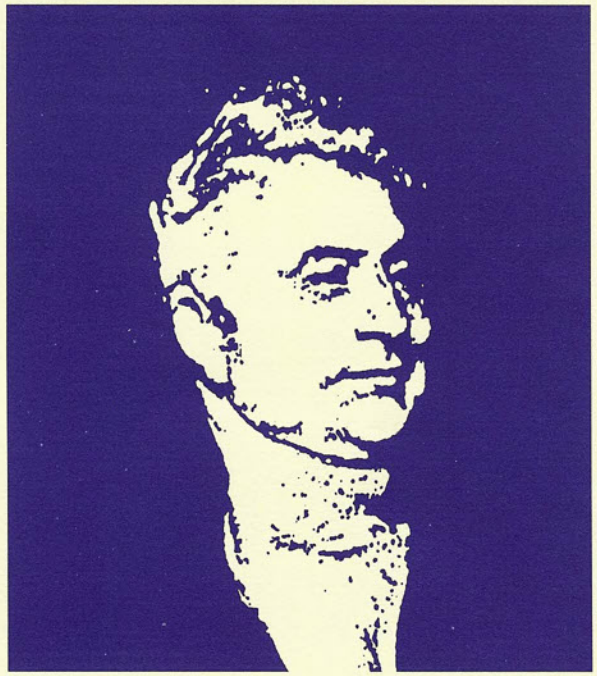
THE SYDNEY SMITH ASSOCIATION



NEWSLETTER

Issue 16

May 2011

Sidmouth and the sea.
The view looking east along the dramatic Jurassic Coast

The Sydney Smith Association Newsletter
Issue 16 May 2011

OUR UPCOMING AGM WEEKEND IN SIDMOUTH 17/18 SEPTEMBER 2011

"A little marine paradise": Sydney Smith's description of Sidmouth in a letter to Lady Grey, in August 1844, would be as appropriate today on a holiday postcard depicting this unspoilt Regency town. For fifteen years, from about 1830 until his death, Sydney Smith took his family to Sidmouth, renting a large house 'as close to the sea as your bedroom is to your drawing room' (letter to Lady Grey, August 1831). Although we have not been able to trace the actual house referred to, the Esplanade is lined with suitable contenders.

Sydney Smith wrote many letters from Sidmouth to his friends, enticing them to visit (*'there is a large Russian princess who will be delighted to make your acquaintance'*) or complaining of the *ennui.* However, his most famous reference to the town was in a speech delivered at Taunton, when he likened the House of Lords' rejection of the Parliamentary Reform Bill to the vain efforts of a Sidmouth resident Mrs Partington to hold at bay the rising waters of the Atlantic Ocean:

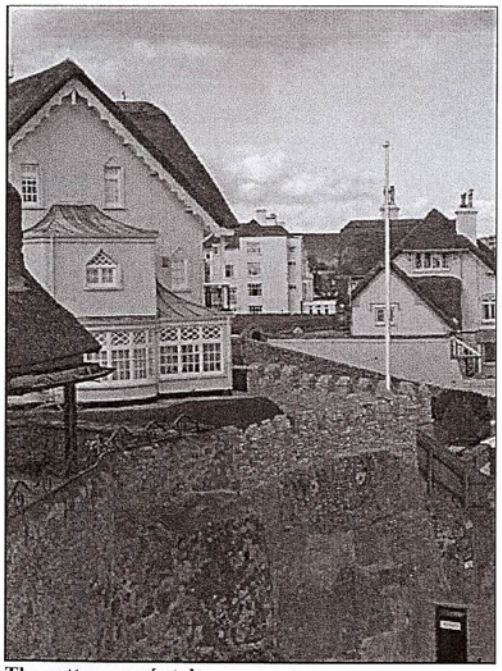
'I do not mean to be disrespectful but the attempt of the Lords to stop the progress of reform reminds me very forcibly of the great storm of Sidmouth, and of the conduct of the excellent Mrs Partington on that occasion. In the winter of 1824, there set in a great flood upon that town – the tide rose to an incredible height – the waves rushed in upon the houses, and every thing was threatened with destruction. In the midst of this sublime and terrible storm, Dame Partington, who lived upon the beach, was seen at the door of her house with mop and pattens, trundling her mop, squeezing out the sea-water, and vigorously punching away the Atlantic Ocean. The Atlantic was

Dame Partington and the ocean (of reform). By HB (John Doyle 1797-1868) at the Bodleian Library

roused. Mrs Partington's spirit was up; but I need not tell you that the contest was unequal. The Atlantic Ocean beat Mrs Partington. She was excellent with a slop or a puddle, but she should not have meddled with a tempest.' Sydney Smith, 11 October 1831.

The tempest of 1824 is documented in the archives; in the museum are political cartoons inspired by the allegory, as also is a painting of Dame Partington's cottage. It stood on the beach, and, like the Lords' opposition, was swept away by the rising tide.

Sidmouth overlooks Lyme Bay, with views stretching east to Portland Bill in Dorset and west to Start Point beyond Dartmouth. Sheltered by red sandstone cliffs, it boasts warmer temperatures than many South Coast rivals. Originally a fishing port, the town developed into a holiday resort in the early 19th century, attracting the nobility and gentry whose customary visits to the continent had been curtailed by the Napoleonic wars. The houses built between 1800 and 1850 were distinctive in style: an early developer, Emmanuel Lousada, built the first *cottage orné* – a large house with thatch and carved barge boards. Villas more suited to the aristocracy were described as 'Strawberry Hill Gothic', copied from Walpole's house in Twickenham with castellated battlements and Gothic windows; the town guide now describes these as 'Sidmouth Gothic'. Many of these villas are today's hotels, the most famous being The Royal Glen where in 1819 the Duke of Kent, father of the future Queen Victoria, died of pneumonia.



The cottage orné style

The Belmont Hotel, where our AGM takes place, started life as a fine family home, double-fronted with verandahs and bow windows, approached through an impressive crenellated and arched stone gateway. A painting of it *ca*1821 hangs in the museum. The Regency house is recognisable externally only by the first floor balcony.

The Association is indeed fortunate in having the Bishop of Exeter, the Rt Revd Michael Langrish, as the guest speaker. He will no doubt be seeking to restore the good name of bishops in general, and the Bishop of Exeter in particular, in view of the aspersions cast upon his predecessor, Henry Phillpotts, by Sydney Smith: 'so like Judas that I now firmly believe in the apostolical succession'.

Sunday worship will be in the parish church, dedicated to St Giles and St Nicholas. Norman in foundation, the structure was extensively rebuilt in 1860, retaining only the 15th century tower and two side arcades. A contemporary benefactor and diarist, Peter Orlando Hutchinson, documented the modernisers' and preservationists' bitter feud, an altercation that divided the whole town. The reconstruction went ahead; Peter Hutchinson recorded the saga in his account *The Restoration of Sidmouth Parish Church*. Anxious to preserve what he could of the former building, in September 1859 he bought the old chancel from the builder for £45, rebuilt it on a nearby plot of land stone by stone, eventually adding new accommodation into which he moved in 1866. The project took a further 25 years to complete. Old Chancel House, located near the church at the end of Coburg Terrace, will be one of the houses identified on the town walk.

Our final gathering will be a buffet lunch in Kennaway House, formerly Church House, currently owned by a charitable trust and run as a centre for the arts. This elegant Regency house was built in 1805 by Captain Thomas Phillipps for his wife, the daughter of Sir James Amyatt, MP for Southampton and a major landowner in Sidmouth. It was described as 'a handsome brick house … with a view of the town and the sea'. After the death of the immediate family, various tenants rented the house; the census return for 1841 records the tenant as the Revd James Blenkowe.

Kennaway House, formerly Church House, will host a Sunday lunch for SSA members

Sidmouth continues to win the devotion of frequent visitors, as witnessed by the recent legacy of a Canadian investment banker, Keith Owen, who bequeathed most of his fortune to the town; according to John Betjeman's daughter, Candida Lycett

Green, this was because 'he believed it was just how England used to be and exactly how it should be'. Betjeman is perhaps the best-loved of personalities who have sung the resort's praises; his commentary in verse written for a television programme in 1962, published in 2000 as *Still Sidmouth : The Lost Poem*, contains the following lines:

Mansions for admirals by the pebbly strand
And cottages for maiden aunts, inland,
That go with tea and strawberries and cream,
Sweet sheltered gardens by the twisting stream,
Cobb, thatch and fuchsia bells, a Devon dream.

Betjeman and Sydney Smith agree: a marine paradise indeed.

Combe Florey is little more than an hour's drive into Somerset. The church has recently undergone repairs and all the pews are once more in regular use. Some of you will undoubtedly wish to make your own pilgrimage there.

Accommodation in Sidmouth

The following information is for guidance only: seafront hotels are expensive but there are guest houses offering reasonable bed and breakfast within walking distance of the sea. The Tourist Information Centre, Ham Lane, Sidmouth EX10 8XR, tel. 01395 516441, website www.visitsidmouth.co.uk and the town website www.sidmouth.com give details of hotels and B&B establishments.

