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# Cowper Away: a Summer in Sussex

Alexandra Harris

'How should I who have not journey'd 20 miles from home these 20 years, how should I possibly reach your country?'[1] This was Cowper's response in the spring of 1792 when his new correspondent William Hayley invited him to stay in Sussex. It was optimistic of Hayley even to suggest it. No-one – no beloved cousin or old friend, no admired writer or publisher – had persuaded Cowper to travel any distance from his Buckinghamshire home. 'My passion for retirement is not at all abated', he had told John Newton ten years earlier, though it was a passion he regarded with ambivalence. His 'local attachment' was an invisible bond that held him as if by a chain; 'an invisible, uncontroulable agency' kept him as if within prison walls.[2] Cowper was now sixty-one and there was little reason to suspect that he would leave Weston. By way of explanation to Hayley he observed how 'every year that is spent at home, adds terrours to the thought of quitting it'.[3]

Hayley visited Weston in May and renewed his invitations, and as the friendship deepened Cowper began to give the matter serious thought. 'How should I possibly reach your country?' turned from a rhetorical question to a genuine one: Could I? Might it be possible? It would be a 'tremendous exploit', but by July he was bracing himself: 'a thousand Lions, monsters and giants are in the way, but perhaps they will all vanish if I have but the courage to face them.'[4]

On the first of August, he and Mary Unwin set out, accompanied by his cousin John Johnson, his two married servants and Beau the dog. They travelled about 130 miles over three days, arrived at Eartham House near Chichester, and stayed for six weeks before making the journey home again. It was the only voluntarily undertaken trip of Cowper's post-conversion life. When he next left Weston it would be in the desperate sadness of 1795 when he closed the shutters for the last time on the scenes he loved and was taken away to be nursed by his cousin in Norfolk. The trip to Eartham, then, was a unique event. The poet famous for his acute feelings about the familiar surroundings of home was, for these six weeks and these alone, 'away'. I want to ask what happened when he looked at a landscape

unknown to him and called on his powers to read it. And I shall argue that, in adapting himself to a different kind of place, he thought with the new clarity of distance about his own.

An intriguing company of thinkers gathered at Hayley's house that summer. Among the guests were George Romney, who was working on illustrations to *Paradise Lost*; Charlotte Smith, who was writing *The Old Manor House* and thinking of her lost Sussex home at Bignor Park; and James Hurdis, whose poetry celebrated the natural history and working year of a Sussex parish. Through the long days of August, as the critical events of the Revolution unfolded in France, Hayley and his visitors walked through the gardens he had laid out as a sacred grove of the classical golden age, as a version of Milton's Eden, and as a landscape of contemporary free-thinking and liberty. Hayley had always wanted to foster creativity among the 'tranquil shades' of his home (the shades were more revered than the open, sunny lawns).[5] This summer was a fulfilment of his hopes, a vision of peaceable, collaborative creative freedom. It was also, for everyone present, a time of anxieties and rapidly changing moods.

*'Cowper's Favourite Seat at Eartham', William Harvey, engraved by J. Goodyear, printed in Robert Southey's Works of William Cowper. The 'favourite seat' is under the trees on the Mount. Cowper is equipped with table, chair, writing slope and a range of folios. His dog Beau is at his feet. Hayley and his son Thomas Alphonso are front left. James Hurdis and Romney are behind Cowper. Mary Unwin, Charlotte Smith and John Johnson are standing. The view stretches the full nine miles out to sea, where boats are visible, but the artist is emphatic about the sheltering bower in which everyone is huddled.*

Cowper's personal and literary relationships with each figure in the party repay close attention, as do the complex debates about Milton's legacy that were much on their minds. James King in his biography has demonstrated the genuine and exhilarating intimacy of Cowper's friendship with Hayley; Lisa Gee has set out the context for the Sussex visit; and Tom Clucas has probed the politics of the Milton editions on which Cowper and Hayley were both at work.[6] Little has been said, however, about the surroundings of Eartham, and surroundings matter at this moment in the history of literature. Fiona Stafford has written that 'understanding poetry had, by the end of the eighteenth century, become a question of understanding place'.[7] Cowper's writing, as we know, played a large part in that extraordinary change. At Eartham he was both out of place and surrounded by poets with quite different ways of 'understanding' it. This short episode, then, reflects back on the wider history of local feeling. It is worth probing beyond the usual observation that Cowper found Hayley's gardens delightful. What were the principles of these gardens, and how did they relate to the local landscape? Was this part of Sussex generally admired in the eighteenth century? Why do I find it so strange to imagine Cowper there?

