Tom Poole was born in Nether Stowey in 1766, the eldest son of a tanner. He was self-taught, his father refusing to allow him to go to university. With a voracious appetite for learning, he amassed a library of books that impressed many eminent men of the day. He was a committed radical, and very often offended the more conventional inhabitants of Stowey.

He was Coleridge’s most faithful friend and equally radical in his political views as the poet. From the moment the two men first met in 1794, Poole saw greatness in Coleridge and had the insight to see that he could be of immense help and support.

It is a measure of his quality that Poole enjoyed lifelong friendships with many other influential men of the time, including Humphry Davy, the Wedgwood brothers, Charles Lamb, William Hazlitt, and Andrew Crosse the scientist from Broomfield.

‘I am attached to you one degree more at least than to any other living man’

Coleridge, in a letter to Poole, 1800

Poole’s legacy to Stowey is wide-ranging. As a farmer, and the owner of the family tannery that he developed and expanded, he employed many local people. He was an active supporter of the Sunday School movement, formed the Stowey Female Friendly Society, and in 1812 donated the building for the village school (Stowey’s library today).
Tom Poole’s appearance and character

Thomas de Quincey has left us a detailed description of Poole:
‘I found him a stout, plain-looking farmer, leading a bachelor life in a rustic, old-fashioned house; the house, however, upon further acquaintance, proving to be amply furnished with modern luxuries, and especially with a good library, superbly mounted in all departments bearing at all on political philosophy; and the tanner turning out a polished and liberal Englishman, who had travelled extensively, and had so entirely dedicated himself to the service of his humble fellow-countrymen, the heavers of wood and drawers of water in this southern part of Somersetshire, that for many miles round he was the general arbiter of their disputes, the guide and counsellor of their difficulties.’

Mrs Joseph Ansticce, a friend of Poole’s, said that he had a clownish exterior, and a rough voice spoilt by snuff, but with a deep concern for all men, rich and poor. Yet he was not universally popular. His manners were abrupt, he had a temper, and his manner could be overbearing.

Dangerous times

The last decade of the 18th century was a time of political upheaval in Europe. When Poole’s friends Coleridge and Wordsworth arrived in Stowey in 1797 England was at war with France. The two poets had been supporters of the French Revolution, as had Poole. Wordsworth described his feelings in The Prelude:
‘Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, But to be young was very heaven.’

The French Revolution was a clarion call for liberty and freedom for all men, including slaves. Coleridge had spoken out against slavery in Bristol, a brave and foolhardy act, as it was England’s main slaving port, from where 500,000 slaves were transported to America. Poole himself wrote an impassioned anti-slavery article for Coleridge’s radical newspaper The Watchman.

The Reign of Terror with its mob rule made them all think again. But it is hardly surprising that villagers were deeply suspicious of a revolutionary intellectual like Coleridge living in a Stowey cottage found for him by Poole.

‘The most dangerous man in the county’

Poole was no less radical than Coleridge and was branded ‘the most dangerous man in the county’. His republican ideas angered many of the more conventional Stowey gentry, and did not sit well with his Tory cousins, Charlotte and John, who lived at Marshmills near Over Stowey. John Poole wrote:
‘Tom Poole drank tea with us. I wish he would cease to torment us with his democratic sentiments; but he is never happy until the subject of politics is introduced, and, as we all differ so much from him, we wish to have no conversation about it.’

Meeting with Tom Paine

In 1792 Symes the Stowey lawyer spotted Poole in the village street brandishing a copy of Tom Paine’s revolutionary book The Rights of Man. Paine helped foment the American Revolution and independence from Britain. Symes was so incensed that he snatched the book out of Poole’s hands and tore it apart. Touring Europe in 1802, Poole visited Paris and met Paine, describing him as ‘an original, amusing fellow’. A year later, when Paine was to be burnt in effigy in the village, Poole tried to stop it, worried that it would further damage his reputation.

An unwelcome visitor

The unconventional behaviour of Wordsworth and Coleridge and their friends – including Poole – so enraged local opinion that people believed they were spying for the French. Their suspicions deepened when one of the visitors to Coleridge’s cottage was John Thelwall, who had been tried for treason and spent time in the Tower. The government sent an agent called James Walsh to Stowey to spy on the poets. He was told ‘a Nest of them … were protected by a Mr Poole a Tanner of this Town’.

He eventually reported back that they were only ‘a mischiefous [sic] gang of disaffected Englishmen’ and no real threat. But they were sailing very close to the wind.