The following examples give prices for stays of more than one night:
On the seafront, the Royal York and Faulkner Hotel provides B&B at £64 per person per night: freephone 0800 220714, www.royalyorkhotel.co.uk
Dukes, also on the seafront, where dinner on Saturday evening will be taken, has guest accommodation at £64pppn, www.hotels-sidmouth.co.uk

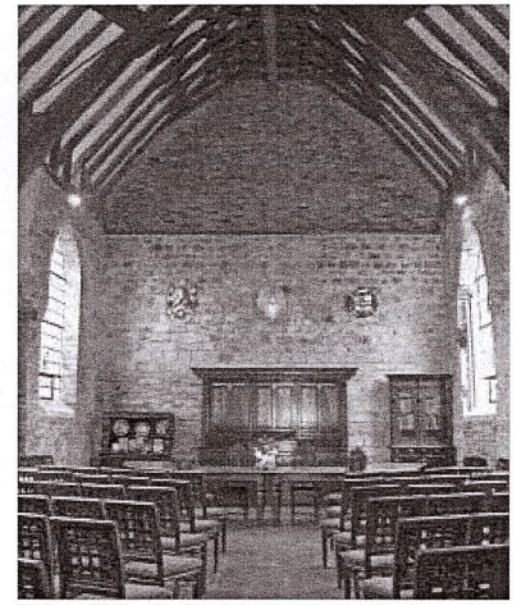
Within walking distance are the following:
Hunters Moon Hotel, £61 pppn, tel. 01395 513380, www.huntersmoonhotel.com
Mount Pleasant Hotel, £55pppn, tel.01395 514694, www.mountpleasant-hotel.co.uk
Canterbury House, £35pppn, tel. 01395 513373.
Berwick Guest Hose, £35pppn, 01395 513621.
The Old Farmhouse, from £30pppn, tel. 01395 512284, www.theaa.com
Willow Bridge, from £30pppn, tel. 01395 513599, www.willowbridgesidmouth.com

MEMBERSHIP DRIVE

Thanks to the initiative of our Secretary, Sydie Bones, we are able to enclose two copies of a new leaflet about Sydney. When she was asked by the Friends of Combe Florey Church for information about him which could be given to visitors, Sydie at once began preparing a draft which, 'with enormous help from Alan Bell' by way of improvement and expansion, became what you now see. Thus, vitally accompanied by application forms for membership of the Association, this admirable account is now available in Combe Florey; and of course, hearing of it, Foston Church was keen to follow, so copies are on offer to visitors there. With those enclosed we invite you to act as recruiting officers to spread word about Sydney and, with luck and persuasion, to bring new members to the Association.

THE AGM WEEKEND AT YORK
11/12 SEPTEMBER 2010

Mark Wade writes: Our AGM last year took place in York somewhat earlier in September than has been our wont. The advantage of this arrangement meant that we were able to meet and eat in a more satisfactory location (the Bedern Hall) than might otherwise have been the case, but on the other hand a number of regular attenders were wrong-footed by this unexpected departure and had already committed themselves to other activities.


Bedern Hall, the fourteenth-century refectory of the Vicars' Choral of York Minster

This was the first time the York AGM was centred on the city rather than Castle Howard or Heslington, the intention being partly to reduce travel. Above all there was the dolorous realization that this was the first York AGM at which Peter Diggle was confined, as it were, to excarnate attendance.

The Bedern Hall, the fourteenth-Century former refectory of the Vicars' Choral, was hired for Saturday. Roger Lee who

supervises the Hall on behalf of its trust enjoys a high reputation for providing good food and in this matter we were in no way disappointed, and indeed some might suggest we were over-indulged. Luncheon was followed by the AGM conducted by chairman Randolph Vigne with his habitual touch of equanimity and eloquence. Matters being duly completed we set about negotiating the crowded streets to the Mansion House where a guide was in attendance to take us around the principal rooms and entertain us with a fascinating historical account of the building and of its many artifacts.

In the early evening some forty members sat down to a splendid dinner in the Bedern Hall after which Graham Parry, whose erudition is so entertainingly expressed, gave the company a compelling account of the decadence of the Church of England in Sydney's day.

An unusually large number of members were on parade for Choral Matins in the Minster on Sunday morning to enjoy the extraordinarily high standard of singing that has been achieved under the new director of music Richard Sharpe, not long arrived from Lichfield. From there it was but a short distance along cobbled back streets to Grays Court where a light collation had been ordered, greatly to the delectation of those assembled.

Whether or not Sydney would have entered this ancient building can only be a matter for conjecture but he would certainly have approved of it and of the elegant Regency dining room with its huge bow window where we had lunch. It proved a fitting finale for our weekend which, as Jeeves might have observed, 'appears to have given universal satisfaction'.

MINUTES of the YORK AGM
11th September 2010

The Chairman, Randolph Vigne, opened the Annual General Meeting held at the Bedern Hall, York, where members had earlier enjoyed lunch and lively conversation. Before starting formal proceedings, the Chairman invited members to join him in a minute's silence in commemoration of Peter Diggle, whose death in March 2010 was a great loss to this Association, which owed its existence and success to Peter's vision and involvement. The Chairman stressed the importance of continuing to foster Peter's legacy.

- **Apologies** had been received from Mary Beaumont, Alan Bell, Mary Rose Blacker, Raymond Burton, Timmy Forbes Adam, Ashley Jones, Graham Parry, Diana Shervington, Norman Taylor.

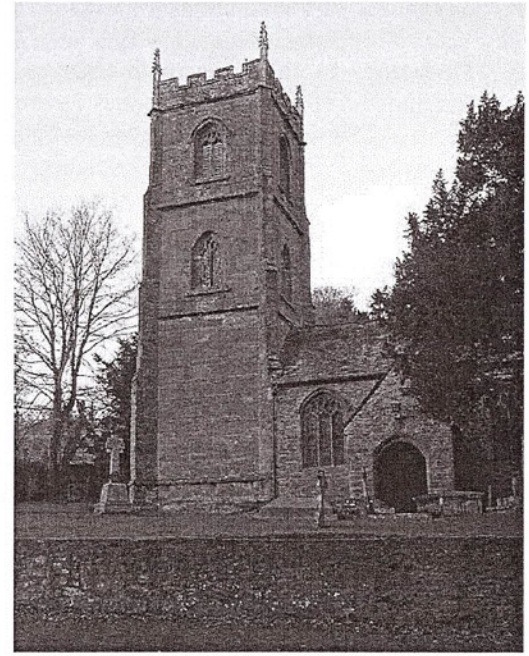
- **Minutes** of the 2009 AGM, printed in the May Newsletter, were accepted as a true record of the proceedings.

- **Points** arising: encouragement to introduce Sydney Smith into schools' curriculum had resulted in an offer to accept an article for publication in the HM Conference journal.

- **The Treasurer** presented a healthy financial statement for the year 2009 which had been submitted to the Charity Commission in April. Subscriptions amounted to £2060; Gift Aid tax recovery added £185; end of year balance £4685.

- Revised Gift Aid forms, covering all future subscriptions and donations, have been returned by 37 members. The Treasurer encouraged all members to do likewise.

- For the current year, 2010, receipts from subscriptions and donations stand at £2292 compared with £2030 last year. After deduction of AGM expenses, projected end of year balance is in the region of £6000.


The church at Combe Florey, recipient of an SSA grant

- Adoption of the Treasurer's Report was proposed by Mark Wade, seconded by Michael Ranson, and accepted *nem con.* The Treasurer was thanked for his Report.

- **Membership** now stands at 237, one-third of whom have not paid their subscription for the current year (N.B. £15 single, £20 double).

- **Newsletter**: the Chairman thanked Charlie Charters for producing an excellent Newsletter, and acknowledged the experienced help given by

Frank Collieson. Members' attention was also drawn to Charlie's recent publication *Bolt Action*.

- **Trustees** – Deirdre Bryan-Brown is standing down as a Trustee. Sylvie Diggle has agreed to join the Trustees: proposer Arnold Arthurs; seconder Sydie Bones. Remaining trustees have agreed to stand for re-election: Chairman, Treasurer, Secretary, Alan Bell, Graham Parry, Peter Payan and Norman Taylor. Proposed *en bloc* by Maureen Payan, seconded by Sheila Wade. Agreed *nem con.*

- **Website** is dormant and a new webmaster will be sought urgently.

- **Donations to churches**: with reserves of approximately £6000 estimated for the end of 2010, the Trustees have agreed two donations of £1000, the beneficiaries being the churches at Combe Florey and Foston. This is in accordance with our aims as a charity. The Secretary reassured members that problems at Combe Florey had been resolved.

- **The AGM for 2011:** the date was agreed for 17th and 18th September; the location chosen was Sidmouth, the Devon resort where Sydney Smith took his family on holiday. It was hoped to set up a communication network by which members could be reminded of booking for the AGM. Volunteers will be needed to take on small lists of members; email would be the best form of contact.