It is still possible to climb the 'Mount' at Eartham, where this party of artists and writers sat together in 1792 looking from the Downs to the sea. But their terms for the view were different from those of the modern visitor. It is possible, by reading what they read and what they wrote, to see a little of what they saw.

**'The other side of London'**

Hayley had first written to Cowper in February 1792, on seeing it announced in the press that they were engaged on 'rival' editions of Milton.[8] He had long admired Cowper's poetry, and was by temperament more inclined to extravagant friendship and proud patronage than to rivalry. He wrote to allay any fears of competition, and then accepted Cowper's invitation to stay at Weston. Their exchanges about Milton must have been stimulating, because both wanted the conversation to continue. But it was a turn in Mary Unwin's health that drew the two men into rapid intimacy. Mary collapsed with a second stroke and was partly paralysed, leaving Cowper distraught. Hayley, who was interested in medicine and known at home as the 'physician of Eartham', found an electricity machine in the vicinity and started Mary on a course of treatment which appeared to bring improvements.

When Cowper considered a return journey to Sussex, therefore, he was thinking primarily of taking Mary to stay with a man who had earned his trust as a physician and who

kept an electric machine at Eartham. Hayley promised not only hospitality and support for them both, but good air for convalescence. Cowper had to take that seriously. His assent to the plan was a sign that, in his anxiety, he was willing to try almost anything – even a trip to 'the other side of London, nobody knows where, a hundred and twenty miles off.'[9]

'Nobody knows where' is an instructive remark. It's true that Cowper did not ask many people for information about the villages around Chichester, but it is also the case that the area was not at all well known. Though it was only eighty miles from London, they were difficult miles. The band of clay across the north of the county was a notorious quagmire for large parts of the year. *The Topographer* for 1791 described the 'common ways' as 'most intolerable'.[10] This difficulty of approach gave Sussex a reputation as an outpost and a wilderness. In an age of domestic tourism, when parties of sight-seers were keenly following ambitious itineraries across England in quest of recommended antiquities and picturesque scenes, very few people explored the South Downs, or, as the range in the Western Division of the county was more often called, 'the chalk hills'. They might go down to the coast, but the landscape they must pass through on the way was a hurdle to be overcome.

As for Cowper's own journey, with its overnight stops at Barnet and Ripley, all went well except for 'some terrors' that he felt 'at passing over the Sussex hills by moon-light.'[11] He was, he told Teedon, 'a little daunted by the tremendous height of the Sussex hills'.[12] His fears sound to the modern reader unwarranted: the Downs are now more generally described as 'gentle', 'rolling', and 'embracing'. Those who have climbed Skiddaw and seen the Alps may regard the Sussex hills as mild inclines, but this is a largely post-Romantic view and even today some of the deep-sunk lanes winding down the scarp slopes can feel precipitous. For eighteenth-century inhabitants of the Midlands, these were substantial heights. Gilbert White certainly thought of them as mountains. The area he visited was in the Eastern rather than Western Downs (near Ringmer), but the comparison is relevant nonetheless. To his eyes the bareness had grandeur, and he could see past it to the rich variety of flora and fauna: 'I still investigate that chain of majestic mountains with fresh admiration year by year.'[13]

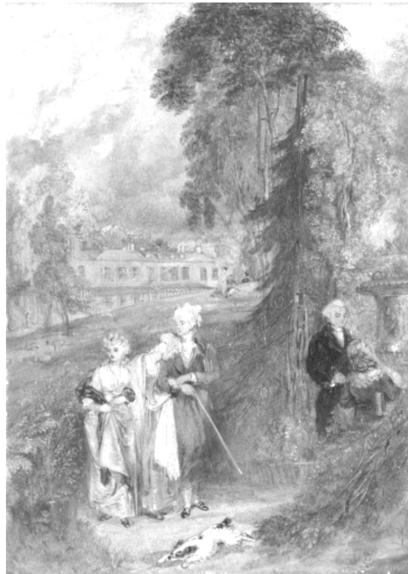
This was Hayley's 'native ground' and he loved it. He took over his late father's villa at Eartham in 1774 and oversaw extensions to the house as well as a major scheme of landscaping to make pleasure grounds. As he put it in his own grand idiom, he meant to 'rear the peaceful grove where love shall reign / And raise the roof where Friendship shall preside.'[14] What is visible today (it is now Great Ballard School) is mainly an Edwardian mansion; Eartham House was much altered in the early twentieth century by Edwin Lutyens. But at the front it still faces onto the 'neat lawn, well decorated with shrubs' that the

topographer Stebbing Shaw saw in 1790 and, built up against the wall of the churchyard, there still stands Hayley's brick and flint summer-house.[15] Looking up at the hill behind, it is not hard to imagine Hayley's grounds with their gently curving paths leading to grottos, their careful exploitation of contrasts between shady enclosures and the wide open downland slopes. Hayley had inherited, he said, 'a passion for the spot' and wanted to share it with others.[16] Like many other eighteenth-century gardeners, however, his way of appreciating 'the spot' was to fashion it into groves and vistas that suited his ideas of landscape beauty.