A Parisian scandal

While Poole was in Paris in 1802 he was presented to Napoleon Bonaparte. When the news reached Stowey it caused a major scandal.
The Poole family’s tanyard behind Castle Street

The tanyard behind Tom Poole’s house in Castle Street employed many local people. Poole’s father fully expected his son to carry on the business when he died. Finding that Tom nursed a love of literature, he denied him a proper education and discouraged his bookish tastes. His father’s attitude rankled, and determined not to be found wanting in the practical details of the trade, Poole did his apprenticeship at a tannery near London. He must have been a success, because in 1791 he was chosen by the tanners to express concern to Pitt the Younger, the Prime Minister, about the excise duty crippling their industry.

Major expansion

When his father died, Poole inherited the business, making many radical changes and improvements, including the building of a new bark house along Tanyard Lane. The land within the red border on the 1750 map of Stowey below shows the probable extent of his tanyard and garden. The new bark house he built in 1796 is now a private house.

A messy business

The bark was dried and ground up, then mixed with water. Hides were steeped in this noxious liquid, which released its tannins over the course of a year. In the illustration (left) we see men stirring the tannin liquid in the vat. Coleridge called the vats ‘Tartarean pits’. On the illustration (right) men are scraping the hairs off the hides, which are then dried and oiled. When the tanyard sluice was opened, stinking residues flowed down the stream through the village. In Poole’s time the stream was not culverted. A ford ran across Castle Street at the point marked on the 1750 map. It must have been unpleasant to splash through.

Making leather from hides

Leather was a vital raw material in the 18th century, used to manufacture a range of items including saddles, harnesses, and shoes.

Tannin is the active ingredient in the process of transforming hides into leather. Oak bark is a rich source of tannin, and Poole’s tanyard relied on a constant supply from the Quantock woods, which would have been busy with men barking oaks. Branches and twigs were beaten to split the bark. The bark strips were bundled and carried by horse and cart down from the hills to the tanyard in Stowey.

The bark house mill machinery

Here we see Poole’s machinery for grinding up the oak bark. The wooden timber wheel was part of the mill mechanism powered by a leat running off the Stowey stream. It was still in existence in the bark house up until the 1930s.
Poole's other business interests

The Dodington copper mine

Copper mining began at nearby Dodington in the early 1700s. The hillsides around the A39 to the west of Stowey are peppered with adits.

The Marquess of Buckingham, who had extensive mining interests in Cornwall, purchased the mine in 1762. The mining was carried out by local men as well as experienced miners brought from Cornwall. However, the enterprise proved uneconomic, and production had stopped by 1801.

Increasing local unemployment and poverty encouraged Tom Poole to investigate re-opening the Dodington mines in 1807. He gathered around him a group of investors, and travelled to Cornwall to 'see the mines and the gigantic machinery employed about them'. The initiative came to nothing.

He tried again in 1816, having interested a group of London investors. He built a new engine-house that can still be seen today (see photo above right). It housed a Boulton & Watt single action beam engine capable of sinking shafts to 200 feet below the surface. The ore that was mined was of prime quality, superior to the ore from Cornwall. Yet in spite of all Poole's efforts the business was never hugely profitable, and a number of the investors wished to pull out. Poole, though, persuaded them to continue with their support, but work at the mine finally came to an end in 1821.

Farmer, landlord, maltster, quarry owner

Tom Poole was always keen to find new business interests. He was not a man who unduly valued wealth or creature comforts, but felt it was his duty to create employment for the local poor.

He owned a great deal of farmland, and with his drive to make improvements removed hedges, introduced new machinery, and planted oaks for forestry and to provide bark for the tannery. During a visit to Stowey in 1807 Coleridge, endlessly curious about the world around him, helped Poole by making notes about the planting and care of oaks.

Poole made the best use of his barley by setting up as a maltster, buying cereal crops from other local growers, including the Over Stowey vicar William Holland.

He was a model landlord, owning several properties in the village. Expanding the tanyard business meant the building of new offices, workshops and storerooms, so he opened a quarry on Castle Hill, and supplied stone to local builders. You can see a disused quarry along Watery Lane, at the beginning of the Coleridge Way.

Tom Poole’s two houses

The most impressive building in Castle Street is Poole House. This was where Tom Poole lived during Coleridge's years in the village. Although imposing, it has a simple 17th-century core. Poole converted it to the grand house it is today in the 1790s, adding a fashionable Georgian frontage – important when you have a reputation to maintain in the community.

Later, part of it was converted into a grocer's shop. You can still see the replacement stone where the shop front was removed.

Poole House

The Old House, St Mary Street

Thomas Ward began as an apprentice in the tannery, but eventually became a partner in the business. Poole gave him the house in Castle Street to live in, and bought another house in St Mary Street (called The Old House) that he lived in from 1802 until his death in 1837.

He installed a new bookroom, and did everything he could to entice Coleridge back to Stowey (the poet had left in 1799). 'I've made a nice book room. I promise to get any books you want', he wrote in a letter to Coleridge.