- The Chairman thanked the Treasurer, Secretary and Membership Secretary for their work throughout the year.

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 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.

In addition, members wishing to take up the opportunity to run their subscriptions through Gift Aid will find enclosed with the Newsletter the appropriate form. Completed forms should be returned to the Hon. Treasurer at the address above. In the last financial year, 37 members took advantage of the Gift Aid scheme allowing us to claim a tax recovery of £185, for which we pass on our thanks and gratitude.

THE DARK SIDE OF SYDNEY SMITH, by Graham Parry

Over the years, the members of this Association have devoted themselves to remembering the many admirable qualities of the Reverend Sydney Smith, so perhaps it is time to reflect on some aspects of his career that are less than gratifying to modern judgement.

As a first consideration, we might remark that he was a clergyman by default. He had no natural vocation for the Church, and he really should have been a lawyer. That is what he wanted to be when he left Winchester, but his father would not support him financially. In his life after Oxford, many of his closest friends were lawyers: Francis Jeffrey, Francis Horner and Henry Brougham, for example – though relations with Brougham were always volatile.

Sydney didn't seem to have many clergymen amongst his good friends. He took holy orders because he couldn't think of any other way of earning a living, and at the time he did so, in the 1790s, the church was a career like the law or the army, though less exciting and less well paid. The Church of England was a central part of the social system, and had become so secularised that it could scarcely be considered a spiritual repository. That secular character suited Sydney, and indeed he helped to strengthen that tendency, by involving himself in the foundation of the *Edinburgh Review* and writing (anonymously though with wide recognition) on political and social matters, and by becoming a society figure known for his wit and bonhomie, and for his interest in the gastronomic arts.

The late eighteenth-century church that Sydney entered was torpid, deeply conservative, and totally disinclined to change. Led by archbishops whom no one remembers, it was devoted to the maintenance of its own privileges and perquisites. One might say that the Church existed primarily for the benefit of the clergy, who, for the most part, formed a class of comfortably housed and socially respected gentlemen. Unless one was a curate – of whom more later.

The duties of a clergyman were usually undemanding. A little light baptising, the composition of sermons of a conventional nature, the occasional communion service, and so on. The rector or vicar of a parish was unlikely to be troubled by any theological difficulties, or by any doubts about the vast social inequalities of the time. The rich man was in his castle, and the poor were at his gate, in great numbers. The rector protected the character and conscience of the squire and the gentry with services of an uncomplicated Christianity, and aided and admonished the country folk of his parish by the same reassuringly simple Christian means.

As I said, the Church of late Georgian and Regency times was highly secularised and had a low spiritual content. It was after all an institution of the state. Reading diaries of the time, I find many examples of the laxity of religious practices. I have read of a rector in Somerset who had become an atheist, who greeted worshippers on Sunday morning at the gate of his rectory wearing a long dressing gown and smoking a hookah, while his curate took the service. Or the church in Wiltshire where the beginning of the sermon was the signal for the squire's butler to bring in his master's luncheon, which the squire then ate in his pew. Or the card-playing that went on in family pews, or the ladies in a church in the Kent marshes who would feed the toads that lived in the damp pews. When John Mason Neale, the hymnologist, took his first service at Crawley, 'in the middle of the service, the churchwarden, wanting to open the east window, got up on the altar …'

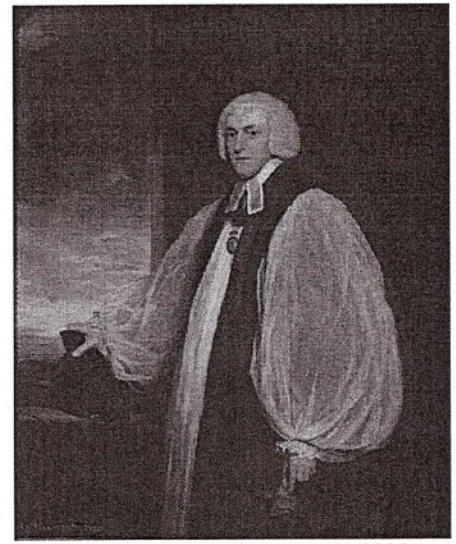
John Mason Neale (1818-1866), writer of the lyrics to the hymn *Good King Wenceslas*

But this casualness was nothing compared to the real corruption in the church, most especially nepotism. The term 'nepotism' was first applied to the Catholic Church, in which popes gave rich livings to their nephews and other relatives, but the practice had spread to the Church of England by the eighteenth century. It was worse the higher you went. The dominant Archbishop of Canterbury in Sydney's time was Charles Sutton (1805-28). He placed thirty-eight members of his extended family in church livings, and he is cited as a prime example of 'the perversion of ecclesiastical patronage' by one of the critics of the Church in the 1830s. 'Among seven of his closest relatives are shared sixteen rectories, vicarages and chapelries, besides preacherships and dignities in cathedrals. Of the eleven daughters of the Archbishop, several had the prudence to marry men in holy orders, who soon became amply endowed. One of these men, the son of the earl of Beverly, in as many years, was portioned with eight different preferments, estimated to be worth in total £10,000 per annum.' You can see where Trollope got the stuff of his novels from.

Big Money for some

There was big money to be made in the Church. In the 1820s, the two archbishops were paid about £26,000 per annum, and the bishops averaged £10,000. Many livings brought in close to a thousand pounds a year. At the bottom of the system were the drudges, the curates who had not managed to be appointed to a living, and who could be hired by vicars to do the work of the parish for £60 or £75 pounds a year.

Not only were many livings very profitable, but the custom of holding plural livings was also prevalent in the Church. A successful man could hold several livings, which were in most cases given to him by a patron who approved of him or who was related to him. The additional livings would be served by a curate on those disgracefully low wages, while the vicar who possessed the living would receive the full income of the place.



Charles Sutton (1755-1828) was Archbishop of Canterbury from 1805 to his death

Nepotism, pluralism, tepid belief, irreverent attitudes to the Church – this was not a good time for the Church of England. And conservatism too. For the first thirty years of Sydney's ecclesiastical career, the Church was in a profoundly conservative condition, in line with the conservative politics of the country that were in large part a reaction to the French Revolution. Liberal or radical politics were deeply offensive to the governing classes of this country: look what they had done to France. Hard-line conservative ministries continued, with a brief interruption, up until 1830. And the most deeply conservative group in Parliament was the bench of bishops in the Lords.

I think one can say, then, that the Church was in a fairly corrupt condition in late Georgian England, and I would say that it corrupted those who entered into it, and benefited from its privileged opportunities. This is where Sydney's dark side lies, hard against the Church, the Church that caused him so much frustration, so much gratification, that was the source of so much humour and so much bitterness, and which he accepted as unchangeable. He swallowed the enormities of the Georgian Church whole, suffered its privations and vastly enjoyed its rewards.

In truth, he only did what all of his contemporaries did, but when one remembers Sydney's acute mind, his appeals to the conscience of his hearers and readers, his ability to recognise hypocrisy and unethical dealing, then one begins to think that he should have been more aware of the compromising circumstances of his career in the Church. When he was offered the living at Foston near York in 1806, through the good offices of Lord Holland when the Whigs enjoyed a brief spell in power after the death of William Pitt, Sydney accepted, but he still held on to the three preacherships in London that he occupied: the Berkeley Chapel, the Fitzroy Chapel and the Foundling Hospital. These London appointments obliged him to swan off to the metropolis for extended stays. At first he continued to live in London, and put in a £60 curate at Foston. His response to the gift of the Yorkshire living was to move into a larger house in London, in a posher part of town. He obtained a permission for non-residence at Foston from the Archbishop of York. Even when he finally came up to Yorkshire, he managed to get approval to live on the edge of York rather than in his parish. His reluctance to visit, let alone settle in, the village whence he received £800 per annum for the cure of souls is remarkable, but hardly unique. It has been calculated that in the diocese of York in the 1810s, only four out of ten parishes had resident ministers.

This basket-full of livings that sustained him by 1810 must have seemed to Sydney a compensation for his early experience of clerical misery when he left Oxford without an appointment to a college living, and went as a curate to a bleak country parish at Netheravon in Wiltshire on £50 a year. 'Nothing can equal the profound, the unmeasurable, the awful dullness of this place', he informed the squire of the village. As for his tiny income, he wrote: 'Poverty is no disgrace to a man, but it is confoundedly inconvenient.'