Cowper's first impressions were of elegance and magnificence held in pleasing relationship. The grounds, he wrote to his friend Samuel Greatheed, 'occupy three sides of a hill, which, in Buckinghamshire, might well pass for a mountain, and from the summit of which is beheld a most magnificent landscape, bounded by the sea, and in one part of it by the Isle of Wight, which may also be seen plainly from the window of the library, in which I am writing'.[17] He used 'magnificent' again in a letter to Mrs Courtenay at Weston describing 'a deep valley well cultivated and inclosed by the magnificent hills all crown'd with wood. – I had for my part no conception that a poet could be the owner of such a paradise.'[18] Paradise: that was a word he did not use lightly.

**'In a bower'**

Several times in the next few weeks Cowper mentioned to his correspondents that their letters had been brought to him while he was sitting 'in a bower'.[19] He and Mary took up their favourite sheltered positions whenever they could. Cowper, the poet of the Olney alcove, was a connoisseur of shaded and enclosed seats, but in Hayley he had met his match. Hayley had designed seats from which one could look out over the full nine miles to Chichester and the coast while sitting in a protective grove of trees. Readers of Milton might have recognised in his newly finished Mount 'a sylvan scene, and as the ranks ascend / Shade above shade, a woody theatre / Of stateliest view.'[20]



*William Harvey, The Residence of Hayley, Eartham ( Nottingham City Museums and Galleries).*
*The scene as it was imagined by Harvey in 1834 or 5 when he made illustrations for Southey's edition.*

Hayley had been working on his grounds since the mid-1770s. What he achieved was a balance between a particular place – distinct from anywhere else, following the natural contours of Eartham Hill – and a generic place featuring fine versions of all those mid-to-late-eighteenth-century garden requirements: grottos, secluded seats, and walks that traced out the 'line of beauty'. Stebbing Shaw published a detailed survey of it after his tour of Sussex in 1790, so we have a clear picture of what Cowper encountered in 1792:

> First the lower walk to the west, at the end of which you have a picturesque view back upon the house and little spire church […] Turning northward we came to an oval grotto, formed of rough wood, flint and moss. This is called the entrance into Otway's Walk; a beautiful close shade of a gentle curve, and exquisitely designed for the meditations of a poet. At the end of this is another small grotto. Returning from hence, we ascend a little to the right to an octagonal alcove in the wood, for the purpose of tea drinking etc. Pass from hence through a higher serpentine walk, with various shades and seats […] We next passed through a lovely shade of filberts, and ascended the mount which gave a full view around. […] Descending from hence through another serpentine walk to the house, we had a charming peep into the valley, skirted with the wood before mentioned.[21]

The whole ensemble sounds designed to please Cowper. With its close shades and 'charming peep' of a view, it is close to the familiar topography of *The Task*. Certainly the taste which

formed Hayley's garden was similar to that which shaped the gardens Cowper so appreciated at Weston Underwood. There, too, were winding shady walks, and a Moss House.

Cowper knew well the language of gardening. He had denounced the presumption of the 'omnipotent magician' Capability Brown in sweeping whole established landscapes into new shapes. 'Lo! He comes', like God at the Revelation, except only a magician with a wand.[22] The nooks and 'peeps' of Eartham were not at all like the grandiose prospects engineered by Brown, and Cowper appreciated that. Where Brown favoured immediate impact, Hayley encouraged gradual appreciation and moments of discovery. His affinities as a gardener were probably closest to the artful rusticity of William Shenstone. The historian James Dalloway visited Eartham during his time as vicar of nearby South Stoke and then Slindon, just after Hayley left for Felpham. He understood the grounds as being in the 'simple and genuine taste of the *ferme-ornée*' (or ornamental farm) made famous by Shenstone at Leasowes.[23] Though Hayley was no farmer, he had taken up the idea of the garden as pleasingly linked with rural productivity. The 'airy hill' in front of his library was a continuation of the sheep-pastures on the hills to either side.[24]

