

‘Wish You Were Here’: The Significance of Coleridge’s Holidays at Ramsgate, 1819-1833

Allan Clayson

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‘O I wish, you were here, and that we could all Ramsgatize till the midst of December!’ (CL V 186) So wrote Coleridge to Gillman on 31 October, 1821, from No. 7 Wellington Crescent, Porta Arietina, Coleridge’s dog-Latin for Ramsgate.

I have the good fortune to live in No. 6 Wellington Crescent, and the people of Ramsgate after generations of ignorance of Coleridge’s illustrious presence in their town at its fashionable Regency peak are at last to erect a plaque next door at No. 7. In all Coleridge visited the resort ten times between 1819 and 1833, mostly for a month or two in the late autumn, always accompanied by one or both of his minders, the Gillmans. Ramsgate’s neglect seems inexplicable, for Coleridge was not a casual tripper but a lengthy sojourner, spending roughly the same amount of time in Ramsgate as Dickens was to spend in Broadstairs—over twelve months in all—and the Dickens industry has netted Ramsgate’s more enterprising neighbour a small fortune over the years.

All this is by the bye. What in a sense is more disturbing is the general academic indifference towards the holidays that Coleridge took in Ramsgate, since the sources for these Ramsgate years are rich and varied. For a start, over fifty of his collected letters were written from Ramsgate and many pages of his Notebooks were written up during these holidays. His social life was full—even hectic at times—and he is a splendidly ironic commentator on the manners of the company that frequented the watering-place, not to mention the frailties of the local inhabitants. There is more, however, than simple biographical interest to his holidays. Coleridge always came down to Ramsgate with the noble intention of writing, and though, of course, being the man he was, he always fell a long way short of his aims, there is, I hope, still enough of critical literary interest to stimulate the present company.

The dating of Coleridge’s later poetry is notoriously difficult, but although the composition of no single poem can be confidently attributed to Ramsgate, he clearly tinkered with and polished several poems while there, and in at least three of these there are clues if not signposts to the town.

In 1821 Charles Cowden Clarke, friend and mentor of the poet Keats, met Coleridge on one of his constitutionals on Ramsgate’s East Cliff, Mrs Gillman having taken a house in Wellington Crescent, then under construction on the Cliff. The situation was, Coleridge boasted to Allsop, ‘the very best in all Ramsgate’, (CL V 181) and a year later, meeting Lord Liverpool, the Prime Minister, and his Foreign Secretary George Canning on the Pier, he ‘walked arm in arm with them, down the Pier, thro’ the Town, and up to the Cliff to

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see the Wellington Crescent &c’. (CL V 257)

Clarke had been staying with his parents, who had retired to Ramsgate, and it was his mother who had first seen the poet in the public library, looking, as she told her son, ‘like a Dissenting minister,’ and ‘talking as she never heard man talk.’ Having introduced himself to Coleridge as a mutual friend of Charles Lamb, Clarke was delighted when Coleridge launched forth into conversation and ‘continued for an hour and a half, never pausing for an instant except to catch his breath’. (*Recollections...* 1878 pp.32-35)

In his *Recollections of Writers* Clarke suggested that Coleridge ‘might possibly have composed upon the occasion’ (ibid.) his fine late poem on fugacity, ‘Youth and Age’. Plainly at some late stage he transformed the line that in draft form had limped along lamely as

‘O’er hill and dale and sounding Sands.’

into the evocative

‘O’er aery cliffs and glittering sands.’ (l. 10)

Where were those ‘aery cliffs’? Certainly not Littlehampton, where he had spent his first holiday with the Gillmans in 1816. Where were those ‘glittering sands? Clearly not Muddiford, where they had passed the 1817 holiday. Surely airy cliffs and glittering sands could refer only to Ramsgate?

Clarke also suggests a Ramsgate origin for the next lines:

Of those trim skiffs, unknown of yore,
On winding Lakes and rivers wide,
That ask no aid of sail or oar,
That fear no spite of wind or tide! (ll. 12-15)

What were those ‘trim skiffs’? Nothing more than an elaborate figure for the new paddle-steamers operating between London and the Thanet resorts of Margate and Ramsgate.

The allusions are worth a small digression. Coleridge came to Ramsgate for the sea-cure, which involved, largely, fresh air and sea-bathing, and which held out prospects of relief for several of the ailments Coleridge had—or imagined he had. He and his house-companions exercised regularly along the cliff tops, and the seascape was to him almost as familiar in his declining years as was the landscape of the Quantocks or the Lake District in his prime.