But Coleridge never lived in Stowey again, drawn to the Lake District and the Wordsworths.

Poole’s social life in Stowey

Poole being a substantial employer, landowner, farmer and magistrate, was welcomed in the houses of the Quantock gentry.

He also started the Stowey Book Society. Members enjoyed an agreeable dinner at the Globe, and bought and exchanged books. Coleridge was a member, and if you lent him a book it could well be returned smothered with his scribbled annotations.

The Over Stowey vicar William Holland was a member, but never felt comfortable with Poole’s radical views, though they dined together regularly. He wrote in his diary about an evening at the vicarage:

'Mr Tom Poole came late, very grand and important, took out his French Gold Watch and affected much the travelled man, coxcomby and with all the appearance of greatness and liberality. He is the most shabby dodging man to deal with I ever met with.'

Poole enjoyed going to parties and dances and musical evenings. There were regular social gatherings in the Assembly Rooms at the Rose and Crown. He would have eagerly looked forward to meeting his many friends and acquaintances, and joining in with the dancing and games of whist.
Tom Poole’s legacy to Stowey is profound. He worked tirelessly on behalf of the poor and employed many local people.

Times were hard in late 18th-century Somerset. When the war came with France the price of wheat rocketed. He wrote to Coleridge in 1801:

“We have been in a continued state of agitation and alarm by the riots concerning the price of provisions.”

Rumblings of discontent among the poor people began as early as 1794 when a note was found on a gatepost announcing the threat of an armed uprising unless agricultural wages went up. It was believed that wheat was being secretly exported away from the starving in the countryside. Another note stated that a man had to pay twice his daily wage for the price of a loaf. In 1801 a hundred starving labourers from the neighbouring village of Stogursey set off on a hunger march, their number growing to a thousand or more as they paraded through the villages.

An untiring benefactor: founder of the village school, Women’s Friendly Society and Savings Bank

In London Poole became acquainted with Coleridge’s friend the civil servant John Rickman, and at his suggestion carried out statistical work intended to help implement the Poor Laws.

In 1804 he was employed by Rickman, offering his time free, making an abstract of the thousands of returns ordered by the House of Commons from parish overseers.

Poole funded and built the village school in 1812-13 on land in the tanyard donated by him. It was only the second free school in the country, offering education for up to 200 children. It opened with 85 children, all ably taught by Jane Turner, the daughter of an Enmore farmer. It gained an excellent reputation. The building is now part of the library.

In 1814 Poole’s friend Josiah Wedgwood wrote asking for a ‘rough sketch’ of Poole’s ‘beautiful school’, to serve as a model for a school for 200 children he himself wished to build. Praise indeed.

Cheap bread for the starving

In 1795 there was hardship in the village, and Poole worked tirelessly with his mother and aunt to devise recipes for cheaper loaves that they sold to the Stowey poor. His cousin Charlotte reported:

“Tom brought two pieces of bread as patterns; one was made with wheat, barley, beans, and potatoes, and nobody can wish to eat better bread. The other is made with wheat, barley, beans, and turnips, and that is likewise good but the turnips give it a particular taste which some persons may dislike.”

A savings bank for Stowey’s poor

Poole’s work on the Poor Laws

A free school for two hundred village children

Tom Poole, though a confirmed bachelor, founded a Female Friendly Society as one of his schemes to help the local poor. He anticipated the welfare state, his venture offering financial aid to working women in times of sickness, childbirth, widowhood, and old age. It involved Poole in a considerable amount of tact and diplomacy to get it off the ground. The scheme encouraged thrift and self-help. Members subscribed what they could afford, with the larger contributions from the wealthy supplementing the modest payments of the poor. It proved highly successful, and a second branch was soon formed.

When Coleridge came to stay in 1807, he wrote a motto for the banner:

‘Foresight and Union linked by Christian Love Helped by the Good below and Heaven above.’

Every June members processed through the village to St Mary’s church for a service, a custom that continues today.

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Coleridge’s staunch friend

From the moment the two men first met, Poole recognised greatness in Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Probably he had journeyed to Bristol to hear Coleridge’s public lectures. In a letter of 1796 he wrote: ‘By you, Coleridge, I will always stand, in sickness and health.’

He found the cottage in Lime Street for Coleridge, and throughout the poet’s troubled life tried his best to be there with help and support for his family. He helped pay the Oxford fees for Coleridge’s son Hartley, regarding him as his godson, and was always willing to provide urgent funds to Sara Coleridge when money was tight – which it often was.

He even poured forth his enthusiastic delight in the recognition of his friend’s genius in some amateur verses. They address Coleridge in Stowey during the dawn of his extraordinary poetical period:

‘Hail to thee, Coleridge [sic], youth of various powers!
I love to hear thy soul pour forth the line,
To hear it sing of love and liberty.’

