THE CAMPAIGN TO ACQUIRE COLERIDGE COTTAGE

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Coleridge Cottage, standing at the western end of Lime Street in Nether Stowey, is now seen by hundreds of visitors over the summer. Perhaps some come out of curiosity or to escape a shower of rain, but for many visitors the Cottage provides an important witness to the life and writings of a poet whose importance seems to increase with every year. It was not always so. For most of the 19th Century the Cottage was unvisited and unregarded. When attention was finally focussed upon it in the 1890s, the Cottage was an inn, and contemporary witnesses found themselves shocked and puzzled that honour had not been paid to the place which once held 'the lamp of genius.' In this article I trace the story of the campaign to save the Cottage, which was begun in 1892 with a letter to a national newspaper.

For the modern reader the most accessible account of Coleridge Cottage since Coleridge's departure is contained in a brief appendix to Berta Lawrence's valuable book, Coleridge and Wordsworth in Somerset (Newton Abbot, 1970, pp. 186-7). But the primary published source of information on the acquisition of the Cottage remains William Knight, one of the main participants in the campaign. He devoted a chapter to the history of the Cottage in Coleridge and Wordsworth in the West Country (London, 1913), an account taken mainly from a paper written by another of the key participants, the Rev. William Greswell. Knight's interest in the Cottage began in 1906, and culminated in the successful acquisition of the Cottage and its handing over to the National Trust in 1909. He had previously been instrumental in saving Dove Cottage, and he was clearly a seasoned and well-connected campaigner. Knight's account gives some sense of the difficulties of the campaign, but provides little detail of his own extraordinary efforts (perhaps Knight did not wish to paint himself too

prominently into the picture).

But interesting new evidence on the campaign has recently come to light, which makes the story worth telling once more. Indeed, it is quite possible that further material may exist, and I would be most interested in hearing from anyone who has additional information on the persons involved, or who can let me know the whereabouts of relevant letters or other manuscripts. The present paper can offer no more than a sketch of the Cottage's story at a critical time in its history.

The Awakening of Interest

First signs of interest in the Cottage, and a suggestion that it should be rescued, can be found in a privately printed book on the Quantocks by the Rev. William Luke Nichols, The Quantocks and Their Associations (1st Edition: Bath, 1873). The Rev. Nichols lived at Woodlands farm near Holford, said to be one of the meeting places of Wordsworth and Coleridge. The book prints a lecture which Nichols had given to the Bath Literary Club in 1871. The lecture is mainly concerned to describe the activities of Wordsworth and Coleridge, while providing a brief account of the geology and flora of the Quantocks.

It was in the notes appended to his book that it occurred to Nichols that the Cottage should be rescued:

> I often drive past that thatched cottage by the road side at the entrance of the long street of Nether Stowey ... and the wish has sometimes occurred to me, that it were possible to rescue it from its present use, a village ale-house, - (the Coleridge Cottage Inn). Are there no admirers of Coleridge who would be willing to assist in appropriating to some purpose connected with education - a Free Library, or a village reading room, - the house and orchard of the Poet, where he spent those three marvellous years which formed the prime and manhood of his poetical life, and where were conceived the splendid dreams of The Mariner and the Christabel? (Nichols, pp. xxii-xxiii)

In the second, enlarged edition of his book (London & Bath, 1891)

Nichols added a footnote citing a letter of his own written in 1888, which provides a contemporary view of the state of the Cottage:

> After enquiry and personal inspection of the Stowey residence of Coleridge ... I found [it] had been so much changed from the pretty low-roofed thatched cottage of the past, by the addition of an upper storey, the re-casing of the walls and addition of an extra wing, that the bard himself would fail to recognize his former domicile. (Nichols, p. 15)

Nichols is perhaps mistaken about the addition of the upper storey: the Cottage already had three bedrooms in the upper part in Coleridge's time (Lawrence, p. 87; the Cottage now has only two bedrooms in the original part). The book includes a picture of the Cottage, showing the roof which had been raised earlier in the century, but without the extension, amounting to an additional house, that was added to the north-west side of the Cottage in about 1870.

The reissue of Nichols's book in 1891 may have been one impetus to an awakening of interest in Coleridge's cottage. Knight observed that interest in Coleridge was renewed by the publication of an edition of the Lyrical Ballads in 1890, edited by Professor Dowden (Knight, p. 116). But the beginning of the campaign itself can be dated from the appearance of a letter in The Daily Telegraph on September 9th, 1892, under the heading Fate of Coleridge's Cottage:

> Sir - In a recent visit to the Quantocks, in Somersetshire, I was surprised to find that Coleridge's Cottage in Nether Stowey had no other mark of distinction except the signboard which showed that it was merely a wayside inn. Various changes seem to have taken place in it - such as the addition of another storey - since the time when it sheltered the poet at the end of the last century. But surely it would not cost much to provide it with one of those metal plaques with which in London we distinguish the homes of celebrated men and women; nor, indeed, would it be very extravagant to rescue it from the degradation of being a public house.

