

**THE
SYDNEY SMITH
ASSOCIATION**



NEWSLETTER

Issue 6

March 2001

The Sydney Smith Association

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Coming Events and other Business

Combe Florey

This year we will be holding our annual week-end at Combe Florey on 29th and 30th September.

Proceedings start with tea in the Village Hall followed by the AGM. Before the AGM we will be addressed by William Thomas, Student of Christ Church, Oxford, an expert on Macaulay, whom Sydney Smith regarded as "a book in breeches" notable for his occasional "flashes of silence".

After the AGM we have been invited by Mrs Bill Read to the Old Rectory.

Dinner is being organised by the ladies of Combe Florey and those members who attended our last visit to Combe Florey will be able to vouch for the excellence of the cuisine.

On the Sunday at 11.00am Matins will be held in Combe Florey Church when Bishop Hugh Montefiore, a member of the Association, will give the address and dedicate a plaque of Sydney Smith donated by the Association in conjunction with the Gemini Foundation.

Details and an application form are enclosed.

Lunches

London lunches held in the Jacobite Room at the Boisdale Restaurant have proved most agreeable and the topics proposed for discussion elicited a lively exchange of views that proved interesting and stimulating. The presenters were Tyrell Burgess, Adam Fergusson and Peter Diggle and their chosen topics "The Poor in a Rich Society", "Should Identity Cards be obligatory?" and "Why go to War?". Mary Beaumont has kindly agreed to continue to organise these lunches and can be contacted at 0208 318 3388.

East Anglia

Some members of the Association who live in East Anglia plan to form a local group to enjoy convivial lunches from time to time. The idea is to stimulate local interest and membership and reduce the need to travel long distances. Existing members who would like to join them should contact Michael Belfrage, Chantry Farm, Campsea Ashe, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP13 OPZ. Telephone 01728 748087.

Committee Meeting

The Association's committee held one of its rare meetings at The Old Brewery, Thornton-le-Clay, on 3rd December, disregarding all the inconveniences caused by heavy flooding in the York region. Only Norman Taylor was (understandably) absent, having found the journey from a storm-bound Lyme Regis to York impractical. He was however asked to develop his proposals for a formal constitution to ensure the continuity of the Association, and drafts will be considered in due course.

Alan Bell, who has chaired the Association for the past five years, gave notice that he wished to resign. This was reluctantly accepted, though we are glad that he has agreed to remain a member of the Committee. Peter Diggle has volunteered to take the chair for the next two years, after which Randolph Vigne (whose family are related to Sydney's mother) will be able to take up the chairmanship once some academic commitments are out of the way.

Professor Graham Parry, who has been the Association's secretary since its inception, also has academic commitments that make it necessary for him to resign. He will however continue to serve on the Committee. He will be joined there by Mary Beaumont and Dr Peter Payan; we are particularly grateful to Mary for her help with organising the London lunches.

Our Treasurer, Professor Arnold Arthurs, submitted up-to-date accounts, which were approved. The joint Editors of the Newsletter expressed their readiness to give way to younger spirits, and it was decided to look for volunteers to take over some editorial duties during the coming year.

The idea of setting up a Sydney Smith website was considered and the committee would look further into the matter. It was agreed that any memorabilia the Association has managed to accumulate might be offered to the Humanities Research Library at York University. It was decided that the AGM gathering for 2001 would be held at Combe Florey, probably over the last weekend in September. The possibility of meeting at New College, Oxford, in 2002 was discussed. The chances of arranging two lunches in York would also be looked into.

St Mary's, Woodford

St Mary's, Woodford is the church where Sydney Smith was baptised on 2nd July 1771. On 14th May 2000 we were invited to join the congregation at their 10am Eucharist when it had been arranged that Lord Runcie would give an address and unveil a plaque, presented by the association in conjunction with the Gemini Foundation, in honour of Sydney Smith. Unfortunately Lord Runcie was not well enough to attend but his address was read out to the congregation.

