

Thomas Poole's friendship with Sir Humphry Davy By Martin McDonagh



Nether Stowey's most famous son Thomas Poole [left] (1766-1837), a self-educated tanner and farmer, had a gift for deep friendship. His staunch support for Samuel Taylor Coleridge is well documented by Elizabeth Sandford in her book 'Thomas Poole and his Friends' and also more recently by Tom Mayberry in 'Coleridge and Wordsworth in the West Country'.

What is less well known is Poole's lifelong friendship with another great West Countryman, Sir Humphry Davy (1778- 1829), experimental chemist, President of the Royal Society and inventor of the miner's safety lamp. Poole first met Davy in 1799 at Thomas Beddoes' Pneumatic Institute at Hotwells in Bristol. Davy had been appointed laboratory superintendent there in 1798. Here wrote Poole "I inhaled his nitrous oxide with the usual extraordinary and transitory sensations". At the time Poole was sorely missing the company of Coleridge who had left for a tour of Germany. Poole was enthusiastic about his new friend and the feeling was mutual. Davy wrote to Coleridge "I have seen Poole and conversed with him with great delight."

In January 1801 Davy was appointed assistant lecturer in chemistry at the newly formed Royal Institution in Albemarle Street, London. He left the West Country and took the first steps in a momentous career of scientific discovery. However Poole and Davy were not to be separated for long. Poole's trade of tanning was of great economic importance in the eighteenth century and the founder of the Royal Institution, Count Romford, was determined that Davy should investigate the chemistry of tanning. To understand the practical aspects of the craft Davy spent part of the summer at Stowey, where Poole had a state of the art tanning yard and the 'new anti-friction steam rollers' invented by his American friend Mr Garnett. There was a search for new sources of tannin as oak bark was expensive. Poole had detected tannin in port wine and he and Davy found that long application of low heat also released it from acorns.

In the autumn Davy returned to London to carry out further experiments on tanning. The two men, now good friends, were together again in January 1802 when Coleridge and Poole came up from Stowey to hear Davy lecture at the Royal Institution. Davy's public lectures were extremely popular and he was becoming the darling of fashionable London society. However in a letter to Poole he counters suggestions that this had turned his head "Be not alarmed my dear friend as to the effect of worldly society on my mind: the age of danger has passed away ...My real, my waking existence is amongst the objects of scientific research".

That same winter Coleridge and Davy introduced Poole to John Rickman, the secretary of the Speaker of the House of Commons. Rickman was a practical man like Poole and, as Coleridge had anticipated, they got on well. Poole had a great interest in the poor and the Poor Laws as did Rickman. In the spring of 1803 Rickman asked Poole if he would come to London to collate and summarise a nationwide collection of parish returns concerning the poor. Poole was in London from December 1803 until July 1804. It was not all hard work. Poole, Davy and Coleridge enjoyed the coffee houses of London, such as Waghorn's in Old Palace Yard and Old Slaughter's in St Martin's Lane, the meeting place for many of the intellectuals of the day. We have a glimpse of this in the following note from Coleridge to Poole "20th January 1804, I dine with Davy at 5 o'clock this evening at the Prince of Wales Coffee House in Leicester Square. I beseech you do make a point and come". In later years one of the group, the London cartographer Mr Arrowsmith, reminisced "I knew Mr Poole Every one almost connected with those days is dead. But they were great days. It was something to be alive then".

Poole was back in Stowey in July 1804. Davy had been investigating agricultural chemistry and had devised an apparatus for analysing the soils he received from agricultural reformers throughout the country. The

Quantock region was included; Davy wrote to Poole “Pray give me an account of the situation of ‘Poole’s Marsh’ with regard to the [River] Parrot, for I have mentioned the soil in a paper to the Board of Agriculture which is now in Press”.

From mid 1804 onwards Poole mainly concentrated on his business and work for the poor in Stowey and, apart from occasional visits to London, kept up his friendship by letter. In January 1805 Davy [right] was appointed director of the Laboratory at the Royal Institution. Poole congratulated him and Davy replied with relish that he was "...giving my course of lectures in Geology to very crowded audiences." Davy's lectures were so popular that the arriving carriages jammed the traffic and Albemarle Street had to be one way on lecture nights. In October Davy was back again in the West Country but failed to meet up with Poole as "the people at Bridgewater would not take us round through Stowey to Taunton without four horses...I long very much for the intercourse of a week with you".



Poole and Davy corresponded for the rest of Davy's life and Davy occasionally visited Poole in Nether Stowey where he enjoyed shooting and fishing for trout and salmon. In later years he tried to buy an estate in the Quantock area: "You were good enough to say you would make enquiries respecting the Quantock Hills Estate and let me know if it could be purchased..." (Dec 3rd 1817). Eight years later Davy was still looking for an estate: "I have seen Mr Z.... I saw the plan of the estate, and heard everything he had to say respecting the value, real and imaginary of the lands. He certainly hopes for a fancy price.... I should like to be within a few miles of you ; for it is one of the regrets in the life which I lead that devotion to the cause of science separates me from friends I shall ever venerate and esteem" (Feb 28th 1825).

Davy's love of field sports and the Quantocks remained unabated and in October 1826 he wrote: "If you are at leisure I will try to shoot a few woodcocks on Monday on the Quantock hills". Then, in December, a calamity occurred. Davy had his first stroke. He recovered, but ever after he was dogged with ill health and fatigue. Like Coleridge, in times of trouble Davy turned to Poole. In November and December 1827 he was back in the Quantocks trying to recover his health. Poole noted later that Davy was unable walk without fatigue and rode a pony to the spots where he could have "the certainty of immediate sport". He spent the morning writing 'Salmonia' a book about fishing and at other times enjoyed talking to William Baker a Bridgewater carrier who had a fascination for natural history. In the evenings he played whist with Poole and Thomas Ward, Poole's protégé and business partner in the tannery. During this time Poole took Davy to see Andrew Cross the gentleman experimenter at Fyne court. Davy was ill and fatigued by the journey. Poole wrote "On his visiting with a gentleman..., who has extensive philosophical apparatus, particularly complete in electricity and chemistry ...as we were walking round the house very languidly a door opened and we were in the laboratory. He threw his eyes around the room... a glow came over his countenance and he appeared himself twenty years ago. He was surprised and delighted and seemed to say 'This is the beloved theatre of my glory'. I said 'You are pleased'. He shook his head and smiled".

On 6th February 1829 Davy wrote what was to be his last letter to Poole from Rovigo in Italy "If you will come and join me here I can give you a place in a comfortable carriage and show you the most glorious country in Europe -Illyria and Styria. If you can do come at once". The urgency was genuine, Davy was failing. "I write and philosophise a great deal and have nearly finished a work...which I shall dedicate to you. It contains the essence of my philosophical opinions and some of my poetic reveries". This 'work' was his last book "Consolations in Travel". On 28th May 1829 Davy died in Geneva where he was buried in the Plainpalais cemetery. Right to the end, the loyal friendship of Poole, the Quantock tanner, had sustained one of the great geniuses of the age. In his will Davy left Poole £50 (£4000 today) and with this Poole bought a painting of his friend by Henry Howard. Its presence said Poole "will tend to make me wiser and better".