The writer, who signed himself 'Wayfarer,' ended by noting that the Rector of Dodington, a nearby village, would 'I have reason to believe, gladly join in any scheme for perpetuating the memory of Coleridge's early house.' The

rector was William Greswell.

The newspaper itself took up the call with a lengthy leading article on the topic on September 13th. This repeated the Wayfarer's arguments, and stated in even stronger terms that the continuance of the house as a wayside inn was 'a degradation' that 'should not be permitted.' Taking up a moral stance on the issue, it foresaw that 'a humble plaque on the walls, might help to keep older memories alive and turn the present generation from the imbibing of spirituous liquors to reverence for a great name.'

Another correspondent supported the call in a letter published on September 17th. The letter suggested laying out the garden as it might have been in Coleridge's time, while

> the cottage itself, if purchased or rented from the owner, might be partly used as a village lecture or reading room. It would be a most desirable thing if a small library of Coleridge's and Wordsworth's works could be placed in one of the rooms for the use of those who might be desirous of studying the works of these poets on the spot. The present owner of the cottage is an intelligent and enlightened man, and is by no means desirous of always devoting the cottage to the somewhat ignominious purpose of retailing beer and cider to the thirsty rustic. The question of ways and means is, of course, the most important one.

The letter went on to suggest forming a small local committee to raise funds. The letter is signed 'A resident in the neighbourhood.'

The local newspaper, The Bridgwater Mercury, was now alerted to the interest being shown, and carried a leading article on September 21st which also advocated a campaign to rescue the cottage:

> The latter quarter of the present century has witnessed many devoted efforts upon the part of Englishmen, undertaken for the purpose of rescuing from decay and degradation relics linked with the lives of those who have added lustre to the national name. A movement, begun by the proper persons, with a like object in view at Nether Stowey would, we venture to say, be sure to be crowned with success. Somersetshire is entering with almost passionate ardour into the educational schemes of the day. There are, upon all hands, evidences of a great intellectual awakening. The spirit of the time, to say nothing of the special local claims which we have been glancing at, appears to be eminently favourable to the initiation of a COLERIDGE memorial upon, and embodying, the

> very dwelling in which the poet lived and laboured. Such a plan might be extended to commemorate the poet of Alfoxden. Nether Stowey and Alfoxden have, heretofore, attracted many a pilgrim from across the seas. The number of such visitors would be multiplied beyond calculation by the completion of a commemorative project worthy of the grand and imperishable associations of the place.

The newspaper looked at the proposal in more detail in another leading article the following week, in which consideration was given to the form that such a memorial should take. Having noted that Nether Stowey itself was declining in population, and now numbered just over 600, the writer continued:

> COLERIDGE Cottage Inn ... is, we are informed, owned by a Mr. Moore, a carpenter, who lives in the house adjoining. His mother, a widow, earns a livelihood by retailing beer and cider in the humble establishment that was formerly the poet's residence. It has been suggested that the building might be transformed into a literary institute, containing a library in which the works of the Quantock poets would form a conspicuous part, that a room should be arranged for the delivery of lectures and that the garden close by should be laid out with laurel hedges and winding walks, such as are supposed to have existed during COLERIDGE'S time... There appears no reason to doubt the willingness of the owner to part with the 'Cottage' - rather the contrary, we should say. But before any definite steps can be taken or negotiations opened, it is self-evident that a committee must be formed, and an appeal for subscriptions issued. (Sept 28th 1892)

The article cites the Somerset Archaeological Society as a potential body for organizing an appeal. The Rev. William Greswell of Dodington was an active member of the Society, and he must already have been contemplating such an appeal. Lawrence says he launched the appeal the following month on the 120th anniversary of Coleridge's death (p. 186).

Meanwhile the Mercury provided one more leader the following week, with the primary purpose of refuting Edmund Gosse, who had published a paper in the Illustrated London News on September 24th disparaging the project. Mr Gosse's article, while acknowledging the importance of the Quantocks in general, was suffused with a tone of irritation at the thought of paying any attention to the Cottage:

> No illusive mist can arise rosy enough for me to gaze through at the Stowey cottage with anything but a sort of vexation. To put an inscription on it, as it is now proposed to do, seems to me positively unfeeling. The sorry edifice excites unwelcome images: Samuel lolling in his shirt-sleeves, Sara garrulous at the washing-tub. But if we can wander away from the absolute vicinity of the squalid pot-house, the whole neighbourhood is redolent of Coleridge...

