# In the Footsteps of Coleridge: An Account of a Tour of Northern Germany

Robin Whittaker and Tim Bartlett [1]

> "Besides, you and my other good friends have made up your minds to me as I am, and from whatever place I write you will expect that part of my "Travels" will consist of the excursions in my own mind."
>
> (BL II 190)

## *The preparations*

It is 1968, and we are in a classroom at the Royal Grammar School, Worcester. Oliver Goldfinch, our inspirational English teacher, sends Robin home with a properly Sixth Form task—to read some poetry by Wordsworth. Instead he reads some by Coleridge and thus starts a life-long enthusiasm. Little did any of us know that this would lead the two of us, all these years later, to be wandering around Harwich in search of an evening meal before embarking on a North Sea ferry. We wondered whether Coleridge had similarly felt a mixture of excitement and apprehension. These feelings, surely, are the hallmarks of a proper adventure? The trip was carefully researched by Robin, and received a further boost when another friend, with whom he was discussing his plans, said that she had studied at Göttingen in the 1960s and put us in touch with a retired University professor, Prof. Dr Friedrich Hassenstein. This contact proved to be of incalculable value in due course. Tim's preparation mainly consisted of following Robin's judiciously-selected reading list on Coleridge, and brushing up his German.

The pleasures of the trip started with all the necessary planning and research, using Coleridge's own letters and notebooks and his later version of these in the three Satyrane's letters in *Biographia Literaria*, together with the remarks recorded by Carlyon in his *Early Years and Late Reflections*. The accounts in the Holmes and Ashton biographies proved rich sources of detail. We used large-scale maps of the regions to plot as accurately as possible the routes that Coleridge would most likely have used, and to help identify the places named in his letters: they do not always tally with modern forms.

## *The trip*

We planned to visit the towns of Germany in the same order as Coleridge. It was changes in transport patterns that made the earlier parts of the trip the most difficult to align with Coleridge's own experiences. His extensive account of his crossing of the North Sea from Yarmouth to Hamburg (illuminated by the researches of Nick Powell) shows what an impact this journey had on him:[2]

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[1] Between 4th and 17th May 2011 the authors travelled in northern Germany, in the footsteps of Coleridge. Robin Whittaker conceived the idea as an expedition to mark his retirement from work. The enthusiastic interest of his friend since schooldays, Tim Bartlett, who asked to join him, made it into a tour with typical and truly 'Romantic' elements:friendship, *Wanderlust,* exploration, new experiences, pursuit of knowledge; and self-discovery. Particular thanks are due to Anya Taylor, without whose encouragement and interest this article would not have been written.

[2] N. Powell, 'Spontaneous Overflows on the High Seas: Motion and Emotion among Voyagers to Hamburg in 1798', *Coleridge Bulletin* 36, pp 32 ff

> I, for the first time in my life, beheld my native land retiring from me. At the moment of its disappearance.....I will dare question whether there was one more ardent prayer offered up...for my country'. (BL II 160)

Or, as he puts it more directly in his letter to his wife:

> … it was English Ground that was flying away from me... my dear Babies came upon me like a flash of lightening... (CL I 416)

With the loss of ferry services from the east coast direct to Hamburg we were forced to go from Harwich to Hook of Holland and from there to Hamburg. In order to approximate to Coleridge's own first sights of Germany we drove to Cuxhaven, and then down the side of the River Elbe to Hamburg.

Here we struggled to get any real sense of the city as he describes it. The great church of St Nicholas—such a landmark for him—was not only a later rebuilding, but itself was a ruin from the Second World War bombing. Perhaps only the Jungfernstieg by the Binnen Alster remains in any way the same. No more ramparts or stinking busy streets.

