

# Cowper and Berkhamsted: Memories and Memorials

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Given his reputation as the poet who celebrated domestic life, little affection for a specific home or homes emerges from Cowper's poems or letters. Especially during the years shortly before and after his and Mrs Unwin's removal from Olney to Weston, it is striking how he describes the time at Orchard Side – the place where he lived longer than any other, for eighteen years – as a period of imprisonment. He writes to Newton in July 1783 describing himself as

both free and a Prisoner at the same time. The world is before me; I am not shut up in the Bastile though often as miserable as if I were, there are no Moats about my castle, nor locks upon my gates but of which I have the Key—but an invisible uncontrollable agency, a local attachment, an inclination more forcible than I ever felt even to the place of my Birth, serves me for prison walls and for bounds which I cannot pass.<sup>1</sup>

In 1786, writing to Newton of the 'intended removal', he refers to the 'thirteen years that I have been a prisoner,' implicitly dating this sense of imprisonment to 1773-4, when he suffered a major breakdown (he and Mrs Unwin had first moved into Orchard Side in 1768).<sup>2</sup> In other letters to Newton around the time of the move to Weston, he meditates upon his mixed feelings about Orchard Side, 'that ruinous abode', marvelling at how desolate it looks now, yet also remembering 'that I had once been happy there, and could not without tears in my eyes bid adieu to a place in which God had so often found me'.<sup>3</sup>

A similar ambivalence characterises Cowper's attitude towards the place of his birth, Berkhamsted. Writing to Samuel Rose on 19 October 1787, Cowper recalls returning there, aged 24, at the time of his father's death in 1756:

When my Father died I was young; too young to have reflected much. He was Rector of Berkhamstead, and there I was born. It had never occurred to me that a parson has no fee-simple in the House and glebe he occupies. There was neither Tree nor Gate nor stile in all that country to which I did not feel a relation, and the House itself I preferred to a palace. I was sent for from London to attend him in his last illness, & he died just before I arrived.

Then, and not 'till then, I felt for the first time that I and my native place were disunited for ever. I sighed a long adieu to fields and woods from which I once thought I should never be parted, and was at no time so sensible of their beauties as just when I left them all behind me to return no more.<sup>4</sup>

This nostalgia contrasts with the tone of a letter written to his friend John Duncombe just a few months after paying another visit to Berkhamsted (presumably to wind up some of his late father's affairs) in June 1757, where the jaunty heartlessness of youth is largely uninflected by nostalgia:

I believe no man ever quitted his Native place with less Regrett than myself, and were it not for the sake of a Friend or two that I have left behind me, one of which small Number you will doubtless reckon yourself, I should never wish to see either the place or any thing that belongs to it again. Notwithstanding this Jack, you & I have spent many merry hours together in the Parsonage, my poor Father has often been the better for your Drollery, for you had the Knack, or the *Natural* Gift of making him Laugh, when no Creature else could have done it.<sup>5</sup>

Changing his tune again, in October 1767 he writes to Mrs Madan describing a visit made with Newton to a Rev. Mr Moody at Dunton, 12 miles from Berkhamsted, and reports feeling deeply 'affected' at the sight of 'my Native Place' which made 'my Childhood and Youth in their most affecting Colours pass in review before me'.<sup>6</sup>

It is with the receipt of his mother's picture many years later, in 1790, that the most bittersweet memories seem to have come flooding back, and Cowper describes how 'I seem t' have lived my childhood o'er again, / To have renew'd the joys that once were mine' (ll. 15-16).<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere in this issue of the *Cowper and Newton Journal*, Vincent Newey writes eloquently on the poem as a whole; what concerns us here are the poem's evocations of Berkhamsted, which seem to have influenced later local admirers of Cowper to memorialise the parts of the town with Cowperian associations. The poem recalls the day of his mother's funeral, before moving into a more general reminiscence about his childhood home:

I heard the bell toll'd on thy burial day,  
I saw the hearse that bore thee slow away,  
And, turning from my nurs'ry window, drew  
A long long sigh, and wept a last adieu! [...]

