Coleridge Remains at Highgate

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I

HIGHGATE HAS IT MEMORIALS TO SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE, 1792-1834: a plaque on the house where he lived and died; a memorial stone in the church, and the excellent room dedicated to him as an annexe to the library of the Highgate Literary and Scientific Institution. The aim of the Coleridge Trust, by rebuilding the crypt where he lies, is to provide greater dignity to his and some of his family's resting place.

He was originally buried in a grave in the cemetery belonging of Highgate School chapel with no great ceremony, shortly after his death in July 1834. His tomb was in open ground on the site of the original Tudor chapel which had been demolished in 1830. According to Jim Mays (*PW* I i lxxvii) he was 'immured in [a] in Highgate Churchyard'. A large stone slab covers a flight of steps leading down to the entry door. His family followed him over the ensuing 30-odd years: his son-in-law and nephew Henry Nelson Coleridge first on January 26th 1843; followed by wife Sarah in 1845; his daughter Sara on May 3rd 1852 and his grandson Herbert `Herbie' in April 1861. He, and they, were to remain there until 1961, when they were transferred to the space beneath the nearby St Michael's church.

During the intervening 127 years the vault weathered badly, and even when the replacement Highgate School Chapel was built on stilts over it in 1863/64 it was still not proof against rain and wind. It and the surrounding small field were still technically the village burial ground – not just the school's - and open to the public. When the new chapel was built putting a roof over the Coleridges' heads, it also provided roof for vagrants, too, to overnight in and leave their litter. This dishonourable state of affairs continued until their cause was taken up by a now obscure, but once very famous English novelist—Ernest Raymond—(of whom more later) and justice finally began to be done.

Prior to Coleridge's death in 1830, as that Tudor chapel was being pulled down so was an equally imposing edifice near by. The stately Ashurst House (1696) was making way for a brand new Vulliamy-designed Anglican church. Coleridge lived with the Gillmans at number 3 The Grove, just opposite the newly built St Michael's which was completed in 1832. All that was left of the original house was a brick wine cellar, and rubble. And it was to this dingy cellar that the entire family were removed in June 1961.

Up until then they had rested in that slowly crumbling tomb. Thus it was still in the mid-1950s when Ernest Raymond stumbled upon the `sunken vault' at the bottom of `six worn steps and in a state of appalling neglect'. Little has changed, though the vault is now locked and the descending stairs boarded over, presumably for safety considerations. Raymond continues (2): 'The

inscribed stones on [the vault's] face had dropped askew so that I was able to push my walking stick through gaps and touch the rotting wood of the coffins within; the floor around it flagged with old unwanted tombstones, was little but a dump of rags, rubbish and various junk … Britain's greatest philosopher-poet lay amid the rubbish forgotten." In a subsequent appeal published in the *Times Literary Supplement* he wrote of it as "a dump for discarded iron, a receptacle for blown litter and leaves, and a convenient place for tramps to sleep in".[1]

Raymond's horror and his subsequent decision to launch a campaign to have the bodies removed to St Michael's church was a decisive moment in the history of the poet's remains.[2] He doesn't regale us with details of the three years it took to go into the legal, jurisdictional and even theological entanglements he had to disentangle.

But by early 1961 they'd been overcome, family agreement secured, and the necessary licences and diocesan faculties obtained. They also had the unstinting support of the Rev Preb Harry Edwards, a Methodist-raised priest who had joined the church of England in 1933 and who came to St Michael's in 1946 remaining the incumbent for the next 27 years. Raymond's campaign, when eventually launched, was backed by the Society of Authors who acted as treasurer, and *The Times Literary* Supplement who acted as what we might call today a media champion.

Eventually sufficient money was raised, from America and the UK, to pay for the Westmoreland stone that was to lie, engraved with a dedication to the family and the poet's epitaph, in the central aisle of the church, and to buy new coffins for the family's remains. On March 28th 1961, these remains were transferred to their new coffins and transported to their new home in St Michael's. The wine cellar was and is lobster-shaped; the coffins were placed at the back, in the lobster's `tail' and then bricked in, leaving two ventilation vents to maintain dryness. Shortly afterwards, on June 6th 1961 a grand ceremony was held at the church to commemorate the unveiling of the slab and its dedication.

It was a grand event. John Masefield gave the sermon (in carpet slippers!); a large number of Coleridge's descendants attended; TS Eliot, Antonia Fraser, Agatha Christie and representatives of the main literary societies as well as the choirs of the local Highgate and Channing Schools. Oddly and interestingly a colonel from the 15/9th King's Royal Hussars was present. This regiment, under its previous name of the King's Light Dragoons, had tempted the young STC to join under the pseudonym `Silas Tomkyn Comberbache', fleeing from Jesus College haunted by debt and his failed love for Mary Evans. A special piece of music was composed by the church's director of music: a boy from

[1] *Please You, Draw Near,* volume 2, 1922-1968 Cassell 1969

[2] It is unclear whether or not Ottery St Mary's was offered the remains; if the local London diocese would have permitted it or even if St Mary's would have welcomed the offer. Family lore suggests that the poet was originally buried in Highgate because, as a consequence of his reputation, his family didn't want him in Ottery St Mary!

the poet's old school Christ's Hospital, in full uniform, read "Let us now praise famous men, and our fathers that begat us…" At the end of the short ceremony a reception for VIP guests hosted by church members Sir Mark and Lady Turner, then residents at 3 The Grove, followed.