We drove on quickly to Ratzeburg, where Coleridge stayed with the local pastor for three months or so, polishing up his German and observing the habits of the locals. The town is demonstrably recognisable from his descriptions, including its overwhelming sense of redness:

> The worse thing is that Ratzeburgh is built entirely of bricks & tile—& is therefore all red... (CL I 460)

The two lakes remain 'exquisitely beautiful' and the Dom Kirche and the Herrenhaus very much as he would have known them, although the latter is

now the local museum, *das Kreismuseum*. Ratzeburg, and its hospitable inhabitants, benefit from having the feel of an island town—surrounded by immense expanses of water, fringed by forests. We sat in the town square through a long and sunlit evening, enjoying the food. From here, we followed Coleridge to Lübeck: he, of course, went by boat, so we gained at least some sense of this by taking a long cruise on the lakes. Lübeck gives the impression of being unchanged. It is, in fact, largely a faithful post-war reconstruction. Typically, Coleridge is more interested in the people he saw there, rather than buildings and places, so we followed the Town Trail through the oldest part of the town, amplifying our own observations of the buildings with what were necessarily very general impressions in Coleridge's description. However, we were able to sample authentic German food, eating *Bratwurst,* followed by warm, caramelised almonds: street-food served at the fish and herring festival to the sound of live jazz in the town square outside the *Rathaus*. Lübeck is in the north-east of Germany, on the Baltic and very close to the old boundary between the former Communist East, the German Democratic Republic (DDR) and former West Germany, the Federal Republic of Germany. When we realised this, we added exploring Germany's recent history to our observations and discussions. Thus we mirrored Coleridge's experience of travel—opening our minds to what lay all around us.

Leaving Ratzeburg we set out for our next major objective, Göttingen. We avoided the modern alignments of major roads and followed lesser roads that were older—in this case one marked 'Alte Saltestrasse'. Coleridge was travelling in the bitter cold of the worst winter for a generation; we had better luck—and the comfort and speed of a car. He apologises for the paucity of his descriptions on the grounds of the cold:

> 'never felt it so cold in my life[']—Meine Seele! es ist kalt! abscheulich kalt! widernatürlich kalt! ganz erstaunend kalt, &c, &c, & &c

Coleridge had made Celle one of his stopping points, so we did the same. We again followed the Town Trail, using our still-reasonable Latin to decipher most of the distinctive carved mottos which appeared on the timbered gable-ends of the buildings lining the main streets, and which were of mainly religious origin. We ate well in *dem Blauen Engel,* a comfortable, wood-panelled *Gasthaus* of the sort Coleridge might have frequented. Our visit to Hanover was brief. Coleridge stayed there for some time, getting letters of recommendation for Göttingen. He was not very impressed by it:

> Besides, I saw nothing in particular in Hanover—it is a neat town, well-lighted, neither handsome or ugly, about the size of Taunton.....The two things worth seeing are—I. A Conduit ...& 2. A bust of Leibnitz. The first for it's excessive absurdity, ugliness & indecency...the second...impressed on my whole soul a sensation which has ennobled and enriched it!... (CL I 472)

Our enquiry at the tourist information office for the latter bust left behind a helpful but puzzled young lady, and such was the wartime destruction that we thought we would not find the former. However, we did find a late-nineteenth-century conduit, perhaps the successor to its absurd forbear.

The fountain in front of the Old Rathaus in the Marktplatz in Hanover.

We now approached Göttingen, where we were to stay three nights. We followed increasingly winding and hilly roads as we left the plains, deliberately going by Alfeld and Einbeck. The road tracked the valley of the River Leine and the towns and villages were characterised by large barns and farmsteads. Late in the afternoon, we entered Göttingen via more modern roads, climbing up from the town to its western suburbs. There, we arrived at the home of Prof. Dr Hassenstein, who had made various plans for our stay, and had set

out a variety of relevant books and articles from his extensive collection. A walking tour of the town the following day was to include a visit to the University archive, and the next day a group of interested academics were to meet us to discuss Coleridge and his time at the University. It seemed to us that here we were experiencing a town that had not changed so much since Coleridge's time, with its academic atmosphere and buildings less affected by wartime and by the later, well-meaning but destructive, 1960s and 1970s town centre re-developments. Between them these had both changed Hamburg and Hanover almost beyond recognition. Here even some of the ramparts remain. Friedrich was an excellent guide, keeping up a punishing pace despite his 86 years: he set everything we saw in a web of associations covering the most interesting aspects of the history of the town, especially its literary history—which includes Günter Grass.

