rich men among them, are going bankrupt: 'Mr Nail, the Taylor', with wife and seven children 'throwd himself out of the Window last Sunday & was killed on the spott … nothing but miseries seem now to present themselves. Poor old England.'

Despite ill-health and worries, Becky Grose found much to enjoy in her London visit in the company of her sister's and the Robert Smiths' friends – professional, military, India and city people, a far cry from the Holland House set and the grandees with whom Sydney mixed in later years.

We cannot now read between the lines of her letters but can detect hints of stress in the brothers Smiths' households, most clearly when she writes of finding a home for 'poor Mary Carkett', motherless and with her father 'to be sent out' (to India?). 'I quite feel for her and where she will go God knows. I don't think St Mary Axe will be the thing for reasons best known to ourselves.'

There are also several critical references to an unidentified, arrogant 'Sir' who could be Robert or his brother, suggesting the difficulties ahead endured by Sydney and his brothers. Becky sets off back to the Priory, near Brading, Isle of Wight and asks her friend to buy two caps, hers with a pink riband, Mrs Smith's with blue, to save sending from London: because 'to have boxes in the chaise will never do with Sir'.

## SYDNEY SMITH: SEEN AND HEARD

### A Happy Helping Hand

The American author Gretchen Rubin wrote *The Happiness Project* (Harper 2009) in which she described spending a year 'test-driving the wisdom of the ages, the current scientific studies, and the lessons from popular culture about how to be happy - from Aristotle to Martin Seligman to Thoreau to Oprah.'

The book was published in December 2009 and quickly became a number one on the all-important New York Times list of bestsellers. Included in one of the hundreds of happiness experiments she conducted during the research and writing of the book is 'Nineteen Tips for Cheering Yourself Up - from 200 Years Ago.'

Rubin says she has her 'own variety of tips lists for cheering up, and I was interested to hear what someone from two centuries ago would recommend. Most of Smith's suggestions [in an 1820 letter from Sydney to a low-spirited Lady Morpeth] are as sound now as they were almost 200 years ago -- "attend to the effects tea and coffee produce upon you" for example, is thoroughly modern. A few, though, are amusingly odd. It might be tougher today to work "good blazing fires" into everyday life.

'My favourites are numbers 1, 3, 6, 13, 15, 16, and 17.

'"1st. Live as well as you dare. 2nd. Go into the shower-bath with a small quantity of water at a temperature low enough to give you a slight sensation of cold, 75 or 80 degrees. 3rd. Amusing books. 4th. Short views of human life - not further than dinner or tea. 5th. Be as busy as you can. 6th. See as much as you can of those

friends who respect and like you. 7th. And of those acquaintances who amuse you. 8th. Make no secret of low spirits to your friends, but talk of them freely—they are always worse for dignified concealment. 9th. Attend to the effects tea and coffee produce upon you. 10th. Compare your lot with that of other people. 11th. Don't expect too much from human life—a sorry business at the best. 12th. Avoid poetry, dramatic representations (except comedy), music, serious novels, melancholy, sentimental people, and everything likely to excite feeling or emotion, not ending in active benevolence. 13th. Do good, and endeavour to please everybody of every degree. 14th. Be as much as you can in the open air without fatigue. 15th. Make the room where you commonly sit gay and pleasant. 16th. Struggle by little and little against idleness. 17th. Don't be too severe upon yourself, or underrate yourself, but do yourself justice. 18th. Keep good blazing fires. 19th. Be firm and constant in the exercise of rational religion. 20th. Believe me, dear Lady Georgiana."'

Perhaps closer to Sydney's heart was the BBC2 programme *The Delicious Miss Dahl*. Episode Four, on Melancholy, saw the model turned cook read out the very same Lady Morpeth letter before restoring everybody to an even temper with a recipe for bubble and squeak cakes with a fried egg and red onion gravy.

**Thanks to the former model Sophie Dahl, Sydney was the talk of a recent BBC cooking programme.**

**In Tuneful Accord**

*From the* Daily Telegraph*, 4 December 2009:* When Samuel Sebastian Wesley was appointed organist of Hereford cathedral in 1832, he found that the eight adult members of the choir were all clergymen aged between 49 and 78. Five were in poor health, two were deemed to be sub-standard and the 78-year-old was exempt from attending services.

This was the crisis in which cathedral music found itself, at a time of clamour to take away revenues from the Established Church. That music survived at all in the Church of England at the Reformation had been touch and go.

**'It is a matter for wonder that those responsible for the leadership of the Church do not have sleepless nights over this problem'**

Cathedrals had precentors, responsible for choral services. But at St Paul's in the 1830s, the Precentor (a canon, on a fat £2,000 a year) appeared so infrequently that when he did once turn up for a service, the dean's verger did not recognise him, and refused him entry to his stall. The wit Sydney Smith, a fellow canon, referred to this precentor as the 'Absenter'.

