

From

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## Allan Clayson

1934 – 2008

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ONE OF THE founding purposes of The Friends of Coleridge is to encourage amateur as much as academic interest in the life and works of STC. And when Allan first came to one of our Summer Conferences, in 2000, he came as an amateur *par excellence*. His paper that year, ‘The Significance of Coleridge’s Holidays in Ramsgate’, delighted everyone with the clarity of its subject matter, his professional presentation (we soon learnt why, he was a retired schoolmaster) and his lightly stated determination to correct what he saw as ‘the general academic indifference towards the holidays that Coleridge took in Ramsgate.’ He then went on to explain their significance, mixing local topography with a reconsideration of some passages from Coleridge’s later poems and letters. It was easy to follow, successful in its intention, and happy to take on, and refute, the more scandalous rumours that circulated about Coleridge in Ramsgate – that he was, for instance, living in open adultery with Mrs Gillman, a rumour which nonetheless pointed to a serious and substantial relationship, the mainstay of Coleridge’s last years.

Allan was born and brought up in East London, South Africa and read English at Rhodes University. With his head full of the Romantic Poets (his wife tells me) he came to England as a young man of 24 expecting a pastoral idyll and, as his first teaching post was in rural Kent, he was not too disappointed! Following this he moved on to a prep school in Cambridge, which did nothing to dispel his idealised view of the country, and then to Surrey. He taught English, of course, and history as well, and boarding school life offered him many opportunities to follow his other great interest—cricket. He coached youngsters in both cricket and rugby, and played for local teams. He returned to South Africa, with a young family, to teach in Johannesburg, then on to what was then Southern Rhodesia where he remained at Peterhouse School until 1978. On his return to England he taught English at St Lawrence College in Ramsgate until retirement in 1999.

Pam and Allan’s flat in Wellington Crescent was next door to No 7—STC’s first recorded holiday address in the town (dated 1821), the property being described by him as ‘the very best in all Ramsgate’. This was enough to encourage Allan to begin his research into Coleridge’s life and work while in the town, and ultimately to his book *Wish You Were Here—Coleridge’s holidays in Ramsgate 1819–33*. This he published in 2001, and it expands his original paper in 2000—or more likely, his paper was a condensation of that book. It is a most enjoyable book, full of illustrations, from bathing machines to steamers to the much admired Mrs Lockhart. Allan’s method is as simple as it is effective—he deals with each holiday year by year, and there is even a table recording, where known, how Coleridge and his entourage travelled up and down from Highgate. A number of themes that emerge from the narrative. One is Coleridge’s health, the prime motive behind the visits that were predominantly made in October and November when the sea bathing would

be distinctly bracing. Others are the developing dynamic of Coleridge's relationships with James and Ann Gillman. James Gillman rarely accompanied the family group to Ramsgate, and much of the detail comes from Coleridge's letters to him. This also gave Coleridge free rein to develop his relationship with Mrs Gillman, with its overtones of his other complicated relationships through his life with motherly women and surrogate families. Another theme is that of Coleridge's social position. He is very much the poet on holiday in these pages, enjoying parties and the attentions of illustrious visitors such as Lord Liverpool, but even so darker themes emerge, such as the troubles the Gillman's son had at Eton. Allan argues for the importance of these letters from Ramsgate not just for the detail they give of life and times in Ramsgate, but also as significant literary productions in their own right, and thus worthy of serious study by all those interested in Coleridge.

Allan's interest in STC lasted for the rest of his life. In their campervan – which looks very small!—he and Pam travelled in Coleridge's footsteps – from Ottery St Mary to Cambridge, the Lakes to the Quantocks, and Allan, never one to miss an opportunity to follow his enthusiasms, even managed to find 'footsteps' on trips to Malta and to North Germany. He came again to the Summer Conference in 2004 giving a paper on Coleridge as Sir Alexander Ball's biographer, and in 2006, comparing Coleridge's last holiday in Ramsgate in 1833 with Wordsworth's one and only holiday to Broadstairs in 1837.

This thinking about holidays, especially in Broadstairs, was to bear more fruit—the holidays of Dickens. But it was part of a much larger project. One of the reasons that Allan's work is so readable is that one feels a depth of unused research behind the subject he is dealing with, and his research into distinguished holiday makers in the Isle of Thanet produced sufficient material for three further volumes, which he describes thus – 'the first ranging from 1750 to 1815, the age of coach travel and the Margate hoy, the second from 1815 to 1850, the age of the steamboat, and the third from 1850 to 1914, the age of the railway. Volume I is complete, and Volume II was more than half finished when I ran up against the chronological obstacle of Dickens. Clearly he would need a volume to himself, as anything less would not do justice to the scale of his holidays and the wealth of his correspondence in comparison with any of the other visitors.' That is from the preface to the volume on Dickens completed just before he died, and Pam is investigating the possibility of publication.

One of Allan's fellow amateurs, Robin Whittaker, came to know him quite well at the Summer Conferences, and writes, 'It was, perhaps, inevitable that Allan and I should gravitate to each other at Conference. We had in common the facts that we both earned our livings, not in academia, but in the local professions, and that our particular researches into STC were also linked to our keen interest in the local history of our areas. Allan was very knowledgeable about East Kent, with which he had ancestral links. He also had a great

fondness for the West Country, and was able to couple his attendance at Conference with touring in the area. His knowledge was extensive but



unshowy, which made him an ideal companion with whom to discuss Coleridgean matters. In my copy of his book on Coleridge at Ramsgate he wrote 'With thanks for all your interest', but in truth Allan himself was one who supported and showed a keen interest in the research and interests of many others, and would always be ready with a quiet

word of appreciation or comment after a presentation.'

His wife, Pam, with whom he shared that tiny campervan, would like us to know how much he enjoyed his membership of the Friends, the people he met



and the friends he made at Cannington. The interest and appreciation he encountered there made him feel that the research and writing that had occupied him so pleasurably in retirement had been really worthwhile. And of course there was that side of him we actually didn't see at conferences – the family man, with three children, three step children and thirteen grandchildren, who were all his great joy.

We can only imagine what a shock his sudden death was to all of them, and with them the Friends of Coleridge mourn his loss.