So all glitz, glamour, razzmatazz and champagne above ground. But below? In the church cellar? It was, and still is, a dark, dusty, rubble-strewn area spread across the whole expanse of the church. Nothing is there. Nothing, save the accumulated detritus of over 300 years of indifference—and a disused wine cellar. And that is roughly how it has stayed for the last 60 years since the re-interment. The church's Christmas crib is precariously balanced on a low wall awaiting its annual dusting down. Some unused chairs and pews rest along the dark south wall.

II

Newly-retired, I had time to involve myself more in church activities. I joined the stewardship committee while the parish was appointing and getting to know its new incumbent, Father Kunle Ayodeji, who was keen to strengthen its outreach programme. He quickly saw the importance of making the local community, as well as the wider world, more conscious of the role we played in hosting STC's remains. His support has been fundamental and unswerving.

I was surprised at how unaware many church members were of the Coleridge connection, or even of precisely where his and his family's remains lay. No records had been kept; nobody close to the church then remained. We could have consulted diocesan archives which might have held the secret. But we thought to test first the best bet, of a very senior and long-standing members of the church family: that the remains were to be found in a bricked up space in the far south west corner, immediately below the font.

The only sure way to answer the question was to explore for ourselves. And so it was that on a chilly February 13th evening in 2018 the stewardship chairman, Alan West, and I scrambled into the space beneath the church. Lit only by torchlight, we proceeded to scrabble over centuries-old rubble, discarded chairs, girders and lumps of cement, the rising slope of the floor level above forcing us increasingly to lower our heads, dodging huge 17th century beams and slithering, half choking on the centuries old dust, till we reached that corner.

The brickwork of the enclosed area was clearly new, so could easily have been built in 1961. But when we pulled a few bricks away from the top and managed to shine our torches into the cavity below … there was nothing there. Nothing.

We were surprised as we had been confident in the offered advice. We looked round for any hidden cavities. We wondered how to explain the absence of the graves. How could a church lose five sacred bodies? We vowed to keep the emptiness a secret until we puzzled out what was going on."

But would the wine cellar provide a clue? We scrambled back down the slope, filthy now with ancient dust, and in the pitch dark I looked round the

cellar's perimeter while Alan performed the altogether more dangerous task of leaping into the lobster-shaped pit itself. Over the years it has become littered with bricks and old rubble, and covered inside with ancient, indecipherable hieroglyphics. At the back, in the lobster's tail was new brickwork wall with two air vents, and as I clambered onto its roof to see what lay behind and along the far, northerly wall, I heard Alan cry "I've found them!"

Against the far wall Alan had managed to insert his pencil-thin torch into one of the gaps in the air vent, and dimly, slowly, one by one, the brooding black coffins were revealed. It was uncanny to think I was so close to the mouldering remains of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and his wife and family.

This was no Westminster Abbey, where Coleridge has a bust. It felt as if he and his family had been moved from one decaying vault to another. The job now, and still is, was to try to dignify their resting place. Over the course of the next few months we were able organise a `Coleridge Day' in early June 2018 to commemorate that 1961 re-interment into our crypt. It was a beautiful early summer day and some 200 guests including Lord and Lady Coleridge and just short of 50 other descendants of the poet came to join us. There were contributions from Richard and Sir Paul Coleridge and a moving and memorable speech from Rosemary Middleton-Coleridge, alas now deceased. Academics Malcolm Guite and Seamus Perry contributed their reflections, whilst our director of Music, Paul Dean, kept the tradition alive by composing some delightful choral music to accompany a verse of STC's *The Kiss.*

We had considerable help from the Friends of Coleridge, particularly Ian Enters, Justin Shepherd and Terence Sackett. We were also encouraged and assisted by the Highgate Literary and Scientific Institution, who lent us some precious volumes, and were kind enough to open up their Coleridge Room to our guests. Our project was also enabled by Highgate School who kindly opened up the space beneath their chapel so that our guests could examine the original Coleridge vault. We were able to provide access to the wine cellar as well, and safely allow all the guests the opportunity of seeing at least the front end of the family tomb. We echoed the great 1961 celebration wherever we could.

Alan and I followed that programme again this year when, again with great support, especially from Highgate School Chaplain Fr Robert Easton, we put together a film showing Sir Paul Coleridge touring the village and documenting the poet's life in his two Highgate houses. We were also able to locate pretty much the precise spot on which he stood outside Dunn's the chemist as Byron's cortege wound its way up Highgate Hill and on to Hucknall in Nottinghamshire where he lies buried. (To view the film go to https://thecoleridgetrust.com/)

There is no doubt that Covid slowed us down; but The Coleridge Trust, and a committed body of trustees (of which Sir Paul is the president) and

influential patrons,[3] now hope that the national and international Coleridge community can assist us in finding ways of saving the poet's and his family's graves from benign neglect, and provide them with memorials fitting to their stature in English literary history.

[3] Nicholas Coleridge, co-chair of the Queen's Platinum Jubilee; Sir Stuart Etherington, former chief executive of the National Council for Voluntary Organisations and the poet's biographer Richard Holmes.