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Coleridge, Cote House, and the White Lion ¹

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Detailed examination of the chronology of Coleridge's movements during the first two months of 1798 has drawn attention to an anomaly in the existing records.

As is well known he preached from time to time in Unitarian pulpits during the 1790s and in December 1797 was offered the chance to be considered for a paid post as minister, largely, it seems, through the good offices of J.P. Estlin, the minister in Bristol, who had heard that John Rowe, the current minister at Shrewsbury, was planning to join him in Bristol. Accordingly, Coleridge travelled to the Shropshire town and preached a sermon there on January 14, 1798 made memorable by Hazlitt's account of it in his essay 'My First Acquaintance with Poets'.

Having just before received a draft for £100 sent him by Josiah and Thomas Wedgwood, and having returned it on the grounds that he must find a more permanent solution to his present financial problems, he received from them on January 16, while staying with the Hazlitts, the unconditional offer of an annuity of £150 a year. After no more than a little thought he accepted this, withdrawing his candidacy for the Shropshire post despite Estlin's previous urgings that he should take it.² He remained in Shrewsbury for two more Sundays, preaching and taking Mr Rowe's duties while the latter looked for a house in Bristol, and finally departed on Monday the 29th, planning to breakfast with Thomas Wedgwood next day at Cote House, John Wedgwood's house at Westbury near Bristol. On the day of his arrival he wrote a letter to John Thelwall from Cottle's shop in Bristol, saying that he would be at Stowey 'in a few days'. The following week he wrote to his brother George, dating his letter on the 8th February and saying that he had stayed a week at Cote House and just returned home. The next letter in the *Collected Letters*, addressed to J.P. Estlin, is headed 'Tuesday night—' and dated by the editor, presumably from the internal evidence it contains, 13 February. It opens as follows:

My dear Friend

If you have never been a slave to the superstition of impulses, you will marvel to hear that I arrived at Stowey, on Friday last, by dinner time.—I left Mr Wedgwood's on Thursday evening, just time enough

¹ This article is reprinted, with variations, from *Notes and Queries* (NQ Vol ccxlv (Dec 1999) 457-8) with kind permission of the Editors, Pembroke College, Oxford.

² Coleridge's two weeks in Shrewsbury, doing John Rowe's job, provided him with enough experience to know that the ministry was not his calling; he is telling Tom Poole why he has not written for the *Morning Post*: 'The people here absolutely *consume* me—the Clergymen of the Church are eminently courteous, & some of them come & hear me. If I had stayed, I have reason to think that I should have doubled the congregation almost immediately.—With two sermons to meditate in each week, with many letters to write, with invitations to dinner, tea, & supper in each day, & people calling in, & I forced to return morning calls, every morning, you will not be surprized, tho' you will be vexed to hear, that I have written nothing for the *Morning Post*—' (CL I 381, 27 Jan 1798)

to keep an engagement, I had made, to sup with a Mr Williams of Nottingham, at the White Lion.—There I slept—awoke at 5 in the morning, and was *haunted* by a strange notion that there was something of great importance that demanded my immediate presence at Stowey. I dressed myself, and walked out to dissipate the folly—but the Bridgewater Coach rattling by, & the Coachman asking me if I would get in—I took it for an omen—the superstitious feeling recurred—and in I went—came home, & found my wife & child in very good health!—However, as I must necessarily be in Bristol, in a few weeks, I the less regret my strange & abrupt departure.

Dating the departure from the White Lion on Friday the 9th and the letter recording it on Tuesday the 13th, the editor, Earl Leslie Griggs, also pointed out that Coleridge must have misdated his previous letter by one day, since the episode now recounted involved his having arrived back in Stowey on the 9th, the day after that letter was supposed to have been written. The chronology that resulted, which has subsequently come to be generally accepted, has Coleridge arriving in Bristol on the 30th, staying at Cote House till the 8th, followed by an overnight stay at the White Lion in Bristol that evening and his sudden return to Stowey next day on the 9th. There seems to be little difficulty in assenting to this, indeed, apart from the existence of a curious discrepancy between this account of the events and Dorothy Wordsworth's contemporaneous journal, which records three separate occasions, on the 3rd, 4th and 5th of February, on which she 'walked with Coleridge', once 'over the hills' and twice to Stowey. This naturally raises the question how she could possibly have done so if Coleridge was at Cote House visiting the Wedgwoods during the same period.

The anomaly was not picked up in Griggs's edition, nor has it been mentioned in biographies published since that appeared, but it has been noticed by scholars particularly attentive to the dates involved. Valerie Purton, in her *Chronology*, notes the discrepancy but simply observes (without giving examples) that Dorothy Wordsworth 'often makes errors over dates'.³ Mark Reed in his very thorough chronology of Wordsworth, is, understandably, more concerned, remarking that the letter to George Coleridge 'makes it quite plain that he did not return until 9 February', yet that 'no serious doubt can be cast on DW's datings at this time'. He points out that the journals are printed from transcripts by William Knight, and thinks he must have been to blame, but offers no plausible explanation as to how such a repeated error could have found its way into her text.

