THE SYDNEY SMITH ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER

Issue 1, Volume 1 June 1996

Welcome to our first Newsletter. The Sydney Smith Association is now launched and already sailing strongly, with a complement of over 200 members.

This initial and experimental issue offers, among other things:

- some points raised by members, and some answers...
- Alan Bell: a note on the Sydney Smith letters...
- Peter Diggle's account of how the Association emerged...
- a brief description of Foston Church by Professor Patrick Nuttgens...
- paragraphs from Lord Runcie's address from the Foston pulpit last year...
- information about our gathering this July, and what is proposed for next year's gathering...
- and our membership application form to help you recruit more members.

If you have ideas for improvements, or suggestions, or complaints, or contributions, please send them to the Newsletter editor, Alan Hankinson, at 30 Skiddaw Street, Keswick, Cumbria CA12 4BY ('phone number 017687 73746).

Words of welcome and encouragement

Many of the applications for membership we have received have been accompanied by messages of heart-warming support and encouragement. They came from varied sources - from academics in many disciplines, from clergymen (many more than ever supported Sydney in his life-time), from a whole range of liberal professionals, from folk all over the British Isles who share an admiration for Sydney, and others much further afield. We have members from the Antipodes to the Arctic Circle. Other and older literary societies - devoted to Jane Austen and Mrs. Gaskell - have joined us. It is all very gratifying.

Characteristic of the affectionate regard that Sydney's name clearly inspires were the words of the actress Sîan Phillips, recalling her first encounter with Sydney: "It was very ordinary and must have happened to thousands. I was 16 and in my University Entrance group and a rather more sophisticated student gave me 'The Smith of Smiths'. It was love at first paragraph. My blue Penguin is almost worn out through frequent reading, and in the many years since then I've met very few people I like as well".

Virginia Woolf must have been reading the same book, though not in the paperback version, in 1940 when she wrote in a letter: "I'm reading Sydney Smith - his life - with only one wish in the world: that I'd married him. Isn't it odd when the rumble-tumble of time turns up some entirely loveable man?"

Hesketh Pearson's ebullient biography 'The Smith of Smiths' came out in 1934 (with an introduction by G.K Chesterton), and was published by Penguin in 1948. It did more than any other single factor this century to keep Sydney's flame alight and to remind us of his unique genius. Then, more than 30 years on, came Alan Bell's biography to renew the interest for another grateful generation.

Perhaps the most heart-warming of all the letters we have received came from Frank Muir, the veteran comedy writer for

radio, witty panel-game performer on radio and television and the author of two anthology-type books (both of which pay high tribute to Sydney). Mr. Muir wrote to Graham Parry :

I am delighted that you have set up a Sydney Smith Association and even more delighted that you have invited me to join you. Which I happily do.
A keen eye will note that my cheque is for slightly more than the present annual subscription. Please do with the surplus as you think fit but I would be most happy if you took my view that the Rev. would be gratified to know that there was always a glass of good sherry to be had at committee meetings of his Association ...

We do take his view, with gratitude.

Sydney's Life and Letters and friendly legacy

by Alan Bell (Association President)

In his introductory note on the prehistory of our Association, Major Peter Diggle refers to Martin Higham's learning and enthusiasm for Sydney Smith. I am sure Martin would have rejoiced in the formation of our society, not least because the impetus came from Yorkshire, where he lived at Crayke Castle (near Easingwold and not far from Foston) until his death in 1984. He had an enviable knowledge of Sydney Smith's writings and an enthusiasm for his life and works, which he was able to spread far and wide during his many travels as recruitment director of Rowntree's, the York confectionery manufacturer, and indeed in his many contributions to the professional literature of industrial psychology.