Coleridge was also a keen sea-bather, and regularly used the machines of the horse-drawn bathing-machine proprietor Philpott, the butt of many of his jokes. In a letter to Gillman on his visit to Ramsgate in 1821, Coleridge relates a bathing-machine experience on Ramsgate Sands:

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I was myself very unwell on Monday & Yesterday – but this morning, I have cleared up again, and had such a Trio of Plunges into the very heart, Liver, and Lights of three towering Billows this morning, the last of which fairly hurried me back, I might almost say, into the Machine – but actually, to the top-most step of the Ladder – so that I narrowly escaped a bruise – The wave set the Carpet afloat, and had I not instantly called out to Philpott, that his Pot was over-full, I should have had my outsides, alias, extra-cuticulars, alias, Cloathes, seized by the grim old *Surge-on* without any to *redress* me... It was glorious! I watched each time from the top-step for a high Wave coming, and then with my utmost power of projection *shot* myself *off* into it, for all the world like a Congreve Rocket into a Whale. (CL IV 185)

Coleridge it would seem bathed in the sea throughout his holidays in the 1820s, but on his last holiday in 1833 he settled for something less shocking to the system:

I have certainly been much benefited, in praesenti, by the warm salt Shower Baths – standing with my legs in a Tub at the temperature of near a 100, & receiving from 30 to 40 gallons of salt water of from 90 to 100 [Fahrenheit] (CL VI 947)

On his return, his wife, by now living in Hampstead with her daughter and son-in-law, found him transformed, and, in a letter to her old confidant Thomas Poole, attributed the change to his holiday: ‘S.T.C. is ten years younger in spirit: the tepid-salt-water-shower-bath has done wonders!’ [\[1\]](#)

As for the steam-packets, Coleridge was a pioneer of the Ramsgate run, which commenced early in the eighteen-twenties, and many of his trips down are recorded in minute detail in letters and notebooks. He found the idea of propulsion by steam rather preposterous, but also found beauty in the movement of the paddle-steamers, as we can see in an exquisite passage in a letter to Gillman of 1827:

I never saw a Steam-boat look beautiful—tho’ always interesting—till yester evening ¼ past 4, when it pencilled it’s way toward the Pier and then described a horseshoe wake of grey lustre within the Harbour as it curved round in the largest possible Circuit to the old Station at the Landing-steps, all in a glory of the richest golden Light reflected from it’s sides and Uprights, & transmuting it’s long pennant of Smoke into a huge Cylinder or what shall I call it? Of Topaz. (CL VI 706)

To revert from this purple prose to the mere poetic, let us consider another poem with possible Ramsgate associations—‘The Pang More Sharp

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Than All’.

The 1823 holiday was one of mixed emotions for Coleridge. His regard for Ann Gillman was beginning to unnerve him, if his cryptic notebook entries of the early part of this holiday have any significance. There are references to ‘*Ultima*’ – an ambiguous Latin code-word: ‘*Ultima* alarmingly affected in her Head and Eyes, doubtless, from over excited feelings of Distress and honest Indignation’ (CN IV 5010 and n.) and ‘Ult. had a good night & better. But this is usual for the first half of the Day.’ (CN IV 5011 and n.) These entries caused raised eyebrows in the joint editors of Volume IV of the *Notebooks*, who opted tentatively for Ann Gillman ahead of Sara Hutchinson as the said *Ultima*.

He was thrown into even greater emotional turmoil by learning of the presence in Ramsgate of Sara Hutchinson, recently arrived from Boulogne, where she had been staying with Southey’s neighbour – the bankrupt and self-exiled Miss Barker, references to whose financial incompetence and consequent misfortunes are scattered through Sara’s letters from 1818 to 1823. In a letter from Boulogne in July 1823, Sara makes a telling observation about Miss Barker – and an even older friend:

...she lives in such a complete dream – planning & scheming, & never executing! Yet believing as firmly as M^r Coleridge that she never fails![\[2\]](#)

Coleridge called unexpectedly on Sara and her cousin-by-marriage, Jane Monkhouse, then staying on the town’s West Cliff. Though Coleridge remains silent on their contacts Sara’s letters record a burst of social activity: there was dinner at Jane Monkhouse’s, where Coleridge was the life and soul of the party; they planned a visit to a musical concert at a local library, and there was promise of endless autumnal fruits.