The eighteenth-century Kollegienhaus in Göttingen, entrance to the library and archive, with the Paulinerkirche to the right.

What was most Coleridgean? We stood before the building in which he lodged, now bearing one of the many plaques commemorating famous residents. We saw the houses of the University tutors, such as Christian Gottlob Heyne, where he would have attended lectures. Jim Mays, in his forthcoming *Coleridge's Father*, notes that Heyne had ordered a copy of John Coleridge's *Miscellaneous Dissertations* (1768)—almost certainly the only university librarian anywhere to do so—and so by a curious irony Heyne

> was the person to welcome STC when he arrived and allow him special privileges as a reader (*CL* I 472, 474). I doubt if he remembered the surname from thirty years before, but it is possible. (*CF* 12.5.5.) [3]

Thus Coleridge might have found his father's book in the library, but there is no indication that he did. It is still there and in good condition.

Göttingen, entrance to Heyne's House in Papendiek (opposite the Paulinerkirche).

Finally, we visited the University building in the Paulinerkirche, the impressive library and the University archive, where the Keeper of Manuscripts, Dr Helmut Rohlfing, gave us a warm welcome, and enabled us to see two original and very tangible records of Coleridge's time there—his matriculation record, and the record of his library borrowings. It also transpired that he was an old hand at welcoming Coleridgean pilgrims, having the previous year been interviewed by John Worthen for a BBC Radio Three documentary. Whilst many make it to Göttingen, we certainly gained the impression that we were the first he had met to have traced Coleridge's route through Germany. On our second day, Prof. Dr Hassenstein had arranged a mini-seminar with academic colleagues, comprising Prof Theodore Wolpers, Dr John Coates,

[3] On Heyne's contribution to building up the Göttingen library holdings in new publications in English theology from the 1760s onwards, see Graham Jefcoate "Asiatick Researches: English Sources for Oriental Studies in Gottingen University Library, 1735-1800" *Libraries and Culture* XXXIII (1998) 283-93 at 284-87, esp.

Heinz-Joachim Müllenbrook and the librarian, Klaus Herrgen. Discussion of the significance of Romanticism in Germany led to local advice about our plans for walking in the Harz Mountains and our ambition to get to the top of The Brocken. Local opinion was that, nine days out of ten, the summit was shrouded in cloud. Given that we were both sixty-year-olds we were warned the climb was stiff, and we might wish to avoid Coleridge's exhaustion when he arrived at the summit in a poor physical state:

> My Toe was shockingly swoln, m[y feet] bladdered, and my whole frame seemed going to pieces with fatigue[e]. (CL I 504)

View from the Brockenbahn showing the characteristic scatters of large boulders that cover the mountainside.

Accordingly, the next day as we drove towards the Harz mountains, we decided that the important priority was to stand on the summit of The Brocken on the planned day, and we would therefore ascend by train. We agreed that later in the day we would indeed walk in the foothills along trails that Coleridge described—selecting the ones that he would most likely have followed. Driving out of Göttingen on modern highways we again struggled to get a sense of Coleridge's pedestrian approach, but gradually some recognisable landmarks appeared. These included the statue of a bishop at Gieboldhausen which he mentions. Here we could leave modern roads and

follow roads through the villages of his letters. A train journey from Drei Annen Höhne took us to the summit of The Brocken. Against the odds the day was sunny and fine, with far-reaching views in all directions. The reason for our choice of dates, and of the train to get to the summit, is now more obvious: 212 years to the day when Coleridge first stood on the summit, we arrived there, and to a scene very different from the one that greeted him. The original eighteenth-century shelter (the Wolkenhäuschen) still stands, but otherwise the summit bears the ugly scars of its years as an East German military area filled with surveillance equipment. During this time the summit

The Brocken summit, with the new T.V. transmission tower in the foreground and the old one (now a hotel) behind.