His other literary interests included A.E. Housman, John Betjeman and Evelyn Waugh - the last giving Combe Florey a double significance for him, and another enthusiam we could share. I got in touch with him soon after my own Sydney Smith researches began, introduced by some letters in the Oxford

University Press Archives, that he had written to Nowell C. Smith (1871-1961) the first modern editor of Sydney's letters. We began a correspondence that lasted sixteen years and became virtually a diary for each of us. I could share with him many interesting discoveries, and he put me in the way of securing access to the muniment room at Castle Howard, which was the richest source of supplementary material. George Howard was exceptionally helpful there, and these early findings have proved invaluable.

Nowell Smith's principal source of letters had been the family collection of Sydney's correspondence used in his daughter's 19th century selection and later deposited in the archives of New College, Oxford. So rich were these documents that further research may have seemed almost superfluous. I had long admired the 1952 Nowell Smith edition, but as an archivist in London and then at the National Library of Scotland, I found enough further letters to suggest a more thorough search would be worthwhile. The OUP encouraged me with a grant of £100 for expenses, and before very long enough material had been found almost to double the number (1038) published in 1953 and to replace faulty printed texts with better versions from manuscript originals.

It was deeply satisfying at an early stage to discover in the Wedgwood Museum at Barlaston a letter to (Sir) James Mackintosh about the foundation of the Edinburgh Review. The projectors intended to 'barbecue a poet or two, or strangle a metaphysician, or do any other act of cruelty to the dull men of the earth' 'The rocks and shoals to be avoided are religion, politics, excessive severity and irritable Scotchmen'. Sydney's letter provided a lot of information that confirmed Professor John Clive's conjectures in his Scotch Reviewers (1957), and I remember with pleasure his excited letter from Harvard, glad to have been proved right thirteen years later.

Small verbal changes were now possible, best of all perhaps in Sydney's celebrated 'Advice in Low Spirits' to Lady Morpeth. Its first adjunct, 'Live as well as you dare' could now be read

correctly as 'Live as well and drink as much wine as you dare' and elsewhere the Victorian Veil could be lifted from Sydney's more robust Georgian expressions.

As my researches proceeded Dan Davin of the Oxford University Press became a little apprehensive at the possibility of a four-volume publication and suggested that I should start by writing a biography to stimulate demand for the letters. This I did, and Sydney Smith was published in 1980. Immediately afterwards, and when a term's visiting fellowship at All Souls College had enabled me to set my materials in order, I moved to an unexpectedly demanding job in charge of an Oxford library. It became impossible to make much progress with the Sydney Smith letters, rather as Nowell Smith's work as a headmaster and educational administrator had interupted his work on the two-volume edition.

It would have been wrong merely to have sat on my notes and transcriptions, and several scholars have had access to them, particularly Dr Peter Virgin, whose 1994 Sydney Smith made use of this material to supplement his own investigations. My move three years ago to become Librarian of The London Library keeps me fully occupied, but always with the hope of some spare-time leisure in which this great task of finishing off the edition can be completed. When it is done it will be a tribute to the memory of my friend Martin Higham and will I hope meet the legitimate expectations of the newly founded Sydney Smith Association.

Prelude to the Formation of The Sydney Smith Association

by Major Peter Diggle

In 1983 such was the predicament of Foston Church (inability to meet the quota or costs of urgent repairs) the Archdeacon warned the PCC there might be no alternative but closure; at the time it appeared unlikely that adequate funds could be raised locally to avert this.

But by harnessing Sydney Smith's 23-year-long association with the parish, could a sufficient amount be raised with a wider appeal? It was worth a try. The Sydney Smith Foston Church Appeal was launched.

Alan Bell was generous with advice and his introduction to Martin Higham, a friend and a very learned local enthusiast for Sydney Smith proved immensely helpful. Letters to various literary papers and journals met with encouraging support, not least from the readers of Private Eye, and many people whose families had had association with Sydney were generous in the extreme: so too were those in the 'public eye' known to quote from Sydney's works. The combined efforts of the Sydney Smith Appeal and local initiatives proved successful and the church was given a fresh lease of life. Now thirteen years later and under a new and caring parson, the Rev Doreen Yewdall, the church is well-attended and able to meet present demands.

