

Henry Francis Lyte (1793-1847)



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Henry Francis Lyte was born on 1 June 1793 at Ednam, near Kelso, Roxburghshire, the second son of Captain Thomas Lyte and Anna Maria Oliver. Thomas Lyte's military career necessitated frequent moves, and the family followed him to different locations in England, before settling in Ireland in 1797. When the couple separated in 1801 Henry stayed with his father and his brother Thomas, and was then sent to Portora Royal School, Enniskillen, in October 1803. Because he spent both the terms and the holidays at the school, he developed a close relationship with Dr Burrowes, the headmaster, who became a surrogate father to the boy, taking over his financial responsibilities and eventually

becoming his guardian. While at Portora Lyte began to compose poetry.

Lyte entered Trinity College, Dublin, in 1811, and distinguished himself academically by winning a university scholarship in 1813, and the chancellor's prize for English verse in three successive years. He graduated BA in February 1814 and was ordained deacon on 18 December 1814. His first curacy was in Taghmon, co. Wexford, where he stayed for eighteen months, but his frequent attacks of asthma led him to resign this post. He then travelled through France. After his return to England, Lyte was moved from one curacy to another before eventually being given a position at the chapel of ease in Marazion, Cornwall, on 24 June 1817. On 21 January 1818 he married Anne, daughter and eventual heir of the Revd W. Maxwell of Falkland, Co. Monaghan. It was while at Marazion that Lyte underwent a spiritual experience at the deathbed of a neighbouring clergyman, Abraham Swanne. Lyte claimed that this encounter altered his whole view of life: he emerged with a deeper faith, and preached with a new vitality.

In January 1820 the family left for Sway (near Lymington), Hampshire, to live in temporary retirement; it was here that Lyte produced many of his poems. Early in 1822 the family moved to a house near Dittisham, Devon. Lyte held no full-time position at Dittisham, but while there he was asked to do temporary

duty at the chapel of ease at Lower Brixham. In May 1822 he was invited by the trustees of the chapel to remain at Brixham permanently. He refused, and went instead to Charleton, where he became curate on 6 July 1822. He stayed for almost two years, before moving back to Brixham in April 1824.

Lyte began by ministering in two churches, St Mary's Church, Brixham, and the new district church of Lower Brixham. On 13 July 1826 Lyte was instituted as the first incumbent of Lower Brixham. He published *Poems, Chiefly Religious* (1833), that contained some of his early hymns, notable for their scriptural emphasis. In 1834 his *Spirit of the Psalms* was published, which contained one of his best-known hymns, "Praise, my soul, the king of heaven".

During the 1840s Lyte spent increasing periods abroad. He spent the summer of 1847 at Berry Head, where he wrote his most famous hymn, "Abide with me". He left for the continent again on 1 October 1847. He died at the Hotel de la Pension Anglaise in Nice on 20 November and was buried in the grounds of the Anglican chapel in the old cemetery, Nice. A volume of *Remains*, consisting of poems, sermons, and letters, was published in 1850. It included "Abide with me", which was first sung (to his own tune) at his memorial service in Brixham in 1847. Though his poetic energies were directed at scripturally and evangelically minded audiences, his lyric gift was universally appreciated. The example of "Abide with me" is instructive: intensely personal and contemplative, yet nationally popular-even being sung (always, after its publication in 1861, to W. H. Monk's tune, "Eventide") on secular occasions such as at football matches, and especially, since 1927, at the English cup final.

A memorial tablet to Lyte was placed in Westminster Abbey in 1947.

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