"I am very sorry that I cannot be with you in Woodford this morning. I wanted to share in the worship of a church that has a great tradition and come through many times of change. It seems the perfect place in which to remember Sydney Smith and to pay tribute to him as one of the most loveable, unusual and prophetic of the clergy that the Church of England has ever known. He was baptised here in 1771. He died in 1845. He lived through the arrival of the steam engine, the American Revolution, the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, the Great Reform of our parliament. They were also years when the Christian faith seemed to be threatened by the discoveries of scientists and the scholarship of critics. Sydney Smith saw the importance of changes and was fascinated by the task of living through changing days. He did not lose confidence in his faith. He was such a remarkable guide through the first part of the last century. I believe that he has much to tell us as we enter the third millennium.

He was famous for his wit. He thought that a sense of humour was very important to give you a sense of proportion. People without a sense of humour should never be put in charge of anything. But he is less well known as an outstanding parish priest. That is a virtue to be remembered here on Good Shepherd Sunday. He cared for the body and souls of his parishioners in Yorkshire for twenty years. He preached straight forward sensible sermons and did not show off his learning and wit but spoke plainly to ordinary people who grew to honour and love him.

At the centre of the nation's life he campaigned against all the ills that diminished our humanity – slavery, ignorance, cruelty, social and political injustice, mental torture, inhumane treatment of prisoners. He enjoyed the friendships and hospitality of London life but he had no time at all for religious bigotry. He disliked bureaucrats. He made fun of proud bishops. He resisted superstition in every form.

His home was rooted in the Church of England but he was ready to recognise goodness and even sanctity in those with whom he was in regular and frequent disagreement. This combination of commitment and openness is surely the message that comes through the figure of Christ the Good Shepherd. May we all rejoice in commemorating through this plaque the

baptism of someone who did his best to embody what the Lord so supremely taught us. Sydney Smith stood by his baptism all his days; but he was ready to fight for the freedom of others to follow their own way of faith. To love God and to rejoice in his creation there must be liberty. We are put in this life to honour God and his creation not to indulge ourselves and spoil his purposes."

Woodford Church was first built towards the end of the 12th century but by the end of the 14th century was in such a ruinous condition that the Abbot of Waltham Holy Cross rebuilt it in brick with stone dressings, financed by a penitent named Woodford. Over the years as the population of the parish increased the church was gradually enlarged and refurbished until it was rased to the ground by fire in 1969. By 1972 it had been rebuilt but the interior was in a completely different form from the one it replaced. Those responsible for the conversion managed to blend church and community together in a most effective way. It was a great experience to be able to attend a service in a light, open and airy church with a large and enthusiastic congregation who exuded happiness and goodwill. After the service our members were hospitably received in a reception room on the first floor, when we had time to meet many of those who had done so much to make this a very special church.

From the church we wended our way to Stansteadbury, near Ware, where we had been invited by Anthony and Joan Trower to a buffet luncheon in their historic family home. (Anthony Trower is a descendant of Sydney Smith's aunt.) The house is 17th century in origin though altered over the years. The garden front now has an early 18th century façade with nine bay windows. The view over the immaculately kept garden and lawns makes it hard to realise the house is a bare 20 miles from the centre of London. The house has a fine staircase and there is an interesting collection of family portraits in a lovely interior with beautiful furniture lovingly looked after.

The dining room is a large one and it was there, after drinks in the drawing room, that members were firmly sat down and the anticipated buffet had been transformed into a substantial and excellent lunch the like of which Sydney would have felt bound to regale his family and friends. To Anthony and Joan and two more generations of Trowers who looked after us so efficiently we are most indebted for making this 14th May such a memorable occasion.

The Edinburgh Week-end

Last year's annual gathering was held in Edinburgh over the week-end of September 23rd - 24th. Norman Taylor reports.

John Harden's Sketches

On Saturday morning Dr Iain Brown, senior curator of the Department of Manuscripts of the National Library of Scotland, showed us slides of the drawings of John Harden. These meticulously accurate sketches depict the interiors of the newly built Georgian houses of the New Town, Edinburgh, and the activities of those living in them, such as making music, playing cards, reading. Only one 'below stairs' drawing exists – of servants bottling wine. To such a house Sydney would have been invited during his years in Edinburgh when he took lodgings, first in Hanover Street, and then, after his marriage, in Queen Street. He is mentioned in one of the lengthy letters in notebook form, with which the sketches were sent to a sister in India, as "a very fine orator", who had preached a charity sermon for the industrious blind.