In 1995 The Very Revd Robert Holtby, the former Dean of Chichester, who had kindly helped out Foston Church during a difficult time and an interregnum, felt it would be appropriate to commemorate the 150th anniversary of Sydney Smith's death. Various lectures and a musical evening were organised; the events culminated with a Church Service at Foston when Lord Runcie gave the Address.

So successful and well-attended were these events, and so widespread the support, that it was felt an Association should be formed for the purpose of perpetuating the memory and achievements of Sydney Smith, and helping those churches with which he was associated.

And what could be more appropriate than that Alan Bell, who was so helpful at the outset, should be our first Chairman? He is currently the Librarian of the London Library, but to many of our members he will be best known as the author of the admirable biography of Sydney Smith, the first since Hesketh Pearson's to give a full reassessment of that many-sided man.

All Saints' Church, Foston-le-Clay

by Professor Patrick Nuttgens

Sydney Smith became Vicar of Foston in 1806 and stayed there for 23 years. He was celebrated for a diversity of achievements and attitudes, most notably for his wit, which made him the most popular guest in many houses. He is not so celebrated for what he achieved in the church; but now - when his reputation is being seriously reconsidered by scholars and churchmen (often the same) - it is worth looking at the church which became his own.

All Saints, Foston was not in good condition, when he arrived. He said later "When I began to thump the cushion of my pulpit, on first coming to Foston, the accumulated dust of years made such a cloud, that for some minutes I lost sight of my congregation".

He may have seen it as a rare opportunity for a joke. He must have cleaned the church up but he did not make significant changes. He was an efficient and practical manager. He farmed many acres, designed and built a new rectory and even had bricks made (unsuccessfully) to his own specification.

He did not upset or transform his church. It was restored after his time, at the end of the 19th century, and more drastically in 1911, when an old gallery was removed from the north wall and the 18th century box pews were replaced by oak benches.

What he presided over was a homely - and possibly untidy - rural church that dated from 1130-40 and retained (as it still does) features of that Norman period like the narrow arches in the north wall and the admirable chancel arch with its escalloped capitals and moulded bases. It had a font that dated from 1140 with a font cover from the 17th century, a piscina in the north aisle and (I think it must have been there in his time) a panelled dado around the nave. The bell cote with two bells had been planted in timber above the west gable, replaced by a stone bell cote during the Victorian restoration.

But the architectural treasure of the church was (and is) the Norman south doorway. In the North Riding Volume of his *Buildings of England,* Pesvner describes it as being "uncommonly, fancifully and crisply decorated". A list of the carved scenes would sound tedious, they have to be seen and studied. But they are remarkable - the Last Supper, with Jesus seated and three apostles on either side of him, at the apex of the arch; St George and the dragon; David with his harp; the Tree of Life and Knowledge; a lion or two; a demon monster with a basket containing someone's head; a couple of wrestlers and (thank heavens) an Agnus Dei with an angel.

It is a fascinating expression of the early medieval mind that combined the most solemn piety with a taste for the grisly and the absurd. Sydney Smith did not need to look far for stimulation.

FOSTON CHURCH.

(*The scene of Sydney Smith's ministry for twenty-two years.*)

From the Foston Pulpit

The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Runcie, wrote to Alan Bell in January this year, in reply to an invitation to become a patron of our Association: "I am at the stage of shedding rather than adding to my responsibilities", he said, "but I cannot resist an invitation to be a patron of the newly-formed Association. I seem to be in unusual but agreeable company".

Six months earlier Lord Runcie had addressed a gathering of incipient Association members, from Sydney's pulpit in the church at Foston. His text was "Let us now praise famous men", from 'Ecclesiasticus' in The Apocrypha. He praised Sydney's accomplishment in many roles, especially as a country parson "of exceptional talent and achievement".

The address is an important document in the creation of the Association, and Lord Runcie has given his permission to quote from it at some length.

