Early Years (1772–81)

STC’s grandfather, John Coleridge, was ‘dropped as a child’ in the Hundred of Coleridge in Devon, ‘christened, educated and apprenticed by the parish’, but overcame his humble beginnings to become a respectable woollen draper in Crediton. (STC himself always thought it was South Molton.) STC delighted, at the time of the French Revolution, in claiming that his grandfather had been a workhouse bastard, and on one occasion claimed the same for his father; however, John Coleridge the younger was in fact sent to the local grammar school where he held an exhibition and where he stayed until his father’s bankruptcy when John was sixteen. The boy was then helped by a friend, James Buller of Downes near Crediton, to become a schoolmaster in a neighbouring village, Clyst Hydon. He married Mary Lendon of Crediton, by whom he had four daughters. STC himself mentions only three: Mary (became Mrs Bradley); Sarah (married a seaman and died young); and Elizabeth (brought up with the children of the second marriage; she became Mrs Jacob Phillips of Exeter). In 1747, at the age of 28, John had saved up enough money to enter Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, where he distinguished himself in Hebrew and mathematics. He left before taking his degree, in 1749, to become headmaster of Squire’s Grammar School at South Molton and curate of nearby Mariansleigh. His first wife died in 1751 and in 1754 he married Ann Bowdon, daughter of an Exmoor farmer. In 1760 he became headmaster of the King Henry VIII Grammar School at Ottery St Mary and also vicar of St Mary’s; here he remained until his death in 1781.

Ann Bowdon came of a respectable farming family which, said STC, ‘had inherited a small farm in the Exmoor county in the reign of Elizabeth’. The couple had ten children:

**John (1754–89)** Went to the East Indies for the East India Company and thence to India; it seems that he never saw STC, but he concerned himself about the boy’s career, even suggesting that he
join him in India as a cadet. This was prevented by John's death at Tillicherry from malaria.

William: died in infancy.

William (1758–80) Went to Pembroke College, Oxford, then taught in Hackney. He died of 'a putrid fever' on the eve of his marriage to Jane Hart of Exeter.

James (1759–1836) Joined the army at sixteen; he became a lieutenant-colonel and eventually married an heiress, Frances Taylor; he lived grandly in Ottery in the Chantry House. He was the father of Henry Nelson Coleridge, who married STC's daughter Sara.

Edward (1760–1843) 'The Wit of the family', went to Pembroke College, Oxford. He became a clergyman and married, said STC, 'a woman twenty years older than my mother'.

George (1764–1828) STC's favourite brother. He went to Pembroke College, Oxford, then took William's place at Mr Newcombe's School in Hackney. In 1796 he married William's former fiancée, Jane Hart. 'He is worth the whole family in a lump', said STC. He followed his father and took the living and the headmastership at Ottery St Mary.

Luke Herman (1765–90) Trained as a doctor and married Sara Hart. He became the father of William Hart Coleridge, Bishop of Barbados.

Anne (1767–91) Beloved 'Nancy', who died of consumption.

Francis Syndercombe (1770–92) 'The handsome Coleridge'. He went as a midshipman to India, where he by chance met his brother John, who procured for him a commission in the army. He fought bravely at Seringapatam and was presented with a gold watch by his commanding officer; however, he contracted a fever there and in a delirium shot himself.

Samuel Taylor Born 21 October 1772 'at eleven o'clock in the forenoon'. (He always thought of his birthday as the 20th.) He was christened after a godfather, Samuel Taylor Esq. of Ottery, and had another godfather, Mr Evans, and two godmothers, both called Mundy.

As the youngest, STC seems to have been a favourite child. In his second year, when his nurse carelessly left him by the fire, he pulled out a live coal and 'burnt myself dreadfully'. While having his hand dressed, he spoke his first words, according to his mother: 'Nasty Dr Young!'

As a small child he went to 'Old Dame Key's' school (she was a relation of Sir Joshua Reynolds) and by the age of three 'could read a chapter in the Bible'. From October 1775 to October 1777 he 'con-