The Vintners Rooms

Luncheon was held in the Vintners Rooms, part of Vaults Building in Leith, which for centuries from medieval times were used for the storage of the lauded "tonnes" of wine. After the Reformation the Vintners Guild held the monopoly of importing wine, and it was they who commissioned the building of the Vintners Rooms above the vaults. The fine plasterwork was executed about 1739 by Thomas Clayton. In this room, with its auctioneer's alcove, the wine was sold; and perhaps Sydney, with his enjoyment of the good things of life, attended a wine auction where we sat for lunch.

On the Saturday afternoon members were shown round the rooms of the Speculative Society. Amongst them was Peter Payan, a founder member, who kindly sent us the following description.

"The Speculative Society"

Nothing in our visit to Edinburgh gave me greater pleasure than coming to know the Speculative Society. It was scarcely possible to exaggerate the privilege of finding oneself within its rooms: Alan Bell had never set foot in them during his eighteen years at the National Library. Our singular opportunity came through the invitation of his friend Ross Leckie, member of the Society and man of many parts, whose fluency, charm and wit conveyed as much of the nature of the 'Spec' as his account of its doings.

Lord Cockburn, Judge of the Court of Session, writes in his 'Memorials': "In 1799 I entered the Speculative Society; an institution which has trained more young men to public speaking, talent and liberal thought than all the other private institutions in Scotland." Here the brighter young lawyers and intellectuals of the time gained invaluable debating and adversarial experience. Today seven of the twelve Scottish law lords are members, though membership is by no means confined to the legal profession.

William Creech, bookseller and afterwards Burns' publisher, was the moving spirit in founding the Society in 1764, which makes it the longest living debating society in the United Kingdom. Its most brilliant period is said to have been between 1792 and 1805, when members included Scott, Jeffrey, Brougham, Murray, Horner and Cockburn. Sydney Smith was thus well acquainted with a number of members: it is hard to believe he would not himself have become one in due course.

Mr Leckie astounded and delighted us with his account of the Society's procedures and practices. After the Wednesday evening dinner a member is escorted to the lectern by the Servitor to read an essay. This will be on a subject of his choice, serious or frivolous, and last for ten to twenty minutes. Recent essays had been on: "The meaning of the word 'is' in Schopenhauer", and "Glasgow Rangers".

There may be whispering, even shouting during the reading. The speaker has no right of reply to what may be ferocious criticism. If his efforts are approved the essay will be bound, but if they are not there will be cries of: "Mr. President - FIRE!" and the Servitor will shovel the essay on to the fire. (It is more demanding than a comparable occasion at Oxford, Mr Leckie remarked dryly.) The company will then retire to drink claret, returning to debate for perhaps half the night.

An ordinary member will read two essays a year for three years. The Society must then vote upon whether or not he should become an 'honorary' member, with attendant privileges. The anxious candidate is likely to have taken discreet soundings beforehand. The vote is conducted by each of those present dropping a ball into a specially constructed box with two drawers. If even one ball is found in the "No" drawer, the hapless aspirant is cast into outer darkness, never to return. Success brings with it immunity from certain strict rules governing ordinary membership, and the prospect of lifelong enjoyable discourse among intellectual peers.

How pleasant an image is called to mind: Sydney at the 'Spec'. Would that this had happened. For sure he would have enlightened, enchanted and reduced to occasional helplessness even those powerful intellects of Edinburgh in its time of glory. The dourness said to be found in that northern latitude must have succumbed to "The original Projector of The Edinburgh Review and its first editor"

The AGM

On the Saturday evening members gathered, in good numbers, for the AGM, which was held in the prestigious New Club. The Club's earliest records date from 1787, when it met in Bayle's Tavern in Shakespeare Square at the east end of Princes Street. The Club then acquired its own premises in St Andrew Square, before moving to its present site in Princes Street in 1837. Today's building dates from 1969. The contemporary design provides an ideal setting and combines the comforts and style of a long established club. In these delightful surroundings we held the AGM.