Coleridge escaped to the sanctuary of Poole’s book room behind his Castle Street house at every opportunity. Although he was never an intellectual, Poole amassed a remarkable library, praised by Lamb, Hazlitt and de Quincey. It was in this comfortable room with its barrel roof that the Coleridge circle met to talk and exchange ideas.

The lime-tree bower

Coleridge would have walked out of his back garden through orchards to reach Poole’s garden. He loved sitting under the lime-tree bower, which is where he wrote his famous poem This Lime-tree Bower my Prison. It was addressed to Coleridge’s friends who had gone on a Quantock walk without him, after Sara Coleridge spilt a skillet of hot milk over his foot.

Here he and his friends the Wordsworths, Charles Lamb, William Hazlitt, and Humphry Davy, would sit in the shade drinking Taunton ale, and talking long into the evening.

‘Well, they are gone, and here must I remain,
This lime-tree bower my prison! I have lost
Beauty and feelings, such as would have been
Most sweet to my remembrance even when age
Had dimm’d mine eyes to blindness! They, meanwhile,
Friends, whom I never more may meet again,
On springy heath, along the hill-top edge,
Wander in gladness …’

The Wedgwood brothers

In 1797 Poole met Josiah and Tom Wedgwood of the great Staffordshire pottery. Tom, a talented chemist, died early, but Josiah became a lifelong friend. The Wedgwoods were very generous to Coleridge, granting him an annuity of £150 without conditions, so that he could concentrate on his writing.

Some of Tom Poole’s influential friends

Poole was respected by many great men of his time, including Coleridge and his friends Wordsworth, Southey, de Quincey, Thelwall and Lamb. The Wedgwood potter brothers Josiah and Thomas stayed as his guests, and he was a regular visitor to the Broomfield home of scientist Andrew Crosse. William Hazlitt recalls his first visit to Poole:

‘… I passed three weeks at Nether Stowey and in the neighbourhood, generally devoting the afternoons to a delightful chat in an arbour made of bark by the poet’s friend Tom Poole, sitting under two fine elm-trees, and listening to the bees humming round us, while we quaffed our flip.’

Humphry Davy, scientist

‘To Thomas Poole, Esq., of Nether Stowey, in remembrance of thirty years of continued and faithful friendship.’

This was the dedication to his final book dictated by the dying scientist Humphry Davy. It was titled Consolations in Travel; or, The Last Days of a Philosopher, and was a compendium of poetry, and thoughts on science and philosophy.

President of the Royal Society and inventor of the miners’ safety lamp, Davy became one of Poole’s closest friends. They had met in 1799 at the Pneumatic Institution in Bristol where Tom Poole had inhaled laughing gas (nitrous oxide). Davy visited Stowey regularly, enjoying the peace of the Quantock country, fishing, shooting and playing whist with Poole, and investigating the chemistry of tanning.

Davy was highly talented, and could have been a successful poet if he had not been drawn to the sciences. With his interest in tanning it was not surprising that the two men found they had much in common. They enjoyed each other’s company and went on a walking tour together in 1802. Davy was the foremost scientist of his time, especially in the field of electrochemistry. When Davy’s health failed he chose to recuperate in Stowey, staying with Poole in his St Mary Street house. Davy was particularly fond of angling, and composed his Salmonia in Poole’s bookroom. He died at the early age of 51.
Thomas Poole of Nether Stowey, 1766-1837

Tom Poole died of pleurisy in 1837, at the age of seventy-two. His memory lives on in the village. Ask Stowey-born residents to name the most important character in the history of the village, and many will say Tom Poole, not Coleridge. Poole’s commitment to the poor, his energy and vision, the many monuments to his efforts, including the Women’s Friendly Society, the village school, the Savings Bank, and his work for Rickman on the Poor Laws, are testament to his achievements.

Poole’s friends on his character

‘The charm of his character, the true secret of his social influence, lay in his sympathy with his fellow men … there is not a rich man among you who did not prize and use his friendship. There is not a poor man within miles of his residence, who in his difficulties, his sorrows, or his wrongs, could not look to him for advice, condolence, or redress.’

Mr Sandford, in Poole’s funeral sermon at St Mary’s Church, Nether Stowey

‘Few of my old friends are left. I had known him three and forty years, and we had been upon no ordinary terms of mutual esteem. I shall not look upon his like again.’

Robert Southey

‘His house and heart were open to all alike, and the memory of the poorest was cherished as much as that of the most illustrious. A small packet labelled “The hair of my poor shepherd, who served me faithfully for twenty-three years”, was found in his bureau, carefully laid away among the sacred mementoes of those whom he loved best.’

Samuel Taylor Coleridge