How this sorry state of affairs was transformed by the end of the 19th Century, when cathedrals enjoyed a weekly round of well-attended choral services, is a theme of *In Tuneful Accord* (Canterbury Press), a study of church musicians of the past two centuries by Trevor Beeson.

The author was Dean of Winchester and knows what he is talking about, and not just concerning cathedrals. Their reform of choral music was shadowed by the rise of surpliced choirs in parish churches. Very little hymn-singing took place in English churches before 1820. At a time when the altar-table might serve as a convenient place to leave hats, the main Sunday service was Morning Prayer, with the Litany, the Ante-Communion and a substantial sermon.

It caused a stir when, at St Paul's, Knightsbridge, in 1846, two lighted candles were placed on the Holy Table for the weekly celebration of Holy Communion, with a surpliced choir and a few parts of the service sung.

The first surpliced choir had been introduced at Leeds parish church in 1818. The convention before was for ordinarily dressed people to sing and play instruments

from the West gallery at the back of the church. The notion that the focus of worship was in the chancel meant that the choir was transferred into that location and wore sacred vesture.

Beeson's book questions whether this was always a sound idea, for not many parish churches could guarantee the continuance of a good choir. The best 100 choirs in England today are the wonder of the world; but there are 16,000 churches also expected to make music. Perhaps congregational singing with capable singers among the people would sometimes serve better than emulating the cathedral style.

Yet the fact that 'in an increasingly secular age many thousands of dedicated amateur singers and instrumentalists are still ready to assist the Church's worship through the gift of music is a matter for wonder and gratitude. Many of them would benefit from greater appreciation.'

**Edward Elgar (1857-1934) photographed in 1912**

Things might have turned out worse. Trevor Beeson tells much of his story through the remarkable lives of men (mostly) who made the difference: hymn-writers, reforming clergy, and composers like Elgar and Stainer.

One scarcely famous name is that of the Revd Sir Frederick Ouseley Bt, who in 1854 used his own money to build and run a training-school for church music, St Michael's College, Tenbury. It closed as a choir school in 1985, a time when many institutions were closing.

Now, Trevor Beeson notes, music is caught up with a low standard of worship, by which 'congregations are unedified and casual attenders are repelled'. It is, he declares, 'a matter for wonder that those responsible for the leadership of the Church do not have sleepless nights over this problem'.

## The Survival of Books

*On 28 October 2009, the influential reference site Britannica.com published a thoughtful piece by its former editor in chief Robert McHenry:* Over my desk hangs a large print of a photograph taken in London during World War II.

It is of the library of Holland House, one of the great houses of London from the time of its construction early in the 17th Century until its ruin in the blitz of World War II. In its long life as the town home of the earls and later the barons Holland and their descendants, it was frequented by leading figures in English life. In the 18th and especially in the 19th Century it provided hospitality to men of letters: Joseph Addison, who died there; Lord Byron; Thomas Babington Macaulay; Sydney Smith; Horace Walpole; Charles Dickens; and Sir Walter Scott, among many others. Small wonder that the library was large and well stocked.

One night in September 1940 the house was largely destroyed by German bombs. But the library – perhaps fortified by the weight of those books, perhaps (let us imagine) defiant of the book-burning Nazi regime – stood. The roof fell in, great beams hung precariously, but the shelves were mostly intact and the books remained quietly and neatly arranged in their proper order.

In the photograph, three men stand quietly at those shelves, seemingly oblivious of the rubble all about them. They are hatted, of course – two homburgs and a fedora – which brings home to the viewer the ambiguity of their situation: Are they indoors

or out? One of the men is looking into a book; a second is just about to pull one from its shelf; and the third is simply scanning the spines arrayed before him.

What strikes us most forcefully is the men's *sangfroid*. Surrounded by the wrack of war, they stand in silent contemplation of the books.

Merely British stiff-upper-lip? Perhaps. But it seems more than that to me. The men are not, after all, queueing for the No. 47 omnibus.

I have seen a website (it is with pleasure that I omit to provide a link) in which a modern, I should doubtless say postmodern, scholar calls this photograph 'an image of the fetishization of the text,' followed by some more dismissive silliness. To me it is an image of respect, all the more remarkable for the circumstance. It is respect for learning, for what man has achieved since moving out of the trees and the caves, expressed all the more poignantly amidst the evidence of the fragility of that achievement.

Make no mistake: The temporary survival of the library at Holland House was sheer happenstance. The next bomb might well have turned those books back into the wood pulp from which they were manufactured and the thoughts in them into a fading memory. But bombs are not required to do that. Not only books but the whole fabric of civilization exists even now at the sufferance of the least intelligent, the most violent, or the most cynical among us.

