

## DAVID ELISHA DAVY'S JOURNAL OF SUFFOLK EXCURSIONS, 1823 – 1844

by *John Blatchly*

Among Suffolk topographers of the early 19th century, Davy has surely no rival. His folio collections and correspondence in 170 volumes in the British Library are a monument to a lifetime of tireless observation and precise recording. From them we gather that in his earlier years his companion when collecting material in the churches of the county was Henry Jermyn of Sibton, a barrister by profession. Jermyn's death in 1820 marked the end of this phase of Davy's work, and the chance discovery of the journal he kept from March 1823 throws much useful light on his later tours.

It was my good fortune in October 1979 to find the small octavo volume newly half-bound in calf while browsing in a favourite Norfolk bookshop. Davy had filled 255 pages with neat but minute handwriting, all of it most readable, barring eyestrain. He added at the end a table of places visited with a record of miles travelled on foot and by horse and gig, and an index of parishes.

The Preface states that Davy had come to regret not keeping such a diary before:

A thing of this kind, I now find, would have been a very useful book of reference to me, and on many occasions, would have saved me much trouble, prevented a considerable deal of writing, and greatly facilitated my researches . . . it is not yet too late to adopt such a plan . . . Many little matters [he concludes] will thus be preserved which it would be difficult to know how to class, and to comprehend under the general arrangement which has been adopted in forming collections for the general History of the County.

And so we learn from the pages which follow where he went, with whom he travelled and stayed, and we can read of the 'little matters' so fascinating in themselves. Quite often he stayed at Wrentham Rectory with William Barlee and Lucy Elizabeth his wife, Davy's sister. From 1824, and until 1839 when his work was almost completed, his frequent companion, also making church notes, was the Revd John Wareyn Darby of Framlingham, vicar of Wicklewood, Norfolk, from 1832 rector of Shottisham. They got on well despite the fact that Davy was more exhaustive in his searches, wishing to copy registers and terriers where possible, while Darby was mainly concerned with monumental inscriptions. Davy was often making a second or third visit to complete work part done, and so there was rarely too great a difference in the lengths of time the two men required.

One memorable passage tells how in 1823 Davy and Major Edward Moor, leaving the latter's house at Bealings, encountered James Chambers, the itinerant poetaster.

Instead of squalid misery . . . I found him decently, and even cleanly clothed . . . upon asking him if he had written any more verses lately, he took out of his basket a bundle of dirty papers, all fully written upon, most of them in his own hand, a very vulgar, and almost illegible one, but some copied as he told us, by Mr. Cordy . . . he had a comfortable residence upon the barrack ground at Woodbridge . . . He had a dog with him, and had just received a pitcher of milk, which he said was now his chief support.

When near Ipswich, to which the *Shannon* coach took him from Ufford, Davy stayed either with the Mills of Stutton or at George Capper's at Wherstead. In 1829 he called at Hengrave but although John Gage was out on similar business with the artist Buckler, Davy was made welcome by Lady Mary Anne Gage and her son Sir Thomas. Looking around, he was doubtful of the wisdom and good taste of importing armorial glass for the house from Old Buckenham Church in Norfolk: 'Still, a good effect is produced, and few who visit the Hall are likely to discover the objection which I have above stated.'

Quite often he was held up in his work by a church being locked and the key unavailable, or by some cleric or other person wasting his time, intentionally as at Denston, or unwittingly as at Cavendish. At the former,

a strange animal, something between a hog and a bear, came into the church, and after ascertaining from us our object in being there and informing us that he was churchwarden, and that his name was Everard . . . proceeded to give us after his fashion such information respecting the church as he thought in his then half-drunken state we might wish for.

Worse was to follow when Everard went off to find one Benyon who 'occupied the Hall, and in consequence thought, I suppose, that he had hired the church also.' At Cavendish, Mr Castley, the Rector, 'seemed anxious to give us every information in his power, which would have been more acceptable, if it had been involved in fewer words.'

Recording a visit to Bungay in 1830, Davy saw workmen building a wall at the bottom of the playground of the Grammar School, where, he remarks, 'I imbibed a little of the very small portion of learning now in my possession.'

As early as 1833 he seems to have realised that his notes were too compendious ever to appear in print. He was in correspondence with John Deck the Bury bookseller and they met one morning in Ipswich. 'After talking the matter over, but coming to no conclusion, I had 3 or 4 hours leisure before the coach returned in the evening.'

There are no entries between October 1839 and July 1843 when Davy begins again:

After so long an interval of rest from my visitations, I had almost given up the hopes of seeing the few remaining churches in the county, which I had had no opportunity of examining, when my friend Wade [Rector] of Blaxhall . . . offered to carry me to any part of Suffolk with which I was not acquainted.