had been denied to ordinary Germans, and one of the first acts on re-unification was the reclaiming of the summit by a large group of walkers. However, the undistinguished buildings, and their haphazard arrangement, remain. We then put the second part of our Brocken plan into action, descending to the foothills and setting off from Torfhaus up the Goethe Weg towards the summit: our research suggested that this was the route Coleridge took. The miles we walked through the forests on the lower slopes were in keeping with our quest to follow in his footsteps. We saw the evidence in the landscape of the border fences between which lay the *Todestreife,* "death strip": the German interpretation of the Iron Curtain between East and West that had been driven even through this wild country. We also got some indication of

the industrial heritage of the area. When planning his visit to the Harz Coleridge had said 'I go to the famous Harz Mountains .....to see the mines & other curiosities'. At Oder Teich, a lake 'half made by man & half by nature', we saw the eighteenth-century dam and associated weirs, and on the lower slopes of the Brocken there were remains of water channels and sluices from the former mining activity. The name Torfhaus is also a sign of earlier activity, signifying the houses where the turves cut from the bogs in the area were dried.

The next day we followed his roundabout route towards Blankenberg, and then on to Goslar. Rübeland was an obvious stopping place, where we descended the limestone caverns as Coleridge had done. Access to Baumanns Höhle is now through a modern reception building, but once in the caverns we were in a timeless landscape virtually unchanged since Coleridge had stood there. Standing by the old entrance to the caves we knew we were as close as we would ever be to standing *exactly* where he had stood. Most of what is there has not changed. He mentions the efforts of his guides to see likenesses in the cave formations:

> Here was a nun—this was Solomon's Temple .....This was an organ & had all the notes of the organ/ &c & &c—but alas! with all possible straining my eyes, ears, & my imagination I could see nothing but common Cavern stones. (CL I 506)

To our delight, our guide pointed out both a nun and an organ, and we similarly strained to see the likeness.

Now that we were firmly in former East Germany we could see the contrast to former West German areas in the lack of development and the run-down nature of much of the property. This continued when we got to Blankenburg, completely shut up for the day as it was gone noon on a Saturday. Thankfully, the former castle, which Coleridge had visited, was open, staffed by enthusiastic Friends of Schloß Blankenburg. This had been commandeered in DDR days as a school, but efforts are slowly being made to restore its former glories.

Our overnight stop was at Wernigerode. Coleridge briefly stopped here on his epic day's walk from Blankenberg to Goslar. It is a beautiful town. There is a lovely, half-timbered Rathaus and a town square ringed with cafés and restaurants. We can recommend the trout, and the local marzipan cakes, *Leipziger Lerche*. We sat in the square, looking at the road Coleridge must have walked along, exhausted, and could imagine exactly how it must have looked to him that day. We concentrated our attentions on the nineteenth-century castle, and some remains of the town walls. Today, it is a town where the local authority is evidently making an effort to attract tourists, and for the first time in this area we saw a street full of familiar big-name shops.

We were approaching the end of our trip, because the next day saw us in Goslar. We found the ancient gate through which Coleridge must have trudged

Goslar, the Breites Tor, the last remaining medieval gateway.

late at night after his long walk,

> As the Clock struck ten we entered the silent City of Goslar/ and thro' some few narrow Passages, called Streets by Courtesy, we arrived at our Inn (CL I 513)

and, inevitably, needed to sample the home-made cakes with our afternoon coffee. We enjoyed the baroque splendours of its ancient churches, and

thought of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, enduring a long winter in this beautiful, but grey, town. As Coleridge remarked:

> He [Wordsworth] seems to have employed more time in writing English [th]an in studying German- No wonder!- for he might as well have been in England as in Goslar, in the situation which he chose, & with his *unseeking* manners... (CL I 459)