## MORE SYDNEY IN THE NEWS

*From a weekly diary published in November 2009 in the* Irish Independent*, writer and journalist Eoghan Harris records …*

TUESDAY - Archbishop Michael Neary admirably attempts to discourage forecasts of further apparitions at Knock. He should go further and question the first one too. As did my maternal grandfather, Owen Beirne, a small Roscommon farmer and devout Roman Catholic who met many involved at the time.

'Owen believed the alleged Knock apparition was the work of a couple of RIC [Royal Irish Constabulary] constables with a sense of humour and a magic lantern. Like the great English clergyman and friend of Ireland, Sydney Smith, Owen believed that Christianity should be 'an exercise of rational religion'.

*Published in* The New York Times *in October 2009, respected literary reviewer Bob Harris explains How to Be a Book Critic*

You spend all that time, years maybe, writing a book, and what does someone do? Gives it to a book reviewer. Or worse, a critic. Writers, take heart. Samuel Johnson understands, and speaks for you. Celebrating Johnson's tercentenary, Harvard University Press has just published a fine edition of his *Selected Writings*, edited by Peter Martin. In an essay for *The Idler,* Dr Johnson expounded on what it takes to be a book critic:

'Criticism is a study by which men grow important and formidable at a very small expense. The power of invention has been conferred by nature upon few, and the labor of learning those sciences, which may by mere labor be obtained, is too great to be willingly endured; but every man can exert such judgment as he has upon the works of others; and he whom nature has made weak, and idleness keeps ignorant, may yet support his vanity by the name of a critic.


**Gillray's caricature of Dr Samuel Johnson, mocking him for his literary criticism; he is shown doing penance for Apollo and the Muses with Mount Parnassus in the background.**

'I hope it will give comfort to great numbers who are passing through the world in obscurity, when I inform them how easily distinction may be obtained. All the other powers of literature are coy and haughty, they must be long courted, and at last are not always gained; but Criticism is a goddess easy of access and forward of advance, who will meet the slow, and encourage the timorous; the want of meaning she supplies with words, and the want of spirit she recompenses with malignity.'

Hmm. Maybe just hope the book-review editor assigns your opus to a contemporary version of another Englishman, Sydney Smith, who once said, 'I never read a book before reviewing it; it prejudices a man so.'

*In a piece from the* Pittsburgh Tribune-Review *from 13 September 2009, Colin McNickle, editor of the paper's editorial pages, bemoans the lack of consistency in President Barack Obama's manufacturing policy:*

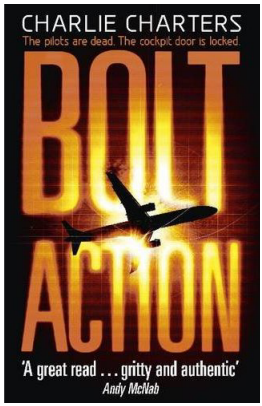
Americans' intelligence deficit – their critical thinking skills, in particular – surely has become a race to embrace the lowest common denominator. 'I never could find any man who could think for two minutes together', wrote Sydney Smith, the English clergyman, essayist and wit in 1804. Considering the reaction, or lack thereof, to one particular development last week, that sentiment is most contemporary …

## New Publications

*The Life and Times of Abraham Hayward QC, Victorian Essayist.* Antony Chessell, Revised Edition 2009, published by Lulu.

Abraham Hayward, 1801-1884, was a frequent guest at society dinners in London where he met Sydney Smith, recording these meetings in his essays and letters. This biography contains some reference to their association, including one letter from Sydney asking for information about a medical practitioner: 'Do you know of the Aesculapius of Lyme Regis?' and inviting Abraham Hayward to visit.

*Bolt Action*. Charlie Charters. Hodder Paperbacks, available now on amazon.co.uk and in UK stores from 2 September 2010.




A shameless plug for the debut book by the *Newsletter's* co-editor!! The subject matter is about as far removed as could be imagined from the world of our Georgian wit and ecclesiastical man of letters: Since 9/11, the door between the pilots and the passengers on an airliner must be locked and impossible to break down. But what if the pilots are dead? Tristie Merritt leads a renegade band of ex-soldiers. Their daring scam will take millions from a furious British government and give it to veterans' charities – if MI5 don't catch up with them first. But faced with the ultimate terrorist outrage at 36,000 feet, MI5 and the CIA find that Merritt is their one hope of preventing global disaster.

But there is a genuine Sydney connection. The book, Hodder's lead paperback for the month of September, starts with a familiar epigraph: 'To do anything in this world worth doing, we must not stand back shivering and thinking of the cold and danger, but jump in, and scramble through as well as we can.'