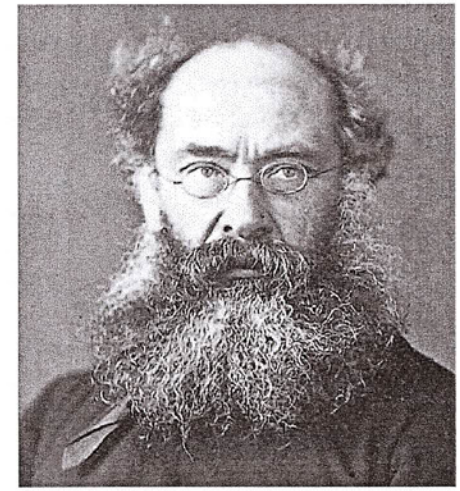
In later years, the curate became one of his favourite figures of fun, featuring in many of his amusing observations, but when he himself was a curate, it was no joke. Ill-paid, lonely, ignored or exploited, with no clear status in rural society, a curate was a forlorn figure. It was a role difficult to avoid for many young clergymen, if they did not get a college living or a patron. It was not too hard to get a fellowship at your Oxbridge college when you graduated, but you had to take holy orders to stay on, and then you had to wait for a vacancy to occur in a living owned by the college. You might have to wait for years, during which time you became deeply bored with the stupefying regime of college life – the character of which in the second half of the eighteenth century is memorably given by Gibbon in his autobiography – or you sought a patron or you risked everything by taking a curateship and hoping that it would lead to a full-time job.

Sydney was fortunate to be rescued from rustic obscurity by his brother's friend, Michael Hicks Beach, who sent him as his son's tutor to Edinburgh, where Sydney's life took off, but countless other curates mouldered, for there were far too many ordained young men for the places available. Nevertheless, I think that this early experience of clerical poverty gave Sydney a lifelong anxiety over money, and a determination to acquire as much as he could in a Church that was rich but very uneven in its distribution of favours.

He did rather well, as we know. In the brief Whig-dominated ministry of 1806, Lord and Lady Holland were able to arrange for the profitable living of Foston to go to their friend Sydney Smith (profitable because of its high agricultural rents - £800 in good years).

After a long time spent caring for Foston, his financial outlook improved again in 1823 when the Howard family at Castle Howard managed to get the equally profitable living at Londesborough in East Yorkshire for him, by persuading the Duke of Devonshire that he was a worthy man. He was certainly now a well-to-do man. Sydney knew he had the confidence, style, education and intelligence that should make him a bishop and put him centre-stage in the Church, but he also knew that under the conservative ministries that dominated the first quarter of the nineteenth century he didn't stand a chance, with his liberal and satirical views and his championing of the cause of the Catholics.

But when the tide of sentiment began to change around 1828, and the Whigs and the Reformers gained ground and then power, he began to feel that perhaps a bishopric was a possibility for him. He knew Lord Grey, the Whig leader, socially, and in 1831 Grey gave Sydney a canon's post at St Paul's, worth £2300 a year. Riches indeed, for that stipend was more than that which several of the smaller bishops received. Would he rise higher? He was 60 then, and vigorous – not too late to be a bishop.



Anthony Trollope: 'the odour of pious decorum round the episcopal wig'

Life in the ether

A bishop in the 1830s was a far different thing from the bishops we know, or the bishops of High Victorian times. They were remote and exalted beings, living in the ether of the ecclesiastical regions. Anthony Trollope gives us some vivid recollections of the bishops of the late Georgian Church, in some articles that were full of observations that he gathered

in the course of writing his Barchester novels. He recalls the splendour of their appearance; 'the odour of pious decorum round the episcopal wig', and 'the cloud of sacred millinery' that enveloped them in those days. They laid aside all this panoply in the 1850s, and with it went much of their authority and mystery. (The same thing happened to academics when they stopped wearing gowns in the 1960s.)

'The bishop lived like a great lord in his palace, drawing an income from his territorial domains – an income which was often so much greater than his needs as to afford him the means of amassing a colossal fortune.' 'And as he generally entered upon the possession of this income without any of the encumbrances which are incidental to the hereditary possessors of great properties, and usually considered himself to be precluded by the nature of his profession from many of those wealth-consuming pursuits to which his lay brother nobles are prone, it came to pass that the bishop was ordinarily a rich man. He kept no race-horses; he was not usually a gambler; he could provide for clerical sons and clerical sons-in-law out of the diocesan pocket: and was preserved by the necessary quiescence of clerical life from that broadcast magnificence which is so costly to our great nobles.'

Trollope notes that bishops, once promoted, were rarely content, but hankered after a richer see. 'What was a bishopric with three thousand a year, when there were others of equal rank with seven, or eight, or occasionally with ten thousand – not to speak of the sublimity of Canterbury, or the magnificence of York, or the golden opulence of Durham, or the ancient splendour of Winchester, or the metropolitan glory of London?

'The interest which made a bishop could translate a bishop, and therefore no bishop in those days could rest in comfortable content in the comparatively poor houses of Exeter or Gloucester, while Ely might be reached, or at least Worcester. Thus it came to pass that men, who in those days were never young when they were first chosen, were still living always in hope of some rich change. And they sought ever-greater opportunities of wealth with a tenacity of purpose which might almost put a usurer to shame.'

Trollope had no doubt that underneath the splendour that clothed the bishops and their appanage, there was a dullness of mind and a rottenness of moral purpose. 'The bench of bishops as constituted under the circumstances described was not conspicuous for its clerical energy, for its theological attainments, or for the impartial use of the great church patronage which it possessed.

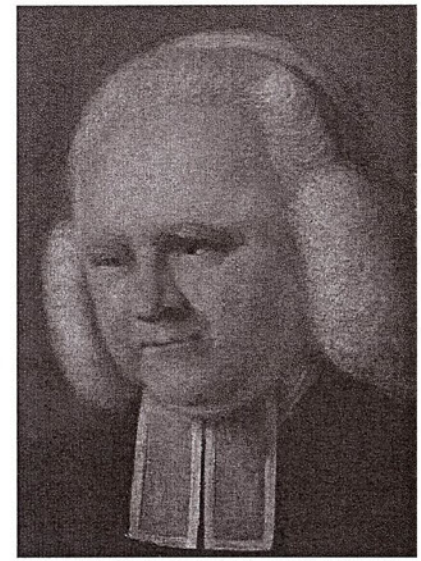
'Much awe was engendered, but with a few exceptions, they did little other clerical service. New churches were not built under their auspices, nor were old churches repaired. Dissent in England became strong, and the services of the State Church were in many dioceses performed with a laxity and want of decency which, though it existed so short a time since, now hardly obtains belief. Who remembers bishops of those days who did the work to which they were set?'

New rectory, church unrepaired

This, then, was the episcopal world that Sydney would have entered had he succeeded in his ambition to rise in the Church. One can well imagine that he would have fitted into it effortlessly. He had already shown that his inclinations were conventional for the time at Foston, when he decided to build himself a new rectory instead of repairing the church. And he was notable for his scorn for Dissenters, who were often the most spiritually active Christians in Britain at this time.

It was fairly easy to lampoon the excesses of Methodist enthusiasm or dissenting smugness, as Sydney did in his article on Methodism (a book review), but less easy to explain why Methodism was sweeping the country. Their preoccupation with their own salvation, their wonderment at trifling signs of God's grace (as when someone who was swearing was stung on his tongue by a bee), their sense of divine providence constantly at work on every individual, their sentimental and extravagantly metaphorical language for describing their experiences: all these could be sent up and seen to be ridiculous. Sydney's satires in this department were followed up by Dickens in his caricatures of dissenting and evangelical ministers. Sydney for example shows his disapproval of what he calls their low and shocking familiarity with the sacred – their mingling of the holy with the commonplace – in his entertaining treatment of a Methodist tract that opens: 'to those among the followers of the crucified redeemer who are in the habit of visiting the Isle of Thanet in the summer'... You can imagine what possibilities that sentence opens up.

But while Sydney can readily believe that uneducated people can easily be beguiled by a form of religion that assured you of personal contact with the saviour, and produced emotional highs and lows, he can't acknowledge that there is any genuine spiritual nourishment in Methodism, of a kind that the established Church of England was failing to deliver. He keeps talking about the virtues of a moderate, rational Christianity that teaches people to be 'good and just and charitable'; he



George Whitefield: 'considerable talents'

speaks of the 'calmness and moderation' of the established Church, but he can't feel the force of Methodism or the need that it meets. John Wesley and George Whitefield he respects as men of 'considerable talents': 'they observed the common decorums of life; they did not run naked in the streets, or pretend to the prophetical character – and therefore they were not committed to Newgate. They preached with great energy to weak people; who first stared, then listened, then believed, then felt the inward feeling of grace, and became as foolish as their teachers could possibly wish them to be. In short, folly ran its ancient course.' This doesn't seem to get the whole picture. One might reflect that Jesus preached with great energy to weak people, to some effect. He acknowledges that Methodism is gaining ground with remarkable speed: 'the principality of Wales and the East India Company they have already acquired; they are attacking the army and navy, and have made an alarming inroads into the Church'.

'It will excite in us no manner of surprise if a period arrives when the church of the sober and orthodox part of the English clergy are completely deserted by the middling and lower classes of the community.' He rejects the idea of suppressing the Methodists and similar enthusiasts by act of parliament – toleration must always prevail: there is his liberalism showing. The only remedy against the growth of Dissenters is the education of the poor. The thought that it might be the services of his own established Church that are at fault never crosses his mind. The conventional routines, the dull repetitions of the prayer book, the banal sermons – surely never at Foston or Combe Florey, I hear you cry – the bland assurances that all will be well hereafter. The appeal of an inward spirituality escapes him.