Griggs's chronology follows logically from the evidence in the letters he examines, but two points about it should be noted. One is that it involves Coleridge staying at Cote House for ten days—rather more than the 'week'

³ It is worth noting Dorothy makes uninterrupted daily entries from January 20th, when the journal begins to February 27th. Under such circumstances it would seem almost impossible to make the kind of error her editor assumes, or for someone else to make mistakes in the transcription of dates.

mentioned in his letter to George. The other is that the account to Estlin of his unexpectedly abrupt boarding of the Bridgwater coach is not altogether convincing if it means that he was anticipating his departure from Bristol by no more than a day, or a few hours.

I should like to propose an alternative solution, namely that (whether or not one accepts his vivid account of the exact circumstances) Coleridge's sudden departure from Bristol took place not on Friday the 9th, but on Friday the 2nd, after he had stayed at Cote House for no more than two nights. In that case, the records fall more neatly into place. The letter to George can be said to have been correctly dated by Coleridge on the 8th after all, while the one to Estlin, which bore no date at all in the original, may be brought forward to the 6th. The only points that then remain anomalous are the reference in the letter of the 8th to the 'week' spent at Cote House and the phrase 'have just returned home' (when he would already have been there for five or six days). These, however, are not unbelievable as exaggerations, given Coleridge's well-known epistolary habits of imaginative elasticity and the fact that he was trying to excuse himself for having been so long in replying to a letter from his brother, received about six weeks before, informing him of sickness in his house.

On this showing the chronology which seems to make best sense of the various pieces of evidence is that Coleridge, having arrived at Cote House on the morning of the 30th, left there on the evening of the 1st, probably planning to spend a day or two longer in Bristol seeing a few friends, including Estlin, who needed to be reconciled to the fact that Coleridge had after all turned down the offer at Shrewsbury which he had helped to bring about.⁴ Instead, however, he was smitten next morning by his sudden panic at the thought of what might be happening in the Stowey he had left more than a fortnight before (where his wife was expecting their second son in a few months' time) and returned there precipitately, only to find that all was well after all.⁵ Once there he could write a letter of explanation to Estlin instead of having to face his reproaches face to face and another to George excusing his silence by an account of his recent activities—including a few diplomatic exaggerations as to the time involved. He could also now return to his walking and talking with the Wordsworths in the Quantocks and his writing of pieces such as 'Frost at Midnight' and *The Ancient Mariner*: a more attractive and profitable way of spending his time, no doubt, than that of having to discuss his recent religious

⁴ Estlin lived on St Michael's Hill, less than ten minutes walk from the White Lion. Coleridge may even have gone past Estlin's house on his way into Bristol. Perhaps he is therefore feeling guilty that either on the morning of his departure, or on his way into Bristol the previous evening, he had not called on Estlin. Superstition is an interesting excuse in this context, entirely inappropriate in a potential minister: Coleridge may thus be hinting at his unsuitability. But as he walks out 'to dissipate his folly', there being no other excuse available, the fit comes on him again as soon as the (expected?) coach comes in sight. This may be another example of how difficult Coleridge found difficult duties.

⁵ It is indeed curious that Coleridge expected a *son*: how would they have known in those days? But he says so plainly in his letter to Thelwall: 'My Wife & Baby are well—and I shall probably kiss my *youngest* boy in April. (CL I 382)

conduct in detail, either with his orthodox clergyman brother or with his Unitarian friend and fellow-preacher.

A summary of Coleridge's movements: January and February 1798

<i>Date</i>	<i>Standard Chronology</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Revised Chronology</i>
Jan 14 th	preaches at Shrewsbury	Jan 14 th	preaches at Shrewsbury
Jan 29 th	leaves Shrewsbury for Bristol	Jan 29 th	leaves Shrewsbury for Bristol
Jan 30 th	arrives in Bristol; writes a letter from Cottle's shop; goes to stay at Cote House, Westbury, for ten nights	Jan 30 th	arrives in Bristol; writes a letter from Cottle's shop; goes to stay at Cote House, Westbury, for two nights
Feb 8 th	leaves Cote House and spends the night at The White Lion, Broad Street	Feb 1st	leaves Cote House and spends the night at The White Lion, Broad Street
Feb 9 th	hops on the coach for Nether Stowey soon after five in the morning	Feb 2nd	hops on the coach for Nether Stowey soon after five in the morning
Feb 10 th	Settles in to Nether Stowey	Feb 3 rd , 4 th & 5 th	At Nether Stowey, goes on walks with Dorothy Wordsworth

In Search of *The White Lion* ⁶

It is rather touching to think of Coleridge waking at five, having a premonition that something was wrong in Nether Stowey, and getting up and taking some fresh air to dissipate his folly. And it is delightful to think, even if it is the fiction of a guilty conscience, that he simply hopped on the coach as it passed him by—making it sound as if he didn't go back to the hotel either to collect any belongings or to pay the bill. And why did the coachman ask Coleridge whether he 'would get in'? Did he look like a man going somewhere, or did the coachman know him?