... If one thinks of men who symbolise the English country parson, a handful of representative figures stand out. George Herbert, Kilvert, Woodforde and, I am afraid, the Vicar of Bray, readily come to mind; but perhaps the most unexpected member of the band would be Sydney Smith. He was a frankly unwilling recruit to the ranks of the rural ministry. Country parsons in his age tended to be crusty Tories, and he was a very uncrusty Whig. His first experience of a rural parish in Wiltshire did not enthuse him, and as he grew old, he found that the delights of a country living, even amid the beauty of the Quantocks, held little appeal in comparison to his very congenial work at St Paul's Cathedral. He was drawn into a personal ministry to this Yorkshire parish only when the first stirrings of nineteenth century church reform forced him to end his non-residence.

Yet when he had to come to Foston and Thornton, with characteristic good nature and energy, Smith made the very best of necessity. His rectory house now looks so typical of its date that it cries out for an Agatha Christie to find the body in the

library, but it is in fact a highly remarkable and original building, designed and built by Smith himself with an ingenious practicality which one does not normally associate with writers and thinkers. Moreover, his rectory replaced a hovel where no-one ought to have been expected to live, and indeed where no parson of Foston **had** lived for a century and a half. Smith learned how to farm his glebe, but he also let out part of it as allotments cheaply for the poor; he doled out medicine and advised families on the most healthy diet which they could afford. He preached straightforward, sensible sermons which did not show off his learning or wit, but spoke plainly to ordinary people who grew to honour and value him. He was unselfconsciously and harmlessly eccentric, as so many country clergy have been, thus providing some innocent entertainment in the dull lives of their flocks. He made himself agreeable to local gentry and nobility whom he found congenial - above all, to the family of Castle Howard, so appropriately represented in this service; yet, in the perceptive phrase of his biographer Alan Bell, "the aristocracy took him up but never took him over". Above all, he was happy here, and all the happier because his children loved the place so much ...

He had the instinct of a true historian, which could lead him into some remarkably prophetic judgements. He anticipated the American Civil War forty years before it happened, and also correctly predicted that the great Reform Act of 1832, which he so ardently desired, would stop any further parliamentary reform for thirty or forty years. He also had the good historian's scepticism. He knew that neither Church nor State in England could claim perfection. As a Whig reformist, he likened both to an old house: "if we were to build the house afresh, we might perhaps avail ourselves of the improvements of a new plan, but we have no sort of wish to pull down an excellent house, strong, warm and comfortable". Evolutionary not revolutionary change was his interest, and he correctly predicted that the way to avoid the misery of revolutionary war was to anticipate and manage change rather than to resist it. Politicians today would still learn much from what he has to say about Ireland in the Peter Plymley letters.

The Catholic emancipation struggle of which the Plymley letters form a part was Smith's finest hour. He would have been highly delighted at the symbolism represented by the Prior of Ampleforth's part in our service. He had many Roman Catholic friends, both in Yorkshire and elsewhere. He brought to the question of Catholic emancipation a cool intelligence and a quiet insistence that just because something had been an urgent political necessity 150 years before, that was a very bad reason for making it a necessity in a later age. The Plymley letters are a marvellous exercise in dispelling lazy thinking; they deserve to stand alongside some of the great documents in the history of toleration. And of course, Smith had the great satisfaction of seeing the triumph of the cause in which he had played a notable part, with all the good results for English life which he had predicted.

Smith was being quite courageous in taking up the cause of Roman Catholicism. His fellow-Anglicans felt threatened by this fundamental challenge to the nature of church establishment, and many saw him as a traitor. Undoubtedly his career in the Church was damaged by his stand. However, there was a more general cause for his remaining simple Rector of Foston for so long; he was an intellectual who delighted in not suffering fools gladly. It is not in the least surprising that Smith first began to blossom in Edinburgh rather than in England. The English have never felt that it is entirely wise to be an intellectual; the Scots are much more inclined to treat the word as a compliment. King George III is reported to have said of Smith that "he was a very clever fellow, but that he would never be a bishop" - which certainly shows how sane that monarch could be ...