Our final days gave us an opportunity to visit Wolfenbüttel. The great library that Coleridge visited, and at which Lessing had been librarian, had been replaced by a nineteenth-century, much grander building: it remains a privately-owned academic library of at least university quality, and which anyone can pay to join. A long drive back following Coleridge's return route to Göttingen took us through beautiful scenery and mining towns such as Clausthal and Osterode. We took our leave of Coleridge at Katlenburg, where he had parted from his travelling companions. At first we were quite unable to square this modern and fairly nondescript little town with the place he described, but luckily, following a small sign to a church, we found, isolated and quiet on a hilltop above the modern town, the ancient settlement with its immense monastic church, *Amtmannshaus* and farm buildings:

> /the view of the Amtshause on the Hill forming a fine English Prospect—and from there the prospect was quite English in those counties where many noblemen's Seats with great Woods are— (CN I 418)

We chose a spot on the old road to imagine the parting of the ways. Here again we felt time stand still and we saw sights Coleridge would have seen: a fitting end to our journey.

## *'Home thoughts from abroad'—how did Coleridge react to Germany?*

Famously, without the need to fund the trip to Germany, Wordsworth and Coleridge may never have collaborated on *The Lyrical Ballads*. Coleridge came to see the trip as a critical step. He writes to Poole:

> I still think the realization of the scheme of high importance to my intellectual utility; and of course to my moral happiness..... I propose to...stay 3 or 4 months, in which time I shall at least have learnt the language/ then, if all is well, all comfortable, and I can rationally propose to myself a scheme of weighty advantage—to fetch over my family—if not to return, with my German for my pains; & the wisdom that 3 or 4 months sojourn among a new people must give to a watchful & thinking man

This would be his first trip out of England. What were his reactions? Graham Davidson puts it nicely—'homesickness... is pretty much an unrelieved

condition in Coleridge abroad, though strangely coupled with a reluctance to come home'.[4] Many years after the trip he claims that he felt a liberation on arriving in Germany:

> I walked onward at a brisk pace, enlivened not so much by anything I actually saw, as by the confused sense that I was for the first time in my life on the *continent* of our planet. I seemed to myself like a liberated bird… (BL II 177)

However, the evidence from the letters written home gives a different sense: a keenly felt awareness of the homeland he has left behind. It is often said that travel broadens the mind. More often, it permits reflective travellers the opportunity to see our *own* country, our own life and way of life, from afar, and to benefit from this objectivity. Was this similarly-experienced awareness a way of assuaging any guilt Coleridge felt at leaving behind his family? It seems too genuine to be falsified. His letters attempt to give those left behind some idea of his experiences—yet he denies any descriptive skill—'… but I am a wretched Describer…'(CL I 460)

The vividness both of his letters and notebook entries tend to give the lie to this (see also, for example, Jarvis's analysis of a passage from his letters from Germany).[5] In addition, he makes regular reference to and comparison with familiar English features. However, later he admits its futility, and writes to his wife:

> These Letters, & the Descriptions in them, may possibly recall to *me* real forms, i[f I should] ever take it into my head to read them again; but I fear that to you they must be [insupportably] unmeaning—accumulated repetitions of the same words in almost the same Combinati[ons—but how] can it be otherwise? (CL I 503)

This strikes a note of despair that hints at wider problems of communication with his wife. However, the notebook entries for the German trip show an alertness to the minutiae of what he is experiencing, without any need to communicate it to others.

The references to home recur throughout the letters. On first leaving he writes to Poole:

> I am on the point of leaving my native country for the first time—a country, which, God Almighty knows, is dear to me above all things for the love I bear to you (CL I 415)

and to his wife, 'I beheld my native land retiring from me—my native Land to which I am convinced I shall return with an intenser affection—with a proud Nationality made rational by my own experience of its Superiority…'(CL I 420)

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[4] Graham Davidson, 'Coleridge in Malta – Figures in the Landscape', *Coleridge Bulletin 17* p.77

[5] R. Jarvis, 'Landscape and Locomotion: Coleridge the Walker', *Coleridge Bulletin* 13, p. 45

and later, with a gentle little joke, 'for being abroad makes every man a Patriot & Loyalist—almost a [Pitti]te!' (CL I 510). His homesickness particularly comes through, 'I languish after Home for hours together…'(CL I 470) and 'what must *I* feel, with every thing pleasant & every thing valuable & every thing dear to me at a distance…'.(CL I 484)