Where once we dwelt, our name is heard no more,  
Children, not thine, have trod my nurs'ry floor;  
And where the gard'ner Robin day by day  
Drew me to school along the public way  
Delighted with my bawble coach, and wrapt  
In scarlet mantle warm and velvet-capt,  
'Tis now become a hist'ry little known  
That once we call'd the Past'ral house our own.

(ll. 28-31; 46-53)

The small details in the poem contribute to its poignancy. It is generally acknowledged that 'gard'ner Robin' Pope was indeed the Rectory gardener,<sup>8</sup> and the image of the tiny Cowper in his miniature 'bawble coach' is endearing. The dame school he mentions is long gone, its site



now occupied by part of 'M and Co.' at 212 High Street.<sup>9</sup> The 'pastoral house' is a slightly peculiar way to describe the substantial Rectory in which Cowper was born and grew up, but doubtless reflects Cowper's idealising memories, as well as the genuinely green and rural environs which this engraving of the house reproduced in Thomas Wright's *The Loved Haunts of Cowper* (1894)<sup>10</sup> suggests. Note how the artist has placed little William and his mother on the lawn in the foreground, with his little wheelbarrow beside her, and his hoop and stick. The gardening implements next to the flowerbed, while no doubt left there by 'gard'ner Robin', are suggestive of his adult passion for horticulture.

The poem's sad reflections upon how 'little known' he and his family must now be in Berkhamsted recall a passage from one of Cowper's letters, written a little over a year earlier to Mrs King, describing how, by pure chance, he has recently come across a piece of newspaper used as padding in a parcel of books:

This thought struck me very forcibly the other day, on reading a paper called the County Chronicle which came hither in the package of some books from London. It contain'd News from Hartfordshire, and inform'd me among other things that at Great Berkhamstead, the place of my birth, there is hardly a family left of all those with whom in my early days I was so familiar. The Houses no doubt remain, but the inhabitants are only to be found now by their Grave-stones, and it is certain that I might pass through a Town in which I was once a sort of principal figure, unknowing and unknown.<sup>11</sup>

In the century following Cowper's death, however, his status as a 'principal figure' in the town's cultural history was re-established by a succession of citizens and local historians. Percy Birtchnell, writing in 1960, noted that although Cowper's name is now 'seldom mentioned' in the town of his birth,

in Victorian times and the earlier years of the [twentieth] century, William Cowper was the subject of many a public lecture, and schoolchildren were left in no doubt that Berkhamsted had produced a very great poet whose works deserved a place on every bookshelf. Members of learned societies came here on literary pilgrimages ...<sup>12</sup>

Victorian local historians in particular had shown themselves enthusiastic champions of Cowper and the continuing relevance of his writing. The Revd John Wolstenholme Cobb, Curate and subsequently Rector of St

Peter's (1871-83), devotes several pages to Cowper in his *Two Lectures on the History and Antiquities of Berkhamsted*, describing him as

a man of whom we may all be proud – a man of whom it has been truly said that if anyone was born a poet it was Cowper, the poet of Christianity. The life, indeed, and writings of one who has been characterised by Hazlitt as the most popular poet of his generation and the best of English letter-writers, and as one whose poems contain a number of pictures of domestic comfort and social refinement which can hardly be forgotten but with the language itself.<sup>13</sup>

In that part of his book focused on a detailed history of St Peter's Church, Cobb suggests that one particular draw for literary pilgrims was the memorial to the poet's mother, 'that monument which is perhaps of greater interest than any other in the church', and one suspects that the emotional appeal of the memorial must owe something to the enduring power of Cowper's poem on her picture, as well as to the inherent pathos of the memorial's inscription, which Cobb reproduces:

'Here also lyes interred the body of Ann Cowper [...] late wife of John Cowper, D.D., rector of the parish, who died Nov. 13, 1736. As also the bodies of Spencer, John, Ann, Theodosia, Judith and Thomas, the children of the said John and Ann Cowper, who all dyed infants, and Mrs Cowper died in the thirty-fourth year of her age'.<sup>14</sup>