If Sydney Smith had been simply a controversialist and an amusing man at dinner parties, he would have earned his footnotes from scholars, but perhaps posterity might think that there had not really been much to him as a human being. Here in Foston we can give him the memorial of lasting worth. It is here, and in his other charges in the Wiltshire and Somerset countryside, that he was given a practical outlet for his kindness,

his conscientiousness and his concern for other people, rather than simply his gift of words. Remember that our reading from Ecclesiasticus has two sorts of people who deserve praise. First come the high-fliers, those with their achievements in the history books. Sydney Smith certainly has his niche among these. Second, however, are those "who have no memorial, who have perished as though they had not been". "These were men of mercy, whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten". Sydney Smith's anonymous kindnesses, his consideration, his practical piety were central to Foston for two decades, and no doubt much longer after in memory and example. There is no systematic memorial for the way in which he shaped so many lives. Every parish priest knows how difficult it is to measure the achievements of a ministry, which is why, thank God, the Church can never truly be assessed like a business and turned into an efficient machine. Even in his own days the far-sighted Sydney made sport of synodical management men as in his little, unpublished jingle:

"Speak not of those who in assemblies shine.
Give me the man with whom the jovial dine.
And speed the lingering day with wit and wine."

But here in Foston we know more seriously a man who did his duty and was loved for it. What better memorial can there be than that in the account-book of eternity?

Sydney's Recipe in Rhyme

To make this condiment your poet begs
The pounded yellow of two hard-boiled eggs ....

Sydney's famous recipe for potato salad was one of his very rare excursions into verse, which is a pity because when he did make the poetical effort he produced rhyming couplets of rare euphony and elegance.

However good it may be as a poem, it has been rebuked as a

recipe. Eliza Acton, a Victorian cookery writer, tried it and was disappointed: "The dressing ends up", she said, "like a mud pack". And one of the first people to join our Association, Gillian Darley, records a similar result. She lives in Doughty Street, London, in the house which Sydney and his family occupied in 1803 when they first moved down to London, so - like several houses in that street - it displays the LCC plaque. She reports: "Some years ago we hosted a dinner for other blue plaque inhabitants for a radio programme on the subject and I cooked a suitably 18th century menu (tongue in madeira sauce) and even recreated the Sydney Smith potato salad, which is in reality a rather strange potatoey mayonnaise".

In view of these criticisms it is good to be able to record that our hero's culinary reputation has been restored, and by no less an expert than the late Jane Grigson. She was a devoted fan of Sydney's, and a whole chapter of her book "Food with the Famous" (1979) deals with the man and his favourite dishes. The chapter begins : "If ever I have the chance of arranging a dinner party under the trees of the Elysian Fields, the first person I shall invite will be the Reverend Sydney Smith (the second will be his friend, the Irish singer and composer of songs, Tom Moore)".

Jane Grigson goes on to give her recommended version of the potato salad recipe: "I found that 125g (4oz) cooked, peeled potato, with the other ingredients, produces a sauce of more mayonnaise-like consistency. Use Orléans vinegar - 'almost wine, like a lady who has just lost her character' - and do not be tempted to omit the onion, which is essential for 'perfect success'. Choose vigorous greenery - watercress, Coss or Webb's lettuce, celery, chicory or endive - and you will have an ideal salad .... For the seasonings use a teaspoon, a tablespoon for the olive oil and wine vinegar, with a scant teaspoon of anchovy".

Trulliber Trouble

In a letter sent to members in mid-March this year we invited contributions to the Newsletter, and one member, Lord Deramore of Heslington House in Pickering, was immediately off the mark. Our letter had mentioned Sydney's comment on the man who was the local Heslington squire figure when he arrived on the scene in the summer of 1809: " ... a perfect specimen of the Trullibers of old".