Windham excelled, eventually expelled

The Church of England existed to benefit the dominant class in the country. It did not serve the people so much as it served its own higher ranks. That sometime seems Sydney's attitude. Never was this more flagrantly expressed than in the case of Sydney's problem son, Windham, in the mid-1830s. Windham had left Charterhouse School with a reputation for violence and brutality: in an age when such qualities were common in public schools; Windham excelled in them. At Cambridge he continued violent and brutal, and was eventually expelled from Trinity for gambling debts. But Sydney wanted him to enter the Church, where he could be stowed away in some secluded parish. He wrote to Lord Palmerston: 'I had intended my son for the Church, but he thinks the Church is falling, and will not go into it. I had for the purpose of giving him a good living kept myself at the head of the preferment list at St Paul's – and the good things I had in store for him must now go to some one else.' Nothing could be more cynical.

Sydney's attitude to Church reform is most revealing. Here is a man who had argued for reform on so many fronts: for the reform of Catholic disabilities in articles in the *Edinburgh Review*, in his pamphlets such as the Peter Plymley letters, and in sermons. He had argued for the abolition of the slave trade and the emancipation of slaves, for changes in the administration of justice and to the penal system, for the improvement of the treatment of the mentally ill, and of course for the reform of Parliament itself by supporting the Great Reform Bill.

But when it came to the reform of the Church, Sydney was obdurately opposed. The idea was monstrous, it would overturn the work of ages, it would destroy the spirit of the nation. As Trollope commented, surveying the changes in society in the last generation, 'Sinecures and the promotion of young favourites used to be common in the Civil Service; but the public would not endure it, and the Civil Service has cleansed itself. The army and the navy have been subjected to searching reforms. A great law officer has been made to vanish into space because he was too keen in appropriating patronage to family uses. But the bishop, in whose hands patronage has been placed, that he might use it in the holiest way for the highest purpose, still exercises it daily with the undeniable and acknowledged view of benefiting private friends.'

Sir Robert Peel, championing reform

Sydney against reform 'nonsense'

Not just the bishops, but layer upon layer of clerics resisted change. In 1835, the new Tory ministry headed by Sir Robert Peel decided to steal the Whig's clothing and embark on a policy of reform, beginning with the Church. Peel set up an ecclesiastical commission to reduce the disparities between bishops' incomes, abolish pluralism, and reduce cathedral establishments and perquisites. Sydney fired off letters to ministers pleading with them to intervene to stop this nonsense of Church reform. He had only very recently exercised his right, as a canon of Bristol, to nominate himself to the living of Halberton in Devon. Why should this agreeable system be terminated?

The letters he wrote to Archdeacon Singleton contain in great detail his outrage that the Church should suffer reform – 'the commissioners are on the eve of entailing an

immense evil upon the country'. Reform will ensure that the Church will no longer be attractive to gentlemen of good family, for the opportunities for comfortable living will be so severely cut. What a prelude to the imminent coronation of the young Victoria this will be. He imagines her 'enchantingly beloved, and amid the solemn swell of music, when her heart beats happily, and her eyes look Majesty, she turns them on the degraded Ministers of the Gospel, and shudders to see she is stalking to the throne of her Protestant ancestors over the broken altars of God'. The rhetoric instantly reveals the emptiness of Sydney's fears.

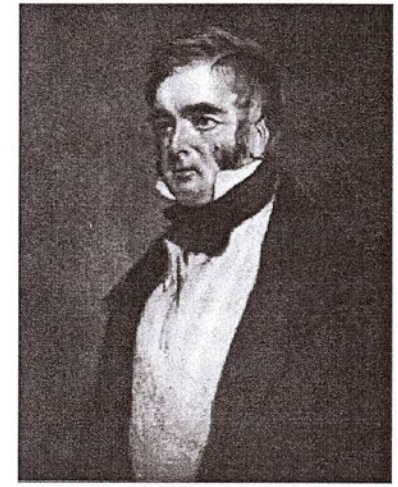
Reform of the practices of the Church did take place, in spite of all Sydney's protests. But reform of the spirit of the Church took place too in the 1630s, in a much more powerful and enduring way, for the crusade against the decadence, secularism and corruption of the Georgian Church was beginning in Oxford, as Pusey, Keble and Newman started to preach against the abuses within the Church, and began to redefine the character of the Church of England in ways that emphasised its spiritual mission.

Its codes of belief were now given prominence, its doctrines were re-examined, its liturgy restored, and the sanctity of the priesthood affirmed. Churches were considered holy places once again, and restored. New churches were built in great numbers. Young men flocked into holy orders out of Christian commitment, not because they could make a comfortable living.

The world was transformed by the Oxford Movement. As Trollope remarked, 'these men, Pusey, Keble, Newman and their brethren, stirred up throughout the country so strong a feeling of religion, gave rise by their works to so much thought on a matter which had been allowed for years to go on almost without any thought, that it may be said of them that they made episcopal idleness impossible, and clerical idleness extremely rare.' Sydney in the course of a few years became an outdated man.

He could not appreciate that, naturally, and still hoped for a bishopric. As the Whigs were in power for half of the 1830s – or Liberals, as they were now beginning to think of themselves – he hoped he would be rewarded for long service in their cause. He wrote to Lord John Russell in 1837 to try to get him to act on his behalf. 'I am distinguished as a preacher, and sedulous as a parochial clergyman. . . . I am sincere in saying that I would not take any bishopric whatever …' He was going to be choosy. He knew though that the existing bishops did not like him, because, as he said, 'I am a high-spirited, honest, uncompromising man, whom all the bench of bishops could not turn, and who would set them all at defiance upon great and small questions.'

Alas, Sydney's reputation worked against him. His worldliness and wit did not seem appropriate to the time. But Sydney was an activist and competent at organisation, and might well have been a very good bishop. The prime minister, Lord Melbourne, with whom lay Sydney's best hopes for advancement, could not bring himself to promote him. Melbourne always regretted this failure: 'our not making him a bishop was mere cowardice', he is recorded as saying. Sydney's friend Samuel Rogers reported that Melbourne told him that 'few things filled him with more regret than not putting Sydney on the bench'.



Lord Melbourne: 'mere cowardice'

At this distance in time, we do not feel the pain of Sydney's failure. All the bishops of his time are forgotten, but his name shines brightly, and he is remembered for all the good things he did, for all the life-enhancing things he said, for his sane, practical no-nonsense view of the world that always cheers one up when one reads it. The most important parts of his life were not those involved with the Church, but those that related to the world of ideas and to the making of a more tolerant and liberal society. And consider, if he never got a diocese, he did get an Association!

- Graham Parry, of the University of York's Department of English, was until recently the general editor of Studies in Renaissance Literature *and an associate editor of the* New Dictionary of National Biography*, with responsibility for literary figures 1600-1650.*

SYDNEY SMITH, A MAN OF HIS TIME by Josephine Boyle
From a talk at a York lunch

'It is of some importance at what period a man is born.' Written towards the end of Sydney Smith's life, these words introduce a kind of balance-sheet of the improvements observed and enjoyed during his lifespan.

I think most of us today have drawn up such a balance-sheet, in mind if not on paper. Sometimes, today, it will contain a debit column alongside. But Sydney's was all credit; and it contains several of the same pluses, I think, someone born fifty or sixty years ago might well put in a similar one today: greater ease of communication (in his case the post, in ours by email), easier and quicker travel with the railway

replacing the stagecoach and (where it had not yet done so) smoother tarmacadam roads and improved springs, better lighting thanks to gas, and more effective medicines. He then adds, not quite so relevant today, umbrellas and of particular interest to a man of his build, suspenders. The very last couple of changes he mentions are even more remarkable: the more general availability of banking and, he notes, a social trend towards sobriety: 'in my youth even in the best society one third of gentlemen were always drunk'.

There is another way of interpreting the phrase, 'the period at which a man is born'. Everyone is influenced by the accepted attitudes of the time in which they live and by those of some of the people who have lived immediately before them, even if like Sydney Smith, this leads you to questioning those attitudes as he did in the Peter Plymley letters and in the letter to the Archdeacon Singleton. As W.H. Auden remarks, he was born two years after the invention of the Watts steam engine and one year after Goldsmith wrote 'The Deserted Village'. It was a period of social change as tremendous as anything in the subsequent century and probably a more dramatic change intellectually. When Sydney was five David Hume died, and across the Channel at about the same time, another philosopher, Voltaire, died, perhaps an even greater influence on Sydney than the Scottish anti-deist. Neither Hume nor Voltaire would have written as they did without their great predecessor John Locke, a generation earlier.

The French Revolution took place when Sydney was a very young man, about eighteen, an impressionable age. It is interesting that he seldom refers to it. One somehow feels that he did not subscribe to Wordsworth's enthusiasm for what was happening. Sydney was wary of Romantic poetry, or rather of the emotions it might evoke. (Actually he enjoyed a close friendship with Thomas Moore, the Irish poet, whose lyrics were set to music and were very popular [see *Newsletter 13*]. Moore said Sydney had made him laugh 'till he fell off his chair'.)

