

**The Cornish Curate
by Berta Lawrence.**

(The Coleridge Bulletin New Series No 2 (Autumn 1993), pp 2-4)

(We are pleased to print this revised version of a paper which originally appeared in *The Charles Lamb Bulletin*. It is now reprinted by permission of the editor.)

In the eighteenth century Roskillys were fairly thick on the ground in Cornwall and it has not proved possible to identify the birthplace of Coleridge's friend. However, William Roskilly served as curate to the church of St. Mary in Nether Stowey, Somerset, where the vicar was frequently an absentee, during the decade 1790-1800, overlapping Coleridge's residence in Stowey by the last four years. Roskilly's first signature in the church registers appears in 1790. The following year he officiated at the marriage of a fellow Cornishman, Richard Lemon from Redruth, to a Stowey girl Susanna Chambers. Richard Lemon worked at the copper-mine in the Quantock Hills owned by the Duke of Buckingham and remembered by Coleridge in a letter from Germany in which he says he refused to visit the mines at Clausthal because he had already visited the Stowey mine and would find nothing new. Most of the miners at the Stowey mine were Methodists..

In December 1792 the register records the burial of William Roskilly's wife Frances. A year or two later he married, in Stowey church, a widow Mrs Dyer. The baptism of their daughter Mary Elizabeth is recorded in 1796, the year when Coleridge's son Hartley was born and when the Coleridges took the cottage in Lime Street. The two young wives became friendly and frequently 'drank tea' together, sometimes in their husbands' company. Tea-drinking was one of the social activities of the little town. More than twenty years later Mrs Coleridge recalls, in a letter to Tom Poole, the prosperous Stowey tanner who was the Coleridges' constant benefactor, that on one occasion the Roskillys brought to tea at the Lime Street cottage a physician called Dr May who was visiting them and that Dr May kindly gave Sarah advice on weaning Hartley. At his Stowey house, not identified, William Roskilly kept a small, genteel boarding school. Tom Poole, warmly recommending it in a letter to a friend seeking a school for his son, wrote 'Mr Roskilly the Clergyman takes 20 boarders at f 20 per annum'. Washing and Latin were included for this fee and there was 'an optional Dancing Master'.

Tom Poole had a friend John Chubb, a prosperous merchant and talented amateur artist. a democrat in politics and a friend and political supporter of Charles James Fox. His hospitable house stood on the quayside by the tidal river Parret in Bridgwater and here he entertained Coleridge and his wife in 1807 when de Quincey met Coleridge at the supper-table and found his personality dazzling. John Chubb's son - Morley aged seven - went to Mr Roskilly's school in Stowey and his

grave, childish letters to his father illustrate the constant fear of French invasion which in Stowey engendered the 'spy-scare' and consequent suspicions about Wordsworth and Coleridge. When there was an alarm the pupils were kept indoors. 'Mr Wood - the music master, teaches us our exercises and we have little wooden guns'. In the time of inflated corn prices riots flared up in the village when 'Sir Phillip Hales came to carry away the corn' so that Mr Roskilly's boys were not permitted to leave the premises. Sir Phillip Hales was 'the titled Dogberry' who led the campaign against Wordsworth.

Mr Roskilly's school ran into debt and failed.

There is no evidence that Mr Roskilly and Coleridge were close friends. No doubt they found each other's company congenial since men of good education were not numerous in Stowey. Over the years, particularly when he was in Germany, Coleridge's letters are scattered with requests to Poole and other correspondents to pass on a brief, amiable message to Roskilly. In later years while living in the Lake District he casually sends 'my love to the Roskillys' including them in a list of old friends like Ward and Chester while never finding time to write them a letter. He did write Roskilly one letter, lively, semi-facetious, while loitering in Germany in January 1799. It is a letter of warm congratulations written after learning that Roskilly had been given a living in Kempsford in Gloucestershire. He declares that he will drink a big 'bumper' to the health of the Bishop of Gloucester - 'God bless him'. Scribbled on the back of a letter written to Sarah the letter ends:

'Sincerely your friend
S.T. Coleridge'.

Sarah kept in touch with the Roskillys who proved kind and helpful. In 1800, after Coleridge's return to England, she found herself stranded without a domicile, with little money, pregnant and with the child Hartley to care for. The Roskillys earned her gratitude by inviting her to Kempsford rectory. 'I and the child left him (Coleridge) in London and proceeded to Kempsford in Gloucestershire. Papa was to have

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joined us there but did not' she wrote after making a six-week stay. For many years Sarah remembered the Roskillys, frequently mentioning them in letters to Tom Poole, chiefly a certain Miss Roskilly still living in Nether Stowey - Roskilly's daughter, perhaps, judging by her age. 'Is Miss Roskilly married yet?' Sarah candidly enquires. At times she merely asks 'how is Miss Roskilly?' In 1830, after a Stowey visit, she writes 'I am sorry to have missed a sight of Miss Roskilly' and, in 1829, after the wedding of a Southey daughter at Southey's home Greta Hall

Mrs Coleridge writes to Poole, 'I have indulged in scribbling an account of the wedding for the amusement of your young cousins and Miss Roskilly'.

Two intimate friends of the Coleridges during their Stowey sojourn were young Mr and Mrs John Cruikshank who had. married the same day as the Coleridges and occupied a nearby house communicating by a garden path. Cruikshank's father was agent to the Earl of Egmont (brother of Perceval the Prime Minister) who lived in Enmore Castle, a few miles from Stowey, and gave Coleridge hospitality some years later. It was John Cruikshank who described to Coleridge his dream about a skeleton ship manned by a crew of ghosts which Coleridge incorporated in his *Ancient Mariner*. On 3 February 1797 William Roskilly baptised the Cruikshanks' baby girl Anna Elizabeth who was about Hartley's age. We do not know whether Coleridge, who at that time disapproved of infant baptism, attended the religious ceremony but we know that, he wrote a poem to honour it, *On the Christening of a Friend's Child*. These verses were a tribute to the baby's mother Anna Cruikshank, particularly for the sweetness and 'meekness' of her character - much admired by Coleridge (according to a letter).

In October 1807 William Roskilly and his wife paid a visit to Nether Stowey. The recently published interesting diary of William Holland, Vicar of Over Stowey (it is called *Paupers and Pig Killers*) describes the visit in Mr Holland's usual carping manner. He met the Roskillys at the house of a relative of Tom Poole whom he disliked intensely. He remarked that Mr Roskilly did well for himself by marrying the Bishop of Gloucester's niece! He had. failed at everything else - his school had failed, he was a poor scholar,. a poor parson and a poor preacher, and a very mean-looking plain man. Yet marriage to the Bishop's niece had 'set him right again'.

William Roskilly died in 1810.