Hayley cared about the *genius loci*, at least in so far as that spirit was appropriately literary. In naming one of his 'walks' for Otway, he was affirming the literary history of his native county. Otway did not work in Sussex, or write about it, and his birthplace near Midhurst was a slow fifteen miles away – but Hayley revered him as a local writer, testament to the possibility that great art might grow among Sussex fields and rivers. Charlotte Smith had likewise invoked Otway in her *Elegiac Sonnets* of 1783. 'Still the poet – consecrates the stream', she wrote in 'To the River Arun' imagining the infant Otway 'lingering' on the banks of the river she too had known since her childhood.[25]

Hayley summoned Otway to consecrate his own downland garden, and he made a place of ideal retirement that might summon the Sussex muses again. The 'oval grotto' mentioned by Shaw was the building Hayley referred to as his 'hermitage', the kind of retreat in which a poet might remove himself from chatter to contemplate more permanent things. Self-consciously rustic buildings like this had been fashionable in gardens since the late seventeenth century, and were linked in most literary minds with the 'mossy cell' of Milton's Penseroso.[26] In the mid-to-late eighteenth century they were still favoured by thinkers like Gilbert White and Henry Hoare at Stourhead. This was a suitable accoutrement, then, for the man who signed himself 'the hermit of Eartham'. Hayley was a hermit who would invite ten people to lunch; Cowper was a different sort of recluse, whose retirement was a necessity.

Still, the two men sat together in the mossy grotto at Eartham, respectful of each other's forms of retreat.

Cowper even tried, the following summer, to create such a hermitage in his garden at Weston. He wanted a 'shed', 'rude and rough like one of those at Eartham', and he composed an inscription which designated the simple 'cabbin' as a 'Rest afforded to our weary feet / Preliminary to the *Last Retreat*.'[27] He imagined himself and Mary resting there, recalling in their last months together the protecting bowers and grottos they had most liked in Sussex. In the event, Samuel Rose well-meaningly built for him 'a thing fit for Stow-gardens', a 'fine and pompous' alcove.[28] There was irony in Cowper's irritation about being stuck with something so much finer than he wanted; the humour was not lost on him. Still, his liking for Eartham-style rusticity was genuine. It was a testament to his deep affection for Hayley, and for the time they had shared in Sussex, that Cowper wished to make at home a resting place that would always remind him of his time away.

**'The scenery *would* have its effect'**

Cowper's response to Sussex was determined by his hopes for Mary. He noticed the topography insofar as it affected his ability to push her wheelchair outside: the chalky ground, he was pleased to find, drained better than the Buckinghamshire clay so that the paths dried quickly after rain.[29] He liked the air because it seemed to be helping Mary, infusing 'a little portion of strength into her shattered frame' as Hayley put it.[30] Hayley's son Thomas did what Cowper was not strong enough to do: he wheeled Mary daily 'in a commodious garden-chair' round the 'airy hill' that rises at the back of the house (a hard task on a steep turf slope).[31] After three weeks, John Johnson could report that 'this journey, together with the pure air of the Sea, and South Downs, has strengthened her beyond conception. As for our dearest Cousin, he is ten times younger than ever I saw him — and laughs from morning till night.'[32]

The party adopted a routine of work and leisure. Romney, who had a studio at Eartham to which he returned each summer, enjoyed the new visitors and recorded their timetable in a letter to his son:

> [Charlotte Smith, Cowper and Hayley] were employed every morning from eight o' clock until twelve in writing, when they had a luncheon, and walked an hour; they then wrote again till they dressed for dinner. After dinner they (Hayley and Cowper) were employed in translating an Italian Play on the subject of Satan [this was *Adamo* by Giovanni Andreini];

> about twenty lines was the number every day. After that they walked, or played at coits; then tea, and after that they read till supper time.[33]

Smith was working on *The Old Manor House* at such high speed that she had a new chapter ready for Hayley or Cowper to read aloud each evening in the big library – where Romney's portrait of Lady Hamilton as 'Sensibility' hung over the Flaxman fireplace which was in turn carved with figures of the muses.