Cobb also mentions the memorial window in St Peter's Church installed by the renowned Victorian stained-glass company Clayton and Bell in 1872, noting that 'The Rev. J. E. Greatheed, the son of one of Cowper's intimate friends, aided greatly in the selection of the subjects, which are all chosen with reference to Cowper's poems. On the topmost light will be observed the spotless lamb, with the angelic choir around'.<sup>15</sup> The window depicts Christ the King flanked by the women and disciples going to the empty tomb on the first Easter Day. The inscription at Christ's feet is taken from the Olney Hymn, 'Jesus Hasting to Suffer', and reads 'Salvation to the dying man, And to the rising God'. Cowper is also depicted in the window, at a prayer desk with his pet hares.<sup>16</sup> According to the church's website, the Cowper stained glass is now in the Lady Chapel and not accessible to the general public.

Aside from the church, there were few tangible links to Cowper for nineteenth-century literary pilgrims or historians. Henry Nash's



*Reminiscences of Berkhamsted* in 1890 waxes nostalgic for the ‘rural appearance of the town’ in Cowper’s day, noting how its crowded side streets are now ‘teeming with human life’. He recalls that, in the previous century, ‘at the corner of the Rectory lane’, there was a ‘large barn for the storage of corn and where the duet of flails during the winter days produced those rural sounds of country life which have fled before the march of intellect, and no longer greet our ears’.<sup>17</sup> However, he also concedes that ‘at this time the science of drainage had not yet reached us’, and that the town was awash with sewage and refuse, used by enterprising pigs as ‘a cooling bath’.<sup>18</sup>

As Birtchnell laconically observes, if visitors in Nash’s time expected to see Cowper’s birthplace they were disappointed. The ‘old rectory’ was pulled down by John Crofts, rector between 1810 and 1850, who had a new rectory built, higher up the hill. It seems that the engraving which graces Grimshawe’s 1849 edition of Cowper was made just in the nick of time. Today, Crofts’ replacement rectory is no longer the home of the rector. A smaller house has been built for the rector, which, in an appealingly recursive move, now occupies the actual site of Cowper’s birthplace.

Demolition of the ‘old rectory’ excited strong feelings among townsfolk of the time. Henry Nash in 1890 still found the event shocking, his lament recalling not only Jane Austen’s disdain for ‘improvement’ but also Cowper’s own elegy for the poplars ‘fell’d’ near Olney: ‘Under the plea of improvement every stone of the old building has been swept away, and the beautiful walnut trees, under whose shadows the poet must often have reclined, have been pulled down and converted into implements of war, a practice that his very soul abhorred’.<sup>19</sup>

But one object ‘on which the poet’s eye had rested’ still remained to gladden the literary pilgrim’s eye in the late nineteenth century – the well house by the side of the drive in the garden, containing the well, which supplied the rectory from a spring. Nash praises Revd Cobb for doing what he could to honour the name of Cowper, and reproduces the poetic inscription on the commemorative marble slab which Cobb had caused to adorn the old well house, composed by Cobb’s own friend ‘the late Rev. G. S. Cantley, a man whom Cowper would have hailed as a brother poet’:

The shy perennial fountain the ivy-tods among,  
Just emblem of his modesty and pure undying song,  
With daily crystal draught refreshed the poet's fragile youth,  
Amid the precious opening buds of genius, grace, and truth.  
Ere spectral wrath had clouded in despair the noble mind,  
Self loathing, yet so loving still, so boon to all mankind,  
Oh, stranger, in your heart of hearts let tender reverence dwell,  
And love of love revived to-day at gentle Cowper's well.<sup>20</sup>

If Cowper's visiting fans today expect to refresh themselves at 'gentle Cowper's well', they are doomed to disappointment. The well house, together with its memorial slab, is gone too. All that now remains is an anonymous metal grid at the side of Rectory Lane, which hides the private water supply of the present house.