These feelings culminate in the poem he wrote about his emotions when he stood on the Brocken, in 'Lines Written in the Album at Elbingerode' (here quoted from the version in the letter to his wife):

> O 'dear dear' England, how my longing Eye
> Turn'd Westward, shaping in the steady Clouds
> Thy sands & high white Cliffs! Sweet Native Isle!
> This Heart was proud, yea, mine Eyes swam with Tears
> To think of Thee; (CL I 505)

Yet for all this, his '3 or 4 month stay' extended itself to nine months, with a period of study at the University, and not even the death of Berkeley called him home. This is indeed that 'reluctance to come home', but also is evidence of his determination to get full value from his trip: van Woudenberg has also demonstrated the importance to his intellectual studies of being in the actual presence of current German thinkers, of not trying to achieve the same at one remove.[6] A letter to Wedgwood of May 1799 seeks to justify the undertaking, and lists five substantial achievements that he feels are the result of the trip. Much might be seen as special pleading to a patron, and he does lay on thickly how hard he has been working:

> For these last 4 months, with the exception of last week in which I visited the Harz I have worked harder than, I trust in God Almighty, I shall ever have occasion to work again... (CL I 519)

However, not all that he claims to have done can be discounted. Carlyon writes:

> No one, apparently, could have led a more studious and regular life than Coleridge during his residence of nearly six months in that university…[7]

Yet he clearly lived a full social life, attracting not only Carlyon's attention, but that of all the company:

> When in company, his vehemence of manner and wonderful flow of words and ideas, drew all eyes towards him, and gave him pre-eminence, despite his costume, which he affected to treat with great indifference.[8]

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[6] M. van Woudenberg, 'Coleridge's Literary Studies at Göttingen in 1799: Reconsidering the Library Borrowings from the University of Göttingen', *Coleridge Bulletin* 21, p. 66 ff

[7] C.Carlyon, *Early Years and Late Reflections*, (1856), p. 186

[8] C.Carlyon, op. cit. p.29

Carlyon also gives many instances of the high spirits of the company of young men on their travels, drinking, singing and teasing the bemused locals with their antics. Whatever his homesickness, he ensured the experience was a full one—perhaps bringing him some of the wisdom he had hoped for at the start.

### *Reflections on our own trip*

Why did we go? What does anyone gain from visiting the places associated with famous people? Did we 'know' Coleridge any better at the end? How does our experience of a unified, European Union Germany compare with the fragmented multi-state Germany of his time?

Göttingen was Coleridge's ultimate destination and purpose. Similar cities that host the world's oldest universities—whether in Europe, the Middle East or Asia—have probably changed least in terms of the experience they offer students and the alert visitor. Experiencing a country through the eyes of a sensitive observer like Coleridge makes one acutely alive: one uses all one's senses. We live in an age of video-conferencing, instant internet access to web-sites, radio stations, cinema and television from all over the world. Even so, there is nothing like the experience of simply standing in the place where that person has stood: smelling, tasting, touching and feeling what they may have smelt, tasted, touched, and felt: and it is this experience that remains the driving force for tolerating the manifold inconveniences of travel.

In addition, we each found different emphases: for Tim, an opportunity delightedly to discover the Coleridge beyond *Kubla Khan* and to revisit modern German history*;* for Robin, an opportunity to establish that sense of place relating to Coleridge's German travels that would lift them off the page. For both, it provided the rich experience of *ex*tensive concentration on Coleridge's own writings in his letters and notebooks during the research phase and in *in*tensive discussions together, and with others, during the tour itself. If what we have written inspires others to trace paths followed by their favourite authors, then we will rest content. However, the final word must, in all modesty, be left to Coleridge himself. We are persuaded that he was a great conversationalist: so it must always have been thus, in any company. Perhaps we can also echo to some extent his summation of his trip:

> "The Journey to Germany has certainly *done me good*—my habits are less irregular; & my *mind* more in my *own power*! But I have much still to do!" (CL I 455)