Mr Gosse, the Mercury noted, 'has a very sorry opinion alike of the hospitable ale-house and the poet's retreat.'

Despite the reservations of Gosse, the project went ahead. Its first achievement, less than a year later, was to place a special memorial plaque on the wall of the Cottage. The ceremony took place on June 9th 1893. The stone for the plaque was taken from a quarry at Spaxton, a nearby village, and the plaque can be seen on the wall of the Cottage to this day. The Bridgwater Mercury of June 14th carried a full report of the event, which included an evocative lecture by Ernest Hartley Coleridge, the poet's grandson. The ceremony was introduced by William Greswell, and the audience included J. Dykes Campbell and Mrs Sandford (author of Thomas Poole and His Friends). After the lecture, the Rev. Vernon of St Audries (recipient of the letter from the late Rev. Nichols cited earlier), observed that

> It was a day which ought to be memorable in the history of literature - he was almost going to say of the nation. They were but a small gathering of earnest admirers of the poet but they were the nucleus of a very large number.

He envisaged raising a fund of £10 to £15 a year to preserve the Cottage for two or three years (in order to rent it), while efforts were made to find capital to buy the Cottage from Mr. Moore. A small committee was to be appointed 'to take steps with a view to securing the cottage.'

It is worth noting that three years later a copy of this report in the newspaper was made by Lettie Moore, the daughter of the cottage's owner. At the age of ten she laboriously wrote out the article in the blank pages of a schoolbook. The copy, which runs to twenty-three pages, is in the possession of the Moore family who still live in Nether Stowey.

The first committee, which must have been formed immediately after the ceremony, consisted of William Greswell, Ernest Hartley Coleridge, J. Dykes Campbell (who had recently edited a new edition of Coleridge's poetry), the Rev. Vernon, and Mr. H. St Barbe Goldsmith. Between them they raised the money to lease the cottage for £15 per year, with an option to purchase the cottage for £600 at the expiry of the lease in 1908. The lease was signed on July 31st 1893. Knight tells us that 'The sounds of rustic mirth and revelry disappeared from the premises, and there was no further use for the Cider House and Bowling Alley which had been attached to it' (Knight, p. 118). Tenants were found for the house, and the Committee now set to work to raise the purchase price.

The Campaign

First responses to the campaign were disappointing. An appeal for funds was made in The Athenaeum on March 21st 1896, but little was obtained. Knight commented in his book that

> under the existing circumstances, the only course open to the Committee was to keep the cottage tenanted, and in good repair, for the term it was rented, and trust to fortune. The responsibility rested chiefly with Mr. Greswell during the fifteen years' lease, and at times the difficulties of keeping the whole scheme, even in a state of suspended animation, were considerable. The preservation of the cottage must be regarded as his work (p. 120).

Knight's own involvement began later. His account, quoting Greswell, states that Knight 'found his way to Nether Stowey in the autumn of 1906.' In fact a visitors' book kept at the Cottage shows the precise date to be a little earlier: Knight's signature is dated June 15th, 1906. Knight immediately set to work to form a new committee.

A small pamphlet which was recently found in the Cottage lists the names and addresses of over two hundred subscribers to a scheme to purchase Coleridge Cottage for the nation. The subtitle of the pamphlet is 'First

List of Those who have written approving of the Scheme, and agreeing to help it.' A distinguished list of names is provided, drawing from the literary, clerical, academic, political and aristocratic worlds. For example, the first page alone lists the Earl of Aberdeen, the Bishops of St Albans, St Andrews, Bath and Wells, and Birmingham, Herbert Asquith, Arthur Balfour, Robert Barrett Browning (son of the poet), Stopford Brooke, and Dr. Butler, the Master of Trinity College, Cambridge. Other pages contain such names as Ernest De Selincourt, Richard Haldane, E. V. Lucas, George Meredith, W. M. Rossetti, George Saintsbury, Swinburne, Alma Tadema, and the son of Lord Tennyson. Unfortunately the pamphlet has no date, but it seems likely that the list was compiled about 1906, and was the first fruits of the work of Knight's committee.

While Knight's book provides a brief account of the work of the new committee, a more detailed source of evidence is a minutes books bound in red vellum, which was found among the archives of the National Trust, and which is now kept at Coleridge Cottage. The book records the meetings of the Executive Committee, and runs from a meeting on November 16th 1906, to a meeting on April 6th 1909. The minutes provide a detailed narrative of the discussions that took place, and also put on record copies of several important letters that were sent and received by the committee. The list of subscribers is already mentioned as being in printed form.