But, at least, the features of William Cowper remain on display in the town today, thanks to the initiative of the Mechanics' Institute, which arranged in 1873 for a copy to be made of a portrait ascribed to John Jackson, R.A. (but actually made after the famous portrait by Lawrence), and hung in Berkhamsted Town Hall, where it is still visible.<sup>21</sup> An article in the Berkhamsted *Chronicle* in 2005 summarises further evolutions in Cowper's profile in the town of his birth, noting the existence of a Cowper Road and a Gilpin Ride.<sup>22</sup>

Although the foregoing discussion has focused mostly on particular buildings within the town, both Cobb and Nash are equally concerned to attribute Cowper's lifelong love of the countryside to the rural environs of Berkhamsted. Nash in particular, who in the passage quoted above regretted the nineteenth-century urbanisation he described, suggests that 'the rural sights and sounds peculiar to country life met one at every turn' in the Berkhamsted of Cowper's day, and that 'doubtless our own poet had Berkhamsted in mind when he penned the oft-quoted words – "God made the country, but man made the town"'.<sup>23</sup> Although Cowper lived mostly away from his birthplace after his mother's death, he continued to visit his father throughout his time at Westminster and the Inns of Court, and the quiet pastoral landscape seems to have refreshed him in a manner that Wordsworth was later to describe more fully in 'Tintern Abbey'. In *The Task*, Cowper recalls how he has 'loved the rural walk / O'er hills, through valleys, and by river's brink, / E'er since

a truant boy I pass'd my bounds / T' enjoy a ramble on the banks of Thames'. It is tempting to compare this with the memories of another distinguished Berkhamsted writer, Graham Greene, for whom truanting on the Common and among the woods of Ashridge provided welcome relief from the perceived pressures of the classroom, 'for then I could be alone in the solitude of the countryside, and at this period of my life I loved the country. It was my natural escape route ... I grew clever at evasion. Truancy was impressed as the pattern of my life'.<sup>24</sup>

Both Nash and Cobb wax lyrical over the charms of Berkhamsted Common, 'one of our chiefest antiquities, and at the same time one of our greatest present glories', and Nash suggests it could be turned into a convalescent resort.<sup>25</sup> Both historians relate the local legend whereby 'the celebrated naturalist' Linnaeus 'was once journeying across our Common when the gorse was in full bloom, and the good man was so impressed with the sight that he fell on his knees and thanked God for the great beauty with which he had clothed the earth', and cite a poem on the subject 'kindly written by Mr. Cantley [author of the poem on Cowper's well] for our parish magazine in 1874'.<sup>26</sup> Intriguingly, Linnaeus's visit is dated by Cobb to 1736, when the small boy Cowper was still in Berkhamsted.

If the Linnaeus anecdote offers a somewhat rare insight into the spiritual sensibility of the great naturalist, a similar conjunction of religious and natural devotion characterises what is the most recent and impressive of Berkhamsted's efforts to memorialise Cowper. In 2000, the town's Cowper Society 'commissioned a new engraved glass window in the north wall of the nave' to honour Cowper and to mark the new Millennium (a conjunction which would likely have amazed him).<sup>27</sup> Made of transparent etched glass by David Peace and Sally Scott, its upper panel depicts the church surrounded by trees and wildlife while in the lower panel panes, Cowper's pet hares are seen frolicking, and there are inscriptions from two further *Olney Hymns*, 'Oh! for a closer walk with God' ('Return, O holy Dove, return!') and 'The Light and Glory of the World' ('Let everlasting thanks be Thine for such a bright display as makes a world of darkness shine').<sup>28</sup>



## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Cowper to John Newton, 27 July 1783; *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, ed. Charles Ryskamp, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979-1986), II, 150.
- <sup>2</sup> Cowper to John Newton, 5 August 1786 (*Letters*, II, 580-1); for similar comments, see also Cowper's letter to Unwin 3 July, 1786 (*Letters*, II, 573) and to Hill, 11 July 1786 (*Letters*, II, 578).
- <sup>3</sup> Cowper to Newton, 17 November 1786 (*Letters*, II, 597); see also Cowper's letter to Newton 16 December 1786 (*Letters*, II, 618-19).
- <sup>4</sup> (*Letters*, II, 42-3).
- <sup>5</sup> Cowper to John Duncombe, 16 June 1757 (*Letters*, I, 79).
- <sup>6</sup> Cowper to Mrs Madan, 15 October 1767 (*Letters*, I, 182-3).
- <sup>7</sup> 'On the Receipt of My Mother's Picture out of Norfolk: The Gift of My Cousin Ann Bodham,' in *The Poems of William Cowper*, ed. John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), III, 55-60.
- <sup>8</sup> James King, *William Cowper: A Biography* (Durham, NC; Duke University Press, 1986), 10.
- <sup>9</sup> Percy Birtchnell, *A Short History of Berkhamsted*, published by the author, 1960, revised 1972, 109.
- <sup>10</sup> 'The Parsonage, Great Berkhamsted', from Thomas Wright, *The Loved Haunts of Cowper*, p.10 (London: T.Fisher Unwin, 1894). This engraving, by E. Brandard, is in turn based on 'The House in which Cowper was born, Berkhamstead', by J. L. Harding and W. Greatbach, the frontispiece to *The Life and Works of William Cowper, now first completed by the introduction of his 'Private Correspondence'*, edited by Rev. T.S. Grimshawe, 8 vols (London: Saunders and Otley, 1835-6).
- <sup>11</sup> Cowper to Mrs King, 6 December 1788 (*Letters*, III, 237).
- <sup>12</sup> Birtchnell, *A Short History of Berkhamsted*, 107.
- <sup>13</sup> John Wolstenholme Cobb, *Two Lectures on the History and Antiquities of Berkhamsted* (London: Nichols and Sons, 1883), 71. The book offers a two-page biographical sketch of 'The Poet Cowper' in an Appendix (140-2).
- <sup>14</sup> Cobb, *Two Lectures*, 70-72. The tablet was later moved to the north transept.
- <sup>15</sup> Cobb, *Two Lectures*, 142. Somewhat confusingly, in 1885 another window in the church was installed to honour a local manufacturer of sheep-dip named William Cowper.
- <sup>16</sup> See <http://www.stpetersberkhamsted.org.uk/heritage/guide> Accessed 18 April 2018.
- <sup>17</sup> Henry Nash, *Reminiscences of Berkhamsted* (Berkhamsted: W. Cooper and Nephews, 1890), 10-11.

- <sup>18</sup> Nash, *Reminiscences*, 28.
- <sup>19</sup> Nash, *Reminiscences*, 11. See Jane Darcy, “‘With what intense desire she wants her home’: Cowper’s Influence on Jane Austen”, *Cowper and Newton Journal* 7 (2017), 3-21, for a sensitive account of how Austen’s disdain for ‘improvement’ (especially evident in *Mansfield Park*) invokes several key moments in Cowper’s poetry, especially *The Task*.
- <sup>20</sup> Nash, *Reminiscences*, 11; see also Cobb, *Two Lectures*, 141-2, where Cantley is further identified as ‘author of the “Afterglow”’. A ‘tod’ in this context is a ‘bushy mass of vegetation’ (*Oxford English Dictionary*).
- <sup>21</sup> Jennifer Sherwood, ‘The story of Berkhamsted’s Mechanics’ Institute, Part I’, *The Chronicle*, XIV (March 2017), 33-42.
- <sup>22</sup> Tony Statham, ‘William Cowper (1731-1800)’, *The Chronicle*, II (March 2005), 27-30; 28.
- <sup>23</sup> Nash, *Reminiscences*, 29.
- <sup>24</sup> Graham Greene, *A Sort of Life* (London: Bodley Head, 1971), 73.
- <sup>25</sup> Cobb, *Two Lectures*, 142; Nash, *Reminiscences*, 117.
- <sup>26</sup> Nash, *Reminiscences*, 117; Cobb, *Two Lectures*, 142.
- <sup>27</sup> Statham, ‘William Cowper (1731-1800)’, 28.
- <sup>28</sup> See note 14 above. On the website’s interactive tour, the items which relate to Cowper (the two windows and the family memorial), and which are attractively reproduced, are numbered 22, 5 and 15 respectively.