Davy was seventy-four and Ellis Wade forty-seven when the new series of expeditions began. The younger man suffered badly from asthma, and several trips were cancelled or curtailed when attacks came on. The last two churches to be visited were Mellis and Hinderclay, and the *Journal* has a cliffhanging ending. In June 1844, the last church completed, Wade was rushed home for medical aid. Davy had covered 1,268 miles on foot and 3,130 miles by horse and gig.

Loose in the book is a letter Davy wrote to his sister in 1844 expressing his wishes about his collections. If, as he supposes, 'she should not ever be in need of the value of them', he hopes 'she will present the whole to the Trustees of the British Museum'. When he died in 1851 Lucy, since 1830 a widow, was his heir and changed her name to Mrs L. E. Davy. Various clergymen negotiated with the Trustees who declined to offer the suggested sum of £500. When in November 1852 the figure £200 was mentioned the transaction was readily agreed to. It is not clear why Lucy did not follow her brother's wishes, but she did make a present of the *Journal* to Ellis Wade. No doubt she knew, or read for herself, how kind he had been to her brother. An inscription on the fly leaf shows that Wade gave the book to his daughter Sarah Elizabeth in 1864, the year he died. Sarah married Robert Ledger of Blackheath, and it was at a book fair in Kent that the *Journal* was sold prior to its return journey to East Anglia. It must now either stay in Suffolk or eventually go where David Elisha Davy would have sent it, to the British Library.<sup>1</sup>

#### *Note*

<sup>1</sup> An edited edition of a full transcript is in preparation for the Suffolk Records Society.

## OBITUARY

NORMAN SMEDLEY, M.A., F.S.A., F.M.A., 1900–1980

Norman Smedley, who died on Good Friday, 1980, was a man of wide interests, quiet enthusiasm and considerable organising ability.

Born in Yorkshire, he joined the Durham Light Infantry at the age of sixteen and saw active service in France. After taking a degree in biology at Queen's College, Cambridge, he joined the staff of the Raffles Museum in Singapore, publishing the results of his research in various learned journals. In 1928 he represented the Straits Settlements at the Fourth Pacific Congress in Java.

A promising scientific career was cut short when ill health forced him to retire from the Colonial Service, but undaunted, he undertook the curatorship of Doncaster Museum; this he soon transformed, widening his interests to include art and archaeology. During the War he worked for the Ministry of Information and organised the collection of medicinal herbs in the North East.

In 1952 he moved to Suffolk to take charge of Ipswich Museum and Christchurch Mansion. These also he modernised, having succeeded in convincing the Council that they were grossly understaffed. His interest in archaeology now increased; with a band of enthusiastic volunteers he conducted several rescue excavations largely financed by grants from the Suffolk Institute, which also provided a caravan — invaluable as a mobile dig hut. All his excavations were promptly published in these *Proceedings*: they include a Roman bath house at Stonham Aspal and a series of pottery kilns. He also published articles on groups of objects in Ipswich Museum, notably 17th-century witch bottles, and started the annual list of archaeological finds which, though dull reading for members, were much appreciated by research workers throughout the country.

But Norman rendered what was arguably his greatest service to his adopted county after his retirement from Ipswich Museum in 1965. For many years he had deplored the destruction of the relics of our rural past; he had accordingly made a collection of farm and craft tools which he stored at Beccles, hoping that one day he would be able to found a rural life museum. This hope was realised when the Misses V. and E. Longe generously presented their medieval barn and some 75 acres of land; the Museum of East Anglian Life was opened at Stowmarket in 1967. As its first director, with the devoted help of his wife Beryl and of Jack Carter, he built up the most popular museum in Suffolk, now attracting 25,000 visitors a year. Many vehicles, pieces of machinery and tools have been rescued, restored, meticulously documented and attractively displayed. A 14th-century aisled hall, an 18th-century smithy and the mill complex from the drowned Tattingstone valley have all been saved from destruction and re-erected at Stowmarket. This vital work continues.

When he finally retired from the museum world at the age of seventy-four, this versatile and indefatigable man embarked on a literary career. The successful *Life and Tradition in Suffolk and North East Essex* was followed by *East Anglian Crafts*, both books illustrated by his own photographs and line drawings. A few weeks before his death he completed the copy for the Shell Calendar for 1981, *Relics of Farm and Field*.

In addition, Norman found time to act as Chief Correspondent to the Department of the Environment and to sit on the Diocesan Advisory Council. He was a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries and of the Museums Association, for some years he was President of the Council for British Archaeology, Group VII, and from 1966 to 1971 President of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology.

His many friends will miss him for his dry wit, his diffident charm and his great kindness.

*Elizabeth Owles.*