He disliked music in a minor key, probably because it sounds melancholy. In fact in his advice to Lady Georgiana he thought she should avoid both poetry and music if in low spirits, and low spirits were something he greatly feared himself. I haven't yet managed to find any reference to his attitude to the visual arts. I'd love to know what he thought of Turner's landscapes, for instance. John Ruskin claimed Sydney praised *Modern Painters.* So there's hope. Somehow it's hard to imagine him reading *Emile,* much of the early Byron or Walter Scott.

Today it is all too easy to describe Sydney Smith as modern, to see him as an elderly clergyman version of Flora Post and the higher common sense. So much of what he wrote and so many of the anecdotes handed down are so liberal and in tune with our own thoughts. We read with amusement 'The Nice Person' or his comparison of the Bishop who had dismissed two curates with Calvinist tendencies, with the Emperor of Haiti who beheaded two of his dinner guests. Incidentally Sydney added that the Emperor's action had a completely stultifying effect on conversation at his table. Writing like this, Sydney appears just like a columnist of today – in a newspaper rather superior to any presently available. But in fact he was very much of his own time, the early nineteenth century; deeply involved with some of the big questions of his day, the Reform Bill, Catholic Emancipation, the Game Laws and many other causes, which seem arcane to us now. He looked at them through nineteenth century eyes, albeit with a liberal pragmatism.

There is one qualification: he was no romantic; and, beside that, he was no revolutionary, but essentially a man of his own country. Heir to John Locke's way of thinking, he preferred to work within the system rather than to overturn it. He ended his life as sociable Dean of St Paul's, charming Disraeli at dinner. 'I don't remember a more agreeable company.' So famous for his wit that Charles Dickens angled for an invitation to meet him, 'to satisfy my greatest curiosity'.

His views were compassionate rather than passionately radical. His views were Christian, the Christianity of a sensible Whig cleric of his day. It's his engaging and direct way of putting them that we find so sympathetic and modern. That brought him success in his lifetime and is why we still gather here today in his honour …

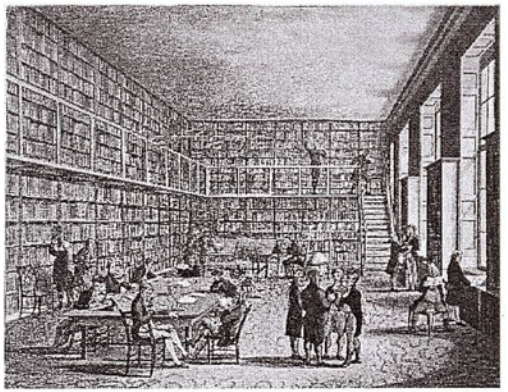
SYDNEY'S 'IMPUDENCE SCARCELY CREDIBLE' AT THE R. I.

Randolph Vigne writes the Editors a short note, passing on information gleaned from an online copy of A Sketch of the Life and Times of the Rev. Sydney Smith *by S.J. Reid (1884)*

Sorely in need of money on his arrival from Edinburgh in 1803, Sydney preached at the Foundling Hospital and, to packed congregations, at the Berkeley Chapel in Mayfair. The success of these sermons won him in 1804 a well-paid course of lectures on Moral Philosophy at the Royal Institution by invitation of the treasurer, the social reformer Sir Thomas Bernard, who had also introduced him to the Foundling Hospital. Mrs Sydney had already sold her pearls to the eminent silversmiths and jewellers Rundell & Bridge for £500; and though Sydney claimed he 'knew nothing about moral philosophy` he was `thoroughly aware that I wanted £200 to furnish my house`: hence the lectures.

R.I., founded to promote the teaching of science and scientific research. was a mere four years old but with Sir Humphry Davy as professor of chemistry and its secretary James Peter Auriol, former secretary to the government of Warren

Hastings in India (and like Sydney of Huguenot descent), its Albemarle Street premises were already celebrated. For Sydney's lectures 'carriages blocked the street' and, as he wrote forty years later: 'Such an uproar I never remember to have been excited by any other literary imposture.' With his 'torrent of words and an impudence scarcely credible in the modern age' he performed, with typical self-deprecation, what he called 'the most successful swindle of the season'.



The Library of the Royal Institution, Albermarle Street, London 1808-1811

The lectures were a turning point for Sydney. From an *Edinburgh Reviewer* known to a few he became a pet at Holland House and of the Whig grandees, author of the Peter Plymley letters and, by one of the last acts of the outgoing government, vicar of Foston.

The annual Christmas Lectures at the R.I. began in 1825 and the Albemarle Street building is now far grander than it was in Sydney's day, having recently been refurbished in great style. Parties of fifteen can be given a tour at £6 per head and rooms hired for lectures and meetings. This was the scene of Sydney's triumph – food for thought for our Committee.

SYDNEY SMITH, RELUCTANT DEMOCRAT by Randolph Vigne
From a talk at a Boisdale lunch, July 2010

In 1839, near the end of his life, Sydney Smith listed the achievements of the *Edinburgh Review* he had founded in 1807 and of which he had edited the first issue. He and his fellow contributors wrote copiously about (his list) Catholic emancipation, the repeal of the Corporation and Test Acts, the reform of the Game Laws, libel laws, the law of debt and conspiracy, the right of prisoners on trial for their lives to have counsel to defend them, the reform of the Court of Chancery, the setting out of the principles of political economy and the ending of 'the enormous wickedness of the slave trade'.

He and they dealt with some of the 'thousand evils in existence' which the 'honest boldness' of the *Edinburgh Review* helped to combat. There is one glaring omission. Sydney does not refer to the great campaign for parliamentary reform, which made its historic breakthrough with the great Reform Bill of 1832. He is remembered by many for the speech he made at the height of the struggle in which he likened the House of Lords in its attempt to stop the extension of the franchise and the abolition of rotten boroughs to Dame Partington who lived on the beach at Sidmouth and tried to sweep back the Atlantic in a terrible storm with her mop and bucket.

He told his audience at Taunton that Mrs Partington 'was excellent at a slop or a puddle, but should not have meddled with a tempest. Gentlemen, be at your ease – be quiet and steady – you will beat Mrs Partington'.

Yet in 1809 he had berated his friend, and successor as editor of the *Edinburgh Review*, Francis Jeffrey, for his failure to 'scout more that pernicious cant that all men are equal'. He linked 'democrats' with 'agitators' as his political adversaries and saw democracy as another word for 'mob rule'. As late as 1819, seeing the need for change, he had written to Jeffrey:

> What do you think will come of all these political agitations? I am strongly inclined to think, whether now or twenty years hence, that Parliament must be reformed. The case that the people have is too strong to be resisted; an answer may be made to it which will satisfy enlightened people perhaps, but none that the mass will be satisfied with. I am doubtful whether it is not your duty and my duty to become moderate reformers, to keep off worse.

A stoneware bottle for gin or something similar, depicting Lord Grey, Prime Minister 1830-34 whose government introduced the Reform Act of 1832. Grey holds a scroll inscribed THE PEOPLE'S RIGHTS. On the body of the flask there is an inscription GREYS REFORM CORDIAL.

No critical argument? No principled support for radical change? No commitment to the cause of the people? To the champions of reform: Brougham – another colleague on the *Edinburgh Review*; Lord Grey, the Whig prime minister and Sydney's friend; and Lord John Russell, 'the people' meant the middle class, but it was the demands of the masses, the working class, that frightened Parliament into reforming itself. It was the masses that gave political power to the middle class by the first Reform Bill. They had a long wait to exercise it themselves. Sydney

had the clarity of vision to see how reform would eventually benefit them politically. 'Demotic habits will be more common in a country where the rich are forced to court the poor for political power', he wrote.

Sydney's attitude to reform fits well with W.H. Auden's view of him as:

> an example of English Liberalism at its best. He is never utopian or given to large generalizations but always attacks a specific abuse, and the reform he proposes is always specific and always possible to realize.

One should not, in Sydney Smith's view, assert that all men are equal when they clearly are not. To make a fairer, safe Parliament was a good first step towards equality under the law, however small the enlargement of the electorate might be. The first Reform Act took that step, to Sydney Smith's satisfaction, though it was 'specific abuses', great and small, that he and the *Edinburgh Review* were more concerned with.

A Correction, and Amplification

Readers of the *Newsletter* Issue 15, recounting the circumstances in which the Sydney Smith Association was created, may have noted a significant omission, which the Editors regret.

We failed to do justice to the simple fact that the idea of forming an association to celebrate Sydney was suggested to Peter Diggle by a fellow Yorkshireman, the Very Reverend Robert Holtby, dean of Chichester Cathedral for twelve years from 1977.

Holtby's rich connection with Yorkshire included time as a chorister at York Minster under Sir Edward Bairstow, serving as a curate in Pocklington and as army chaplain with the 14th/20th King's Hussars in Catterick, as well as writing the definitive history of the York Minster school in 1994.