Alas, it was not to be. Jane Monkhouse, hypochondriac and spiteful, broke up the holiday and returned to town with the disappointed Sara. 'C. will be in despair at our sudden determination - & I am a little sorry to leave R', she wrote; (*Letters*... 267) but Coleridge, though no doubt in despair, as Sara had predicted, remained enigmatically silent in his letters and notebook.

It would seem that there were not many old emotions stirring in Sara, though clearly she was happier to meet Coleridge in the more relaxed atmosphere of a watering-place than in the glare of London society. She was also quite prepared to use Coleridge as a social magnet and a source of intellectual company in the generally sterile field of a seaside resort. Coleridge, it would seem, detected this, and in his allegory 'The Pang More Sharp Than All' appears to acknowledge the true state of affairs.

Kathleen Coburn, in her introduction to the *Letters of Sara Hutchinson*, dates the poem to late 1823 and floats the idea of the allegory being based on the underlying tone of these two or three meetings between the couple. (ibid. xxxi)

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and n.) She introduces her theory of a Ramsgate source by comparing an image found in the poem with one found in one of Sara's Ramsgate letters. The image in the poem occurs when Coleridge speaks of 'Hope's last and dearest child without a name':

And he was innocent, as the pretty shame
Of babe, that tempts and shuns the menaced kiss,
From its twy-cluster'd hiding place of snow! (ll. 11-13)

In a letter of Ramsgate news, Sara related to her cousin Tom Monkhouse, how Coleridge had smothered his baby daughter in kisses, which experience Coleridge, had likened to 'the next best thing to Bathing in the sea'. (ibid. 263) Though Kathleen Coburn expresses some distaste at 'his horrifying but revealing remark', (ibid. xxxi) it seems on reflection a fitting image for a witty poet, fresh from his early morning sea-bath.

With the allegorical figure of Kindness in the third stanza we may perhaps identify the mature person of Sara at Ramsgate, but if Sara's feelings were the inspiration of the poem, then they were to the poet a mixed blessing. The final couplet runs:

O worse than all! O pang all pangs above
Is Kindness counterfeiting absent love. (ll. 57-58)

A year later Charles Lamb heard with incredulity, and not a little consternation, some scandal that was then circulating in London, that Coleridge 'at that very moment was living in a state of open adultery with Mrs [Gil(l)man] at Highgate'.^[3] Needless to say he retailed the rumour with some relish to Sara Hutchinson then passing a holiday in Torquay. Coleridge never ceased to shock his friends, but Lamb, having experienced most of these tremors, felt he knew his old schoolfellow well enough to discount the rumour, and added a cautionary aside: 'Such it is if Ladies will go gadding about with other people's husbands at watering places.' (*Letters* II 705)

As early as 1822 Coleridge reveals in a letter to Gillman his awareness of the risk of scandal presented by Gillman's lengthy absences in Highgate while his wife was in Ramsgate. The 1822 holiday had begun in Walmer, but Coleridge came on to Ramsgate ahead of the others and took bachelor lodgings on the West Cliff. When Mrs Gillman moved

to Ramsgate, her sister Miss Harding (whom Coleridge could not abide) came with her, and Coleridge was obliged to move in with the house party on the East Cliff.

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I had thought of keeping my present bed-room, at 10S. 6D. a week – but on consulting Mrs Rogers, she did not think this would satisfy the etiquette of the World...(CL V, 255)

In 1825, when there was a question of Mrs Gillman's not being able to stay on at Ramsgate, because her companion Mrs Steel was returning to town, Coleridge observed wryly:

...with all respect for, and due sense of, *appearances*, I can neither think of or even look at myself without a sort of BITTER *Smile*, in connection with the Scruple tho' it is only one of the occasions, in which I feel the sharp and jagged Contrast of the wickedness of the World & my own innocence...(CL V 512)

The cynical alone might feel the gentleman doth protest too much.

On the eve of their departure for the seaside in 1824 Coleridge made a tortuous notebook entry in Greek text and transliteration, full of inexplicable innuendo. Out of character he refers, apparently to their Highgate neighbour Eliza Nixon, who in 1823 had been 'Mrs Gillman's fair friend and companion', (CL V 308) as 'Δουεσσα' (Duenna). (CN 5164 and n.) Indiscretion there seems to have been, on what was Coleridge's healthiest and most social holiday. There was visiting and entertaining on a scale not recorded before, and the rumours must have stemmed from their carelessness in this regard.