The Chairman Mr Alan Bell presided. He spoke of the sad death of the Association's Patron, Lord Runcie, whose keen interest in our activities had been a great encouragement to the honorary officers. His impromptu speech during our visit to Sydney's house in Doughty Street, his more formal address dedicating the plaque at Castle Howard and the sermon he had contributed to be read at the dedication of the plaque at Woodford had each made the occasion memorable. He would be greatly missed by the Association. So too would Captain Bill Read of the Old Rectory at Combe Florey, whose bonhomous hospitality at our Somerset meeting had been so enlivening. And we also mourned Mr John Webster, a founder member from Yorkshire.

The London lunches continued thanks to Mary Beaumont's keen interest, Peter Diggle's support and the hospitality of our member Ranald MacDonald of Clanranald Younger at the Boisdale Restaurant: a further lunch was to be held there on 4th October.

Thanks were due, also, to the vicar and congregation of the parish church at Woodford, where a plaque had been dedicated in May. A large congregation had attended the parish communion service, and for the Association the day was made additionally memorable by the hospitality of our members (descendants of Sydney's aunt,) Anthony and Joan Trower.

For the Edinburgh trip, thanks were due to Dr Iain Brown of the National Library of Scotland, who had lectured, on the morning of the meeting, on the drawings of John Harden, illustrating Edinburgh social life at the time of Sydney's residence in the city; and to Ross Leckie, who had shown us the rooms of the Speculative Society in the afternoon, a rare privilege for non-members of the 'Spec'. Also to the New Club for allowing us to hold our AGM and dine there and especially to Dean (Emeritus) Alan Webster for his sermon at St John's Episcopalian Church, Princes Street, which was eagerly awaited the following day.

A statement of accounts was circulated and showed the Association to be satisfactorily in credit, with 189 fully paid up members and over 50 other less regular payers making a total of 240-250. Peter Diggle would welcome suggestions about a Sydney Smith Association website similar to those published by other literary societies.

A return visit to Combe Florey was agreed for the 2001 Annual General Meeting and 29th September seemed the most likely date. Members were asked to note it provisionally in their diaries.

After the AGM we moved to the Long Room and enjoyed an excellent dinner with the spectacular view of Edinburgh Castle as a backdrop. A fitting end to a busy and enjoyable day.

Sunday 24th September 2000

The Church of St John the Evangelist

Members joined the congregation for Choral Matins at which the Very Reverend Alan Webster KCVO DD was invited to preach. Having been Dean of St Paul's he was not unacquainted with Sydney Smith and the following are extracts from this carefully prepared and excellently delivered address.

"Edinburgh is right to celebrate Sydney Smith's role as a minister of the church and a thinker on human rights. Here in 1802 at 18 Buccleuch Place with his friends Jeffrey and Brougham, he founded 'The Edinburgh Review' and the following year, at 40 George Street, he established his first home, and his first child was born. In Edinburgh he found his devotion to children and learnt to play with them.

His long life of campaigning for controversial and unpopular but humane causes started in this city. Here he found kindred free spirits. Here in sustained study, argument, laughter and writing he discovered his role. Here he first insisted that the core of Christianity, the heart of the Gospel, required us to love our neighbours as ourselves. Our neighbours might be black, or Roman Catholic, or tiny children forced to crawl up our chimneys, or fellow citizens without property denied the right to vote. For Sydney, Edinburgh was a city of liberation of the mind and spirit. Of course in his witty way he used to make jokes about 'The land of Calvin, oatcakes and sulphur', but his brief time here and his 25 years writing for 'The Edinburgh Review' liberated him. He discovered that to love our neighbour as ourselves requires us to use our imagination and to share our laughter with those of other creeds and other ways of life....

Sydney learnt in Edinburgh to campaign precariously, away from bland assurances. He made his own that oxymoronical saying of Jesus himself "Peace I leave with you..... not as the world gives do I give you." Sydney's campaigns often disturbed. He would have agreed with the twentieth century Spanish writer Unamuno "God deny you peace and give you glory". He laughed people out of self satisfaction and economic and political selfishness....