In 1995 it was Holtby who helped recruit the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Runcie, to address a church service at Foston to mark the 150th anniversary of Sydney's death. And it was from this service and the goodwill generated, that the SSA was to grow and grow.

Holtby died in March 2003, aged 82. The subsequent *Church Times* obituary noted most approvingly: 'Robert was a good mimic and raconteur, and at Chapter meetings he could cut through the dull agenda to end in gales of laughter. His ability to pick and lead strong teams was notable, at Church House and in Chichester …

'Robert Holtby was fond of quoting Robert Browning. In *Abt Vogler* the advanced composer has a line that might well apply to Robert's inner convictions about faith: "The rest may reason and welcome: 'tis we musicians know."'

Letter from America

The Trustees were curious to know how a generous Californian, John Ebey, had become interested in the Sydney Smith Association and invited him to write a few words on the background to his membership for the *Newsletter*. He replied thus:

> My interest in Sydney Smith arose from a neighbor of ours in Santa Monica, California. The neighbor, Richard Alexander (who was 83 when I met him) had a great love of art and literature. I remember that he was a fine painter and his home was full of his paintings. Richard lived in Europe in the 1920s and worked for his family's company, the huge insurance broker Alexander and Alexander, in Europe and California for much of his life.
>
> He quoted Sydney Smith by heart, introduced me to the recipe for Salad Dressing, and always laughed when discussing him. Richard told me that he was directly related to Smith.
>
> He was in the habit of sending money to an association in England that kept the Sydney Smith flame and memory alive. I assume it was the SSA because I wouldn't have known the SSA existed if it weren't for Richard.
>
> As you know I give small sums of money each year to the SSA in memory of both Mr. Richard Alexander and Sydney Smith. Richard died in 1992 at the age of 92. Before he died, Richard gave me a copy of the *Selected Writings* with the excellent introduction by W.H. Auden. He left me his collection of Sydney Smith books, and letters from the Association. I read the books, became a fan of the great man, and soon after joined the Association.
>
> Best wishes to all!
>
> John Ebey

Note: Can any member enlighten us further as to a possible family connection between Richard Alexander and Sydney Smith?

SYDNEY SMITH: SEEN AND HEARD

Sydney on Clegg's woes

Sydney's reputation, and those of the Holland House set, were used to give a thrashing to deputy prime minister Nick Clegg, in a May 2011 opinion piece in the *Financial Times* by conservative political commentator Bruce Anderson:

'Over the weekend, I came on a copy of Hesketh Pearson's *Life of Sydney Smith*. It did not cut deep. Then again, although many contemporaries thought him the greatest wit of their age – if not of all time – neither did Sydney Smith.

'The high points of his social life occurred around the dinner table at Holland House, Lord Holland's London palace. He may have been the nobleman; his spouse was the dominatrice. Was ever a lady so imperious as Lady Holland? Under her rule, Holland House was the intellectual capital of Whiggery. Progressive causes were not only espoused but taken for granted.

'In Holland House, they advocated Catholic emancipation, Parliamentary reform and the abolition of slavery. They were suspicious of monarchical power, even under poor old George III. They were all in favour of freedom, and the further away the better. In damp and sometimes hungry shires, another universe from Holland House, farm labourers emerged with the dawn from their hovels. Their long days were spent in toil, to provide the viands for her Ladyship's table: to provide the rents for his Lordship's income.

'Hypocrisy apart, the Whigs of Holland House had another characteristic. They had little time for Tories. Holland House would rather have dined with Napoleon Bonaparte than with Lord Castlereagh. Scroll down the decades and this helps one to understand Nick Clegg's problems. While it would be absurd to compare Lady Holland's guests with today's Liberals, the Liberal party does retain one legacy from the Whigs. It does not like Tories. It would prefer to sneer at them than govern with them.

'Mr Clegg is not a sneerer. Except over Europe, he has little tribal antagonism towards the Tories; he is not a natural tribalist. But, on the assumption that the AV referendum goes as expected, his tribe will be steadily more troublesome. Mr Clegg is not the first leader who was too sophisticated for his own party; John Major is another obvious example. It is never a comfortable role.'

Sydney on Fire

From the *Daily Telegraph* editorial 'Feelgood Factors' of February 2011:

'One of the 20 tips that the Regency wit Sydney Smith gave to his friend Georgiana Morpeth, who was suffering from low spirits, was: keep good blazing fires. This spring, our own happiness will be probed by researchers from the Office for National Statistics, and among their questions will be: "Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?" Even among the easygoing, such a question is liable to provoke a sinking feeling of doubt.

'Is it worthwhile being woken by the alarm? Is it worthwhile labouring to pay the mortgage? But ask the questions differently and the answers will differ. Is it worthwhile to see the sun rise and grandchildren smile? "Don't expect too much from human life – a sorry business at best," Smith advised. No doubt the researchers would put him down as a Don't Know.'

When this editorial was published on the *Telegraph*'s website (www.telegraph.co.uk) one online reader called 'Sausageandx' offered a Sydney-like thought: 'The only way a blazing fire would do the job for me is if a politician was roasting nicely on top of it.'

Quotations from '*The Athenaeum – Club and Social Life in London 1824-1974*', Heinemann London 1975

When speaking about Sydney Smith: '*Tom Moore, the poet, … used to declare that as a conversational wit he vanquished all the men he had ever met … "his wit generally involved a thought worth remembering for its own sake as well as for the brilliant vehicle in which it was conveyed". Edward Everett from the United States of America was more concise, saying, "If he had not been known as the wittiest man of his day, he would have been accounted one of the wisest".*' (pages 42-3)

In a paragraph referring to the replacing of cobble-stones in Pall Mall by wooden blocks: '*It was in this environment that Sydney Smith, when told that similar wooden blocks might perhaps surround St Paul's Cathedral, observed that the Dean and Canons need only lay their heads together and the job would be done'.* (pages 103-4)

Terry Price writes: 'Sydney Smith was elected to membership of the recently formed Athenaeum Club at the age of 60. Significantly, the election was under the Club's Rule II, which provided (and still provides) a mechanism for the Committee

to introduce annually a small number of eminent people without the normal need for a proposer, seconder, and support by the wider membership.'

Sydney and the 'Birthers'

From David Porter, a columnist with the Illinois Press Association, writing in February 2011, in the *Morris Daily Herald* of Grundy County, Illinois:

'Every morning, at work, we have to have a quote at the ready. Searching and finding quotes sort of helps clear the mind of other distractions and helps set a tone for the day. Today's quote for me was one from Sydney Smith: "Never try to reason the prejudice out of a man. It was not reasoned into him, and cannot be reasoned out."

'It's so true. No number of facts will convince a person to stop believing what they wish to believe. If it could, nobody would still be talking about President Obama's birth certificate … For the people who still believe the certificate is fake, there is nothing that anyone can say or do — including the president himself — that will convince that person otherwise. Whether politically or racially motivated, that belies a deep-seated prejudice.

'What do you do with people like this? What can you do? Sydney is right. That person didn't become prejudice through reason, and he's not going to lose it through logic. And, no, you can't beat it out of him, either, although it's sometimes tempting.'

Philip Larkin: What I want is …

Sydney and Larkin, and Social Assets

It is probably not surprising to learn that Philip Larkin was familiar with the works of Sydney Smith and the stories which surrounded him. Not famed for his praise of others, Larkin was unusually complimentary in the following extract from *Letters to Monica* in which he bemoaned the quality of applicants for a post in the library of Queen's University, Belfast:

'*One wrote in this week from Antrim saying that she had no degree & no experience but had 'intelligence & a conscience': who does that sound like? The young Carlyle? Or had he a degree? Another one rang up this afternoon to try 'the personal approach'. I want the ability of Henry Ford plus the docility of Cinderella & the social assets of Sydney Smith.*'

Philip Larkin – Letters to Monica. Edited by Anthony Thwaite. Faber & Faber 2010.

The Reverend Gets There First

Reviewing *Living with Books* by Dominique Dupuich and Roland Beaufre (Thames & Hudson), John Walsh of the *Independent* tried to explain why people like him have always displayed the books they've owned, whether read or not.

'Cicero's ideal room was a library in a garden. Montaigne dreamt of having a literary den in an attic. Anthony Powell informed the world that books do furnish a room – but the Victorian, Reverend Sydney Smith, got there first when he said, "No furniture so charming as books". In the fairytale, *Beauty and the Beast*, the heroine's dream of perfection isn't romance, it's a big library. "When I step into this library," wrote the 17th-century French diarist Marie de Sevigne, "I cannot understand why I ever step out of it..."

Walsh, a past literary editor of the *Sunday Times* and of the *Independent* magazine, tried to put his finger on the need to showcase books: 'What you're displaying on the wall is more than just the books you impulse-bought on certain afternoons over the past few years, plus some unwanted "classics" which were Christmas gifts from your book-group-attending aunt. What you're displaying is a collection of the books which had an impact on you when younger – an impact you'd like to experience again one day – or books that have had an impact on the world and that you bought because you wanted to see why. Your library should tell people about you – your taste for the gothic, the comic, the scientific, the philosophic, the romantic and the murderous – rather than exist as a random aggregation of ageing bestsellers.'