At the first recorded meeting, held in a committee room of the House of Lords on November 15th 1906, the chair was taken by Professor William Knight. The Executive Committee that was then elected consisted of The Earl of Lytton (Chairman), Professor Knight (Honorary Secretary), Rev. William Greswell (Treasurer), and Miss Edith Burman (Secretary). Other elected members included the Earl of Crewe, James Bryce M.P., and Ernest Hartley Coleridge. The purpose of the project was restated in the following terms:

> The aim of the promoters of the Scheme is mainly to preserve the Cottage - so far as possible - in the state in which it was during the poet's residence, and to replant the orchard garden; but it is also hoped that the annex to the house - built since Coleridge lived in it - will be taken down to make way for a Library, to benefit the village and district.

The library notion, first mentioned in 1892 by the correspondent of the Daily Telegraph, was to involve the committee in some confusion, as will shortly be seen. The account of this meeting also notes that pictures of places associated with Coleridge 'drawn by distinguished artists' are being sent to the Honorary Secretary, and will ultimately be placed on the walls of the cottage, together with copies of all the portraits of Coleridge that can be located.

At the next meeting, on February 12th 1907, William Knight reported on a correspondence he had begun with the philanthropist Andrew Carnegie. It is not stated why Carnegie was approached, but it may have been because Carnegie had recently provided funds to help build a new library for Bridgwater (he personally laid the first stone on August 10th 1905). Carnegie, however, did not believe in supporting the library project. His secretary wrote to Knight from New York saying that Mr. Carnegie did not think a new library building next to Coleridge Cottage was appropriate, since the village held only six hundred people. He added:

> For the matter to be taken up, not on the basis of the Library requirements of the district, but on the basis of the Memorial feature, it will be necessary to send a list of subscribers, and their subscriptions, to Mr Carnegie; so that he may decide, by the measure of success attained, and the amount contributed, whether to subscribe, and how much to subscribe.

Knight replied, sending the requested list, and saying that some £800 was needed to purchase the Cottage and pay for repairs, and that £180 had actually been received of a promised £350. He asked Carnegie to double the amount obtained from the donations of the subscribers. Knight had also written to Mr. Moore, wondering if the purchase price of the cottage could not be reduced. But Mr. Moore had answered briefly that the purchase price

remained as stated in the lease, and that if the lessees 'do not purchase before the expiration of the lease, they will never have the chance afterwards.' The National Trust, who were already being considered as the final owners of the property, had agreed to try to find an additional £100 if the rest of the purchase price could be raised.

During the Spring William Knight visited America, where he attempted without success to see Carnegie in person, and where he wrote further letters to him. Eventually Carnegie wrote to Knight saying that he had 'never heard of the Coleridge matter as far as I remember.' He received hundreds of letters every day that he did not see, but he would be glad to contribute £200, provided he could see the list of subscribers. He did not want to be associated with a Library project that was likely to fail. Knight wrote in reply, a little aggrieved, saying that he had had several replies from Mr. Bertram, Carnegie's secretary, written as though from Carnegie. He had previously sent full details of the project and the subscribers to Mr. Bertram. While thanking Carnegie for the offer of £200, he still asked him to donate £400; Knight saw that it would be very difficult to raise a further £200 from appeals in England.

At a further meeting on November 19th 1907, with the promise of £200 from Carnegie, the committee decided to initiate proceedings to purchase the Cottage from Mr. Moore, with a view to completing the transaction by the following June 24th. It was also reported that Ernest Hartley Coleridge had raised another £25 for the purchase fund by giving a lecture on Coleridge at Taunton.

The next meeting took place on June 4th, only three weeks before the envisaged purchase date. No money had yet been received from Andrew Carnegie. William Knight reported that he had written yet again in January, enclosing a letter from the Treasurer, William Greswell, that explained the financial position. £400 had now been raised, and it remained only for Mr.

Carnegie to send the promised £200 for the purchase to go ahead. In February the officious Mr. Bertram had replied suggesting that the agreement was that Carnegie would provide £200 only after the committee had itself raised another £200 in addition to the £400 already in the bank. Knight had written back politely explaining the position yet again, urging the necessity of speedy action to complete the purchase that summer, or 'we must I fear abandon all hope of securing the Cottage for the nation.' But Mr. Bertram wrote confirming the conditions.

The Committee was now somewhat desperate. They set about trying to raise the additional funds needed, and to secure a loan to enable the purchase to go ahead in time. The Bank in Bridgwater agreed to make the loan: the Cottage and the annex would be leased again to tenants, but at a rent sufficient to cover the interest and eventually repay the loan. At the end of the meeting on June 4th at which these arrangements were confirmed, Professor Knight said that he had reached the limit of his powers.