At Sydney's Edinburgh homes, and his later homes in London and Yorkshire, he learnt his love of children. He would romp for an hour every day and invent games. He found "more happiness in a multitude of children than in a multitude of councillors". He listened to children and talked with them. Seeing a child stroking the shell of a turtle he asked "Why?". To the child's reply "To please the turtle" he said: "You might as well stroke the dome of St. Paul's to please the Dean and Chapter." The children's imaginative world stimulated his own imagination to see the absurdities of

adult institutions and some long-established customs. He had discovered in the fantasies of children how their language and imagination are different and valuable. He laughed with children and believed that laughter could move the adult world. In his Yorkshire village he carried sweets for children: in his publications, especially "The Letters of Peter Plymley" he knew wit could sweeten his demanding message . . .

Sydney found the disagreements of the Chapter at St Paul's comic. Despite his 16 stone and double chin he was extremely energetic climbing to the roofs and pushing himself through narrow openings. He said to a close friend, "I am just going to pray for you at St Paul's, but with no very lively hope of success". He radiated good nature and could not understand why small groups should be miserable and quarrelsome. He laughed at himself and believed that those who stood on their dignity would be left standing. He said "Life is to be fortified by many friendships... to love, and to be loved, is the greatest happiness of existence". As a rural JP, Sydney had been kind to poachers and did not enforce the laws aimed at the poor, the unfortunate and those who frequented ale houses - as an administrator he was equally warm hearted and effective.

The core of Sydney's creed was that God is tolerant and that omniscience pardons. He did not press people to go to church. He even felt that he must frighten off some of his friends from coming to St Paul's in winter. "To go to St Paul's in winter is certain death. The thermometer is several degrees below zero. My sentences are frozen as they come out of my mouth, and are thawed in the course of the summer, making strange noises and unexpected assertions in various parts of the church; but if you are tired of a world, which is not tired of you, and are determined to go to St Paul's, it becomes my duty to facilitate the desperate scheme. Present the enclosed card to any of the virgers and you will be well placed."

Endlessly hospitable, he was always active over his Chapter duties; he was the first person to insist that an ecclesiastical building should be insured. He reorganised the musical foundation, installed mains water, some heating and gas lamps in the choir and insisted that St Paul's should be cleaned. Sydney deplored, with his usual humour, his own impetuosity, as every aspect of the cathedral felt the animation of his energy. He spent time just being there in the cathedral listening and talking; quizzing everybody but hurting no one's feelings. His liberal kind-hearted wit and his strong mellow voice gave joy to the congregation who heard him read or preach. ...

He died a canon of St Paul's which had been built by Wren as a church of enlightenment for everyone. Later St Paul's was to be a beacon of hope during the blitz and is now frequently a place of joyful ecumenical worship, served by women as well as men, in a diocese with bishops black and white.

Sydney's pilgrimage towards a just and universal sense of the neighbour had begun in Edinburgh but his final home, the end of his long campaigning odyssey, was London's St Paul's. He had stood for happiness and compassion. He had laughed at stupidity and small-mindedness. He had pleaded for love of one's neighbours. Now he was at rest.

How would he preach today? "Our neighbours are the people of the world – sometimes in debt, sometimes without amnesty and tortured by harsh and brutal regimes, sometimes exploited and virtually enslaved. Women are denied their rights, and children forced to maim and kill as mercenaries. You must discredit, laugh out of court, the class attitudes and codes which are based on untrue, unscientific prejudices. They infringe the divine command to love your neighbours as yourself. The Gospel for which you should sacrifice status, popularity and wealth is vital for your world today. Cleave to charity and compassion, forgiveness and reconciliation, joy and laughter, have time, time for children, for each other and for yourself. May benevolence, peace and goodwill fill the sails of your vessel as you travel on your odyssey to the Holy Land, the Kingdom Christ lived and preached, to God's Jerusalem. Remember scripture says that wisdom is ever at play in God's presence as creation proceeds. Remember your own contemporary poet, Ann Lewin."