SOUTH-WEST SPRING MEETING

Sydie Bones writes: A short distance from Combe Florey is the delightful village of West Bagborough which boasts a church, a great house, and an inn – the perfect choice for our annual lunchtime gathering on 13th April 2011. As one of our members, John Stedman, had generously invited us to join him beforehand for sherry in the wing of the great house, it was a merry party that made its way to The

Rising Sun where an excellent lunch awaited us. Conversation, always the highlight on these occasions, ceased only long enough to allow Diana Shervington, a direct descendant of Jane Austen's brother, to tell us why the family believes that Sydney Smith did indeed meet the authoress, pointing out similarities between Sydney and a character named Sidney in the unfinished novel *Sanditon*. This sparked lively speculation, albeit with some reservations, but also encouraged those of who had not done so, to read the novel. We were the last group of diners to leave the inn, too late to make our way as planned to the church at Combe Florey. Next year, perhaps …

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 27 July and 26 October.

Prices from 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 her at least a week's notice if possible.

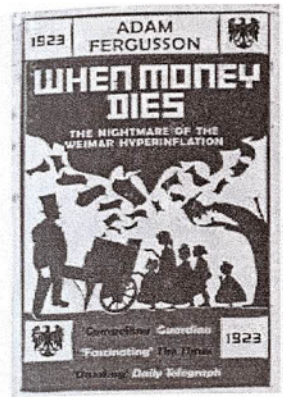
YORK

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 (10653) 696056.

New Publications

When Money Dies. Adam Fergusson, Old St Publishing 2010

Fergusson's book on interwar German hyperinflation was originally published in 1975 but was astutely reprinted last year to catch rising concern about the possible failure of central banks to keep inflation in-check while trying to manage the recovery of the global economy. Reviewed in the *Daily Telegraph*, Charles Moore said Weimar hyperinflation was 'so extreme that it has the perverse effect of making the modern reader feel almost cosy'. If the cost of living index stood at one in 1914,



it was 15 million by September 1923, 3.6 billion only a month later and stood at its peak of 218 billion in November 1923 before gradually unwinding with the introduction of the Rentenmark. Moore writes, 'Government and civil society itself depend for their existence on an infinitely complicated web of trust. Money is a prime expression of this. If money cannot be trusted, nor can any but the most primitive exchanges between human beings. You cannot plan, build, save, borrow, bequeath. Your values, both material and moral, radically deteriorate.'

Sidmouth in Verse

If the encouragement of the Editors has not yet convinced you of the worth of attending the 2011 AGM at Sidmouth, we ask you to consider our final submission, a poem gratefully received from member Ifan Williams:

SIDMOUTH

Sydie's booking Sidmouth, not for herself alone,
she's busy on the internet and on the telephone.

She knows the "time-warp ambience" of this fine historic place
its buildings full of elegance, its people full of grace.

Victoria as a baby and her parents came to stay
but daddy sadly caught a cold and shortly passed away.

At Woolbrook Cottage where they stayed he was laid out as well
in the ducal lodgings now renamed the Royal York Hotel.

In olden days the smugglers were busy after dark
it was wiser not to notice "the brandy for the parson and the baccy for the clerk".

Dear Sydney saw Dame Partington defy the foaming brine
Maybe her mop and mob-cap are in some local shrine.

It's always been well-favoured as a holiday resort;
with a walk along the Esplanade where all the bucks disport.

It's quieter in these days and you'll scarcely see a copper
but if a little nervous you can ride The Sidmouth Hopper.

A walk along the River Sid starting from the sea,
back for a plate of muffins and a lovely cup of tea.

You can go down Jacob's Ladder along the western beach
but be aware that at high tide the sands are out of reach.

Sydie's booking venues for business, food and fun,
to please herself and you and me and almost everyone.

She's making the arrangements, so summon kin and kith
For Sydie's booking Sidmouth for the friends of Sydney Smith.

FINALLY ...

It is with great sadness that the Editors report the passing of a number of long-standing and very committed members of the SSA ...

Raymond Burton (1917-2011) led the modern development of the high-street clothing chain founded by his father and in 1981 retired to concentrate on philanthropic activities. This included a long-standing sponsorship of a series of University of York concerts and the opening, in 2003, of a library for humanities research at the university which bore his name and included his own collection of Yorkshire-related books, manuscripts and playbills from the eighteenth and nineteenth Centuries ...

Sir John Riddell, Bt (1934-2010) was a financier and also served as Private Secretary and Treasurer to the Prince and Princess of Wales in the late 1980s. The *Daily Telegraph* called Riddell 'a man of wit, elegance and charm, a skilful courtier with a light touch' and credited him with helping transform the Prince's interests in inner city regeneration, the Prince's Trust and the Prince's Youth Business Trust ...

The Sydney Smith Association

Objects

To advance the education of the public in the life and works of Sydney Smith.
To advance the Christian religion by the preservation and upkeep of churches connected with Sydney Smith, in particular but not exclusively, the parish churches of Foston in North Yorkshire and Combe Florey in Somerset.
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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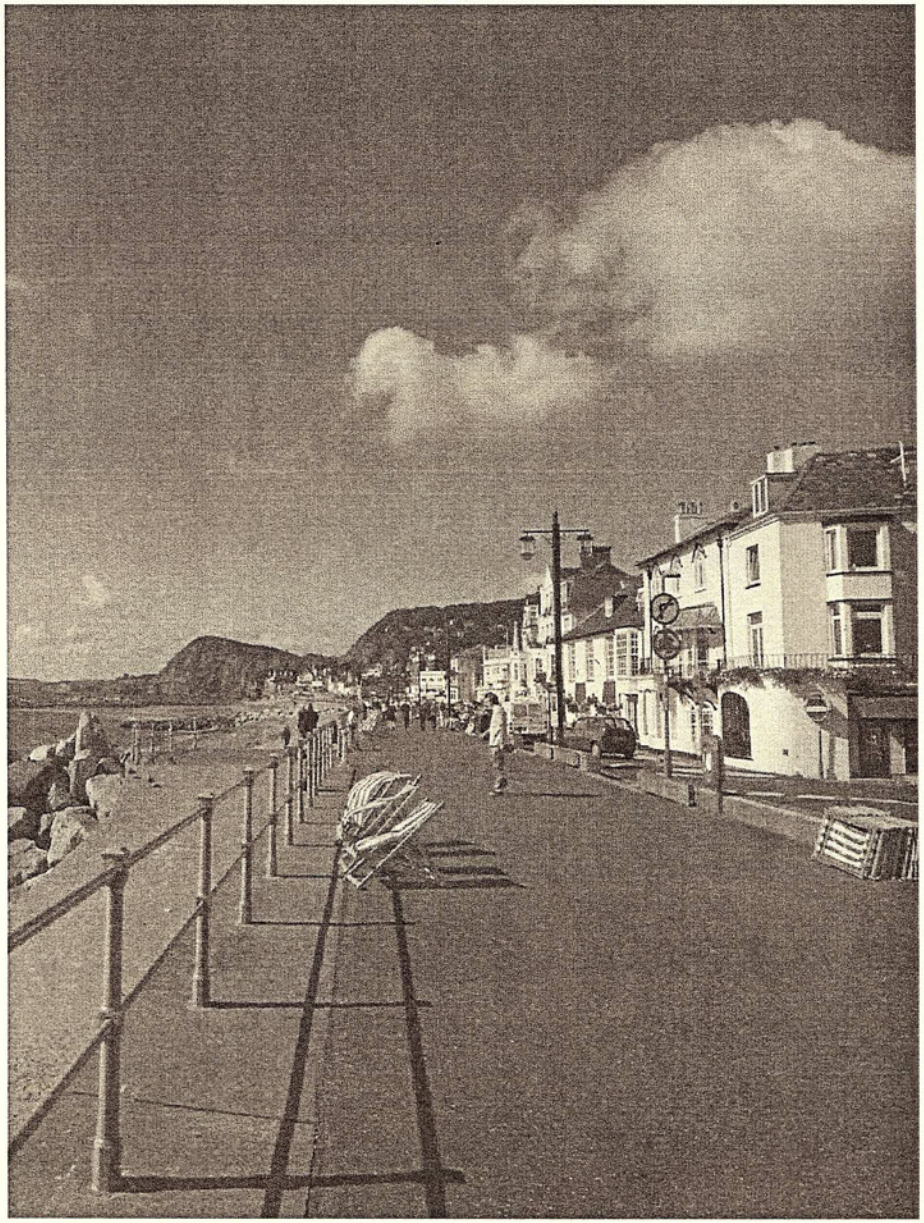

The Atlantic was roused; Mrs. Partington's spirit was up. But I need not tell you that the contest was unequal; the Atlantic Ocean beat Mrs. Partington.