> He found the labour too much for him, and must choose between giving up the writing of books, or taking part in schemes for the public good. He might say without presumption that - with the exception of what had come in to the Fund through Mr. Coleridge's lecture at Taunton and his other work in behalf of the Cottage - almost the whole amount which had been raised was the result of correspondence with friends, and public persons, who were interested in the Poet. During the month of May he had written 300 holograph letters, urging the recipients to contribute something to the scheme ere it was too late; that from its commencement till now he had sent out more than a thousand letters far and wide...

He had also sent out numerous circulars, made many visits, and could now do no more. All the same, he undertook to arrange a public performance on behalf of the fund, as well as continue the correspondence with Mr. Carnegie.

A matinée was held at the Haymarket theatre on November 13th 1908, at which distinguished speakers read Coleridge's poems, interspersed with glees made from verses by Coleridge. The occasion raised over £63. On June 23rd a meeting had been held at Kensington Palace which Princess Louise, Duchess of

Argyll (the daughter of Edward VII) attended with the Duke of Argyll, to hear a lecture by Ernest Hartley Coleridge. This had brought in further subscriptions. E. H. Coleridge took the opportunity to pay tribute to Professor Knight (who was absent due to illness): the purchase of the Cottage (which had now been completed) was accomplished 'largely by the energy and devotion of Professor Knight.' His own part in the matter had lain mainly in being one of three or four persons who had leased the Cottage for the last fifteen years, and 'who would hand it over to the public free of incumbrances' (Bridgwater Mercury, July 1st 1908).

By December the sum of £634 had been gathered, and Professor Knight wrote once again to Mr. Carnegie. Mr Bertram replied as usual from New York on December 14th. His reply represented yet a further twist to the tale of misunderstandings. He stated that it was Mr. Carnegie's determination that, as the necessary £600 had now been raised for the purchase of the Cottage, he would provide the additional £200 needed to erect a small Library, provided he was assured that a penny in the pound rate towards the Library would also be collected. After a further letter reminding Mr. Carnegie of the prior correspondence, a cheque had finally been received for £200, but earmarked 'For a Library and Reading Room at Nether Stowey.' Patiently, Professor Knight wrote once more to explain that they were no longer interested in building a Library, had thought that Mr. Carnegie was not either, and that the costs of such a building would be beyond them. Finally, on March 2nd 1909 Mr. Bertram wrote back (the tone is a little grudging, as of one who realizes that he is at last the loser in the game):

> The £200 should have been sent by Mr. Carnegie's cashier for the 'Coleridge Cottage Memorial Fund', and he will be asked to correct the matter, as after the correspondence which passed, there seemed to be no course open to Mr. Carnegie but to allow his contribution to go to the 'Coleridge Cottage Memorial Fund.'

The cheque was finally forwarded to Mr. Greswell.

The last meeting reported in the Minutes Book was largely concerned with

winding up the affairs of the Committee, and agreeing to pay the expenses of the executive members from the inception of their work in 1906. Professor Knight undertook to write a history of the Cottage from 1798 to the present, to be sold for the benefit and upkeep of the Cottage. I have no evidence that this was issued, but he was later to publish his general account of the poets, Coleridge and Wordsworth in the West Country, containing the chapter on the Cottage from which I have cited. Another meeting was arranged for May 27th, at which the Cottage was to be formally handed over to the National Trust, but the record of this meeting was not entered in the book.

The minutes record some of the items which were to be placed in the Cottage (most of which can be seen today); an appeal was to be made for further pictures and books. Knight's chapter in Coleridge and Wordsworth in the West Country concludes the story in this way:

> Outside the cottage, and in the modern annexe, a Library is being formed, in which it is hoped that a collection may be made of books illustrating both Wordsworth and Coleridge influences. It may possibly become a useful Reference Library. Contributions of books will be gladly welcomed (p. 125).

Thus the Cottage was saved and given to the nation. Valuable items, including a few books, were given to the Cottage by members of the Coleridge family and other well-wishers. Portraits of Knight and Greswell hang in the Cottage to this day, as a memorial to their endeavours. A Library was attached to the Cottage for a while (local residents remember making use of it), but it disappeared some time ago. Other ambitions of the committee were not achieved: the annexe to the house was not demolished, and the garden was not replanted. But the Cottage itself, refurbished and now with two rooms open to the visitor, provides an intimate glimpse of the tenants of almost two hundred years ago. The primary aim of the campaign has been admirably fulfilled.