*Thus heaven and earth were
Finished, and were good. But
In the middle of the night, God woke.
'It might be burdensome' he thought,
'To give dominion over all created things
To earthling folk, lest they should
Take themselves too seriously.
I'll give them music and a
Sense of fun, to lighten duty and
Enliven praise.'
So in wise mercy did Creator God.
And all the seventh day, he rested,
Well content.*

St John's Church was built in 1818. The architect was William Burn, who also designed the portico of the Assembly Rooms in George Street, and the Melville Column in St Andrew Square. The design is Perpendicular Gothic Revival. The fan vaulting of the nave is an interpretation of the splendid medieval ceilings of St George's Chapel, Windsor, and the Henry VII Chapel in Westminster Abbey. The windows are considered by some to be the finest collection of stained glass under one roof in Scotland.

Members we miss

We sadly have to report the deaths of three of our founder members.

Auberon Waugh was an obvious choice at the time our Association was formed to be one of our first Patrons. He was an admirer of Sydney Smith's campaigning style as a reviewer and pamphleteer, and appreciated him for having remained 'a profoundly happy man'. He wrote the introduction to the 1981 World's Classics reprint of the 'Selected Letters', remarking that "Time and again, in reading Smith, one sees with delighted surprise a discovery one has just made oneself. Different people will respond differently, but I find it rather gratifying that Smith was sixty before he discovered what I have understood since my thirty-fifth birthday, that digestion is the great secret of life." He was proud that Sydney had once been rector of the village to which the Waugh family later gave further literary renown. It was there that Bron Waugh and his wife, Lady Teresa, entertained the Association so generously and memorably when we held our AGM in the village in September 1998. He had many friends in the Association, which will miss him greatly.

Captain W. (Bill) A.A. Read lived in the former Rectory occupied by Sydney Smith in Combe Florey and with his wife Mary restored it to its former glory: and there they welcomed warmly anyone who ventured to Combe Florey out of an enthusiasm for Sydney Smith. Guests would find this jovial ex-Battle of Britain pilot declaiming line upon line of perfectly remembered poetry, given the slightest opportunity! As mentioned elsewhere, on the occasion we first met as an Association at Combe Florey, all were invited to the Old Rectory for farewell drinks, and Bill and Mary were presented with a portrait of Sydney. We are sorry he did not live long enough for our visit this year, for, as Churchwarden, he had worked hard and shown infinite patience with Advisory Boards, to have a plaque of Sydney placed in the church, whose only present memorial is a stained glass window in which he has no place.

William Wormald MC JP was one of our founder members, whose kindness and generosity, humour and loyalty his friends will always remember. His family trust owns the Old Rectory (built by Sydney Smith) in Foston and he never failed to respond to the many appeals for help from Foston Church in which he always showed a keen interest.

"Countdown": the story continued

In last year's Newsletter I told a sad little tale, recounting how I had come to send a copy of "Twelve Miles from a Lemon" to Richard Whiteley of the TV Quiz programme "Countdown". A contributor to the programme had quoted from Sydney and Whiteley had said "Who is this Sydney Smith? I've never heard of him". I had worked with Whiteley many years earlier, so I sent him the book and a sharp little note chiding him for his proclaimed ignorance and instructing him to put the matter right. Since then there had been no further mention of mention of Sydney, so I could only assume that my parcel had not arrived

My assumption was wrong. Sometime in January 2000 Whiteley opened his programme by waiving the book in front of the camera, saying he remembered me kindly and promising to bone up on Sydney. Unfortunately, I did not see the programme as I was in Chamonix that week, watching a week-long blizzard. I don't think the publicity did anything much for the sales of the book. But it taught me something about the good folks of Keswick, where I live. When I got home from Chamonix every third person I met in the street stopped me and asked if I was the Alan Hankinson Richard Whiteley had been going on about. "Countdown" clearly enjoys almost 100% of the Keswick viewing audience.

Our grateful thanks are due to Alan Hankinson for his years as Editor of the Association's Newsletter, which he founded and produced regularly single handed until joined by Norman Taylor. Alan's place is kindly being taken by Frank Collieson, who has spent a lifetime in publishing.

Contributions to the Newsletter are always welcome and members opinions are highly valued. Please send them to:

23 Neville Road, Cambridge CB1 3SW.

OUR AIMS

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