I wondered whether any vestiges of this little episode might remain in modern Bristol. I began my inquiries by assuming that the White Lion would have to be very close to the main coaching route through Bristol for Coleridge simply to have come across the coach by chance. I had an inkling of the route the coach might have taken because he describes, in marvellous doggerel, his move from Bristol to Bridgwater on New Year's Day 1797, going down St Michael's Hill, through Bristol, and up Redcliff Hill and so on into the

⁶ Additional remarks by Graham Davidson

countryside:

And now the Chaise came proudly rattling,
And Box and Bundle, Wife and Maid and Bratling
As close as Glass we all were stow'd:
And down St Michael's Hill we rode;
Then up the Hill of Red-cliff
Where Sal liv'd when a Spinster,
And having pass'd the said Cliff
Here rattled thro' Bedminster.⁷

I opened the telephone book and looked up the White Lion—there are several of them in the Bristol area—but only one—calling itself the White Lion Hotel—in the centre of Bristol itself. I rang the landlord, who proved very helpful, pointing out that its address was significant—Quay End, where the river finally met the streets in the heart of Bristol, that the building itself stood against the city walls, had been a wine merchant's in the 1700's, was licensed as a pub in 1830, and had also been Church property at some time—which is perhaps how it got the title 'Hotel' as the Church might have been a little coy of being directly associated with a vintners!

I thought I had found the place, and was looking forward to seeing the room where Coleridge might have spent the night—it was not a big building according to the landlord, as I saw when I arrived at Quay End. Given that the present main thoroughfare through Bristol is right in front of this pub, I felt further convinced that the White Lion was alive and well. However the landlord suggested that I contact the vicar of St.Stephen's—the church that used to own the pub—as he was a man interested in local history. I found my way there, and accosted a man on the way out of the church, and in an obvious hurry, with, Are you the vicar? It so happened, as luck or a good nose for vicars would have it, that I was right. We had a brief conversation then, and after several missed calls, a longer chat on the telephone, the upshot of which was that he had a street map of eighteenth century Bristol hanging, as he put it, on the way to the loo.

This would clinch it, I thought, and a few days later I revisited the church, finding my way to the loo. And indeed I found a splendid and seemingly original map put together from four parts, the whole produced by a certain John Rocque in 1742. What was immediately evident was that the road down St Michael's Hill is directly opposite Redcliffe Hill, (Redcliffe on the map) and the road connecting the two is Broad Street, now inappositely named. Unfortunately, the present White Lion was, and is, some 100 rather indirect yards from Broad Street—which seemed the likely coach road as it went through the very middle of Bristol and over what the map simply, and

⁷ PW 1 i 314 In the previous verse Coleridge describes getting his family up at three o'clock in the morning. Jim Mays wonders why they had to start so early, but taken with his five o'clock rising a year later, it would appear that coaches for Nether Stowey left Bristol early in the morning.

presumably rightly called, The Bridge, now Bristol Bridge. I was a little disappointed. But as I peered closely—specs off, face only a few inches from the map—and followed the course of Broad Street, I saw written at right angles ‘The White Lyon Inn’—and felt triumphant, knowing this must be the place. Interestingly it occupied it’s own road—presumably for coaches to draw in, and right next to it was another such called ‘The White Harte Inn’—rival establishments perhaps, occupying prime sites. Clearly when Coleridge wandered out, he could only have wandered into Broad Street initially, and there the coachman must have found him. The road in which the White Lion stood still exists off Broad Street, and there is a gaudy arch across it, inscribed with ‘The White Lion Tavern’—presumably not in the phone book because not a separate entity from the Thistle Hotel. The Duty Manager, a rotund and obliging chap of about 17, took me down into the tavern, which had a placard briefly describing the history of this ‘famous old Bristol inn’, demolished in 1869, but mentioned as early as 1497 in a deed of Covenant. There was also a remarkable well, now glass topped and lit, which may have been the original drinking supply for the citizens of Bristol. The placard claimed the water had been tested and was still pure. It looked a bit turbid to me, but there ended my search for the place where a fit of suspicious superstition came upon Coleridge, because, as Chaucer might have put it, ‘there was namore to see.’

Map of Bristol

We have printed part of John Rocque’s map inside the back cover. Our apologies for the poor quality. An arrow indicates ‘The White Lyon Inn’. At the top right hand corner you will see the beginnings of St Michael’s Hill. On leaving Bristol, Coleridge will have turned right after crossing the Bridge to get into Redcliffe Street, and so on out into the countryside.