There remains one other poem with near incontrovertible Ramsgate credentials, 'The Delinquent Travellers'. In this poem the target of Coleridge's gentle satire was the fashionable rush by English holidaymakers to visit France and Italy at the end of the Napoleonic Wars. For the financially embarrassed Coleridge, always dependent on the generosity of his friends to subsidise his Ramsgate holidays, France was beyond his purse—though not his view on a clear day from Ramsgate's East Cliff—and it may well have been a case of sour grapes.

Coleridge implies that the average holidaymaker would have been as well off at his own hearth, from where he might travel further afield in his fancy, for, as Coleridge explains in line 60, 'the Fancy's free'. Riding the winged horse of his inspiration, Pegasus, he descends at Dumpton Gap—a bay between Ramsgate and Broadstairs—where, as he had recorded in his first letter from Ramsgate, he had had 'a glorious tumble in the waves'. (CL IV 946) A year or two before, in this remote spot, several excisemen, lying in ambush for a notorious smuggling gang, had been buried in a cliff fall, and the area was steeped in smuggling legend. The poem contains the following delightful fancy:

Dismounting from my steed I'll stray
Beneath the cliffs of Dumpton Bay,
Where Ramsgate and Broadstairs between,
Rude caves and grated doors are seen:

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(For Fancy in her magic might
Can turn broad day to starless night!)
When lo! Methinks a sudden band
Of smock-clad smugglers round me stand.

Denials, oaths, in vain I try,
At once they gag me for a spy,
And stow me in the boat hard by. (ll. 80-91)

And so across to Boulogne, and eventually to Australia in the congenial company of felons aboard a convict-ship – Ramsgate, incidentally, often being the last port of call for transports.

Nevertheless, poetry was not to be the chief achievement of his Ramsgate years. In 1823 he brought down with him the proof-sheets of the work which had preoccupied him for some time, *Aids to Reflection*. Needless to say, he was not content with correcting compositors' proofs; instead he set about and achieved, largely on this holiday, a complete revision and restructuring of the work, giving it the framework in which it was to pass down to posterity.

From his 1826 holiday onwards, he was working in desultory fashion on his *Opus Maximum*, while before leaving for his 1833 holiday he assured his friend and collaborator J. H. Green of his intention of revising the *Logic*—but like most of us on holiday, he simply never got around to serious work.

However, if Coleridge wrote any prose of lasting merit in Ramsgate it is to be found, I would suggest, in his personal letters. Those to Gillman back at his practice in Highgate, spread over ten years, some twenty-six of which survive, are a lasting memorial to a remarkable friendship, and form a unified collection far more substantial and, as one would expect, every bit as stylish as those of other more celebrated writers of holiday letters who stayed within a dozen miles of Ramsgate—among them Dorothy Osborne, Jane Austen, Lamb, Keats and, of course, Dickens.

Coleridge took an informed interest in local affairs; he attended the consecration by the Archbishop of Canterbury of St George's Church, a conspicuous landmark with its great lantern-tower, he visited the newly dedicated Synagogue, the pet project of the Jewish patriot and Ramsgate benefactor Moses Montefiore, and he gave a riveting account in a marvellous journal-letter, updated almost hourly, of the great storm of 1824 which left many ships wrecked on the nearby Goodwin Sands and in the Harbour entrance.

But he is at his most entertaining when it comes to the passing show in Ramsgate. 'Here,' as Dryden said of Chaucer's characters, 'is God's plenty.' A Knight there was, Sir William Curtis, bosom friend of George IV, an illiterate Wapping merchant who had made a fortune in ship's biscuits and become Lord Mayor of London, a Tory Member of Parliament and reputedly the unwitting coiner of the phrase 'the three Rs'. He retired to Ramsgate, where, he owned the best yacht and became Chairman of the Harbour Trustees. He snubbed Coleridge at the public dinner commemorating the laying of the

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foundation-stone of the Obelisk marking the King's visit to the town the year before, but received his come-uppance at the hands of the scientifically well-versed Coleridge at a later dinner when he pontificated absurdly on the origins of the steam-engine.