Lord Deramore, a descendant of that squire, wanted to know what Sydney was implying. He wrote:

> "I must confess as to ignorance regarding the Trullibers and can find no reference to them in any dictionary, history or Brewers, but Sydney Smith's further description of the squire gives the impression that he was an ignorant country bumpkin. As Major Yarburgh was an ancestor of mine, I feel it behoves me to quote a more flattering description of him.
>
> The final years of the 18th century saw two important changes in the village (Heslington) and both were due to Major Yarburgh despite what Sydney Smith said about him. He rebuilt the hospital, which was in need of repair, on a new site to the west of the Hall at the side of the road from Heslington to Fulford and there it stands today, though somewhat changed, as a tribute to his wisdom and generosity. Whether Henry Yarburgh .... needed assistance to read the newspapers of the time or not, he was a firm believer in education and was instrumental in founding the first school in the parish.
> (HESLINGTON, A PORTRAIT OF A VILLAGE.
> A.N. COLLEY)"

I did not know who these Trullibers were either, and none of my reference books gave any help, so I rang our learned Treasurer Norman Taylor, and he had the answer. Trulliber is a country parson in Henry Fielding's 'Adventures of Joseph Andrews', described as "a parson on Sundays; but all the other six might properly be called a farmer". He is a dairy and pig farmer, loud-

mouthed and coarse-mannered and particularly loutish towards his wife. In Chapter 14 Book 2 of the novel, Parson Trulliber gives the saintly Parson Adams a thoroughly nasty and embarrassing time.

I passed this information on to Lord Deramore, who replied:

> "I must say that I still find Smith's comment unduly harsh, and I doubt if Henry Yarburgh was bad-mannered. Like many a Yorkshireman he may have had reservations about 'comers-in' and regarded the intellectual Smith with suspicion ...."

If anyone has further evidence about the true nature of Major Yarburgh (of the 20th Light Dragoons) I would be happy to hear - and publish.

A week-end with Sydney

Higham Hall is a well-appointed and beautifully-situated residential adult education centre at the northern end of Bassenthwaite Lake in the northern-most part of the Lake District. Sydney passed close by - staying briefly in Keswick and having himself conducted to the summit of Skiddaw mountain - on his way to Edinburgh in 1798.

Early next year our Treasurer Norman Taylor and I are to give a week-end course at Higham Hall about Sydney, his life and times and character and writings and reputation. It will begin on the evening of Friday February 21st and conclude after lunch on Sunday 23rd. If you are interested and would like details, please write to Alastair Galbraith, who is the Director (and also a member of our Association) at Higham Hall, Bassenthwaite Lake, Cockermouth, Cumbria CA13 9SH

Soon to be published....

The book that Norman Taylor and I have done - 'Twelve Miles from a Lemon', an anthology of the best passages from Sydney's polemical journalism and his letters - will be published (we hope) in October this year by The Lutterworth Press of Cambridge. We plan to offer copies at a reduced price to members of the Association. Further details in the next Newsletter.

Next year's gathering

Our gathering next year will be in the West Country, in the area of the village of Combe Florey where Sydney was Rector for the last 16 years of his life. For all his emphatic derision for life in the country, he referred to this region as "the valley of flowers" and "our little Paradise".

In appearance, it is little changed since his day. His church is still there (with a window dedicated to his memory) and the Old Rectory where he lived and did some 'improvement', and the garden which he loved.

The novelist Evelyn Waugh moved into the 18th century manor house on the hill above the church in 1956, lived his final ten years there, and is buried there. Evelyn's son Auberon, who was a novelist briefly and is now a forceful columnist and editor of the 'Literary Review' and a Patron of our Association, now lives in the house. He will host the occasion, with the help and support of Captain and Mrs W.A. Read who live at the Old Rectory and are great Sydney fans.

The likely date is the weekend of September 6-7 1997. Full details in the next Newsletter.

Edwin Landseer, portrait sketch, 1840s

The Sydney Smith Association