There was the wife of a banker, Mrs Austin, a social climber, likened by Coleridge to the 'genus, Remora, or Sucking Fish'; (CL V 402) the Librarians Burgess and Hunt, with whom Coleridge was on easy terms, and the blundering Postmaster with whom he was not; two property developers, the shipwright Miller, their obliging landlord who sent in masons to raise their smoking chimneys, and the smith Underdown, who sponsored a tasteless statue of the Duke of Wellington in the Crescent Gardens, which was in due course vandalised—to Coleridge's impish glee; the Harbour Master, Captain Martin, memorably depicted on the Pier during the great storm of 1824, Coleridge commenting that not only was he hoarse, but

‘his very speaking Trumpet has got a sore throat’; (CL V 396) the Bathing-Machinist, Philpott, who after the same storm spoke of ‘the delights & great advantages of a good Wreck’, and having salvaged from the sands ‘Telescopes, Spies-glass, Barrels of Brandy and Wine’, justified it to Coleridge as ‘a diffusion of Property. a providential multiplication of Properties’; (CL V 399) and at the very end of his last stay there was the ‘stately old Lady, certainly not less than 80’ coming down the hill, which the 60-year old Coleridge was crawling up, who made way for Coleridge to pass, adding, ‘No, Sir! You are far the Elder. It is my Duty to make way for the Aged.’ (CL VI 847-8)

Frequently in the letters Coleridge reveals those attributes which in Chapter II of *Biographia Literaria* he so admires in Chaucer: ‘a cheerfulness, a manly hilarity, which makes it almost impossible to doubt a correspondent habit of feeling in the author himself’. (BL, *Everyman*, Dent, London 1906, 16)

Coleridge appears to have been a conversationalist much in demand at Ramsgate dinner tables, and there is little doubt that his table talk was as memorable there as elsewhere, though, unfortunately, there was no Henry Nelson Coleridge to record it. Nonetheless, one of the most convincing of his Notebook entries, made shortly after his return from his last holiday in Ramsgate in 1833, bears all the hallmarks of that table talk of 4 August, 1833, in which he contrasts himself with Sir Walter Scott in his lack of interest in historical associations. (TT 4 Aug.1833)

As it happens Coleridge spent much of his last holiday in Ramsgate in the company of the Lockharts—John Gibson Lockhart, Editor of the *Quarterly Review*, and Scott’s biographer, and Mrs Lockhart, Scott’s elder daughter Sophia, whom Coleridge found a ‘love-compelling Woman’. (CL VI 947)

In his Notebook, a month after his return from his last holiday in Ramsgate, he writes:

So standing before the door of No. 4 Spencer Place, Ramsgate, Mr Lockhart said to me—Surely you cannot look at yonder point at yonder Bay without attaching a livelier interest to it, when you remember that

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there Julius Caesar landed on this Island!—I replied with perfect truth—I attach a delightful interest to Julius Caesar on Shakespeare’s account—(I mean, from having associated him with Shakespeare’s play, so called), but no interest to Pegwell Bay on account of Julius Caesar. Nor do I need it. You cannot look at it with more delight than I do. (N.51 f.20)

Coleridge would have loved to have returned to Ramsgate yet again, surrounded for once by his own family, ‘the whole *Kit*’ (CL VI 948) – his daughter Sara, his son-in-law and his two grandchildren, perhaps even his wife – but it was not to be. Within a year he was dead.

Gillman lived to complete only the first of two projected volumes on the life of Coleridge, the first volume covering the pre-Ramsgate years. He died in Ramsgate, presumably on holiday, in 1839 and after a service conducted by his elder son, Coleridge’s protégé, now the Rev. James Gillman, was buried in St George’s Churchyard. In the 1840s Ann Gillman, moved down to Ramsgate, where she died in 1860, aged eighty-one. The graves of the Gillmans are no longer identifiable.

Apart from the incomparable letters of Coleridge to Gillman, and his copious notebook entries, the best sources for these Ramsgate years are two works by which the grandchildren of the Gillmans set out to record the close friendship between Coleridge and their

grandparents, *The Gillmans of Highgate*, by Dr Alexander W. Gillman, and *Coleridge at Highgate* by Lucy Watson.

During Ann Gillman's last years in Ramsgate, she was nearly blind, and was often visited by her granddaughter Lucy, who regularly read to her, at her request, from the works of Coleridge. As Lucy recalls, she would sometimes interrupt:

'If only' – she would sigh – and there was a change in the tone of her voice as she would murmur 'Ah my dear, if only...' [4]

'If only'... a fitting epitaph, perhaps, for Coleridge.

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[1] Coleridge, Mrs Sara the Elder, *A Minnow Among Tritons: Mrs S.T. Coleridge's Letters to Thomas Poole*. (London, 1934) 178

[2] *The Letters of Sara Hutchinson from 1800 to 1815* ed K. Coburn (London, 1954) 253

[3] *Letters*, ed. E.V.Lucas (London 1912), 26 November 1824, II 705

[4] Watson, Lucy, *Coleridge at Highgate*, 4-5