Passages of Milton, too, were daily read aloud. 'You may imagine we were deep in that poet', wrote Romney, 'everything belonging to him was collected together and some part of his works read every day.'[34] Romney himself was planning his illustrations for the Boydell Milton project; the drawings for *Paradise Lost* in the sketchbook headed 'May 1792', now at the Folger Library, probably date from this time. He paused in this work, though, to make portraits of both Charlotte Smith and Cowper. His crayon drawing of Cowper suggested a gentle and quiet man, but there was alertness and anxiety in the eyes. 'A wonderful likeness it is – everyone is quite charmed by it', reported John Johnson, but charm was not the whole of it.[35] According to Hayley, Romney meant to show 'the poet's eye in a fine frenzy rolling'; certainly he recognised in Cowper a powerful and troubled mind.[36]

All around him people were writing, but Cowper could not join them. He laughed and talked with apparent ease, but he wrote very little at Eartham. His 'Epitaph to Throckmorton's Dog' is the only original verse to survive from this time – and it was a way of thinking back to the Throckmorton estate at Weston. He tried to write a sonnet for Romney in exchange for the portrait, but the words would not come and the sonnet had to be sent from Weston several months later. Even correspondence felt difficult. Two letters to Lady Hesketh began with doubts over whether he could write at all, though he ended by over-spilling his paper: 'I am in truth so unaccountably local in the use of my pen, that like the man in the fable who could leap well nowhere but at Rhodes, I seem incapable of writing at all, except at Weston.'[37] The story was from Aesop's fable of 'The Bragging Traveller'. For Samuel Richardson, in his 1740 edition of the *Fables*, the point was that the bragger was lying about his leaping capacities, and the moral was that boasters are soon detected. Cowper was more interested in the traveller being right: he had leapt at Rhodes and now could not. Why should an act be possible in one place and not another?

Part of the problem at Eartham, he thought, was simple: 'every object being still new to me distracts my attention'.[38] But he was cold, too, and the hills seemed very wild. Wet weather set in, and the yew-lined walks darkened in the rain.[39] David Cecil judged that

Cowper's feelings about the landscape changed as soon as he thought Mary was no longer improving.[40] James King cites evidence for Cowper's disappointment in Hayley's character and discomfort in the house.[41] What is certain is that Cowper's sense of Eartham changed as he realised that his own depression had come with him, that it was here even in arcadia.[42] 'Gloominess of mind […] cleaves to me even here', he told Lady Hesketh in sorrow. He did not add, though he could never forget it, Satan's cry of pain as he approaches Eden in *Paradise Lost*: 'which way I fly is hell'.[43]

As his own spirits wavered, he responded to what he perceived as sadness in the landscape. He still thought Eartham 'delightful': 'more beautiful scenery I have never beheld, nor expect to behold hereafter'.[44] But the delight and beauty were not of the sort that made him want to stay. He was looking forward to home: 'The Genius of that place [Weston] suits me better; it has an air of snug concealment in which a disposition like mine feels itself peculiarly gratified; whereas here I see from ev'ry window woods like forests and hills like mountains, a wildness in short that rather encreases my natural melancholy.'[45]

The 'genius' of Weston suited Cowper's own genius for small-scale observation and for the celebration of the tamed, the familiar and the habitual. Importantly, the landscape was not only like Cowper, but unlike him: the perceived tidiness and containment were in much-needed contrast to the intimations of chaos and infinity that haunted him. He could enjoy the carefully made 'Wilderness' at Weston Underwood which featured paths and statues. He could 'exult' in the view from the 'speculative height' of the alcove, which rose only a few feet above the fields: speculative rather than spectacular.[46] In Sussex, however, the heights felt forbidding. He saw wildness too much like the uncontrollable regions of his mind. 'The cultivated appearance of Weston suits my frame of mind far better than wild hills', he told Newton later: 'Within doors [at Eartham] all was hospitality and kindness but the scenery *would* have its effect, and though delightful in the extreme to those who had spirits to bear it, was too gloomy for me.'[47]

**Seeing Sussex**

The surroundings were not in fact 'wild' in the sense of being untouched by human hands. The hills were intensively grazed by sheep, as they had been for centuries. Even the particular green of the close-cropped turf was the result of this long pastoral use. Close by, there were lime-burners in the woods and fishermen at the river. The turning sails of Halnaker windmill were visible from Hayley's windows and from the sloping lawn. Hilaire Belloc would write an elegy for this 'kindly' windmill in 1923 when the sails were gone, the tower was in ruin,

and the field beneath was left unploughed.[48] His feelings for it were not dissimilar to Cowper's affections for the kindly shades of Olney poplars, and once it was gone Belloc saw desolation in the landscape. But for Cowper, far from his familiar places, the Down was already bleak enough.

Part of what made it feel so remote may have been the lack of histories and guide books. Long after the chorographical surveys of Wiltshire, Cornwall, Staffordshire, and Kent, there was no comparable guide to Sussex. The antiquarian William Burrell had worked hard through the 1780s to correct this, but his findings remained unpublished.[49] Amazingly, though coins and pots came out of the ground with every turn of the plough, it was not yet understood that the area had been the site of intensive building and farming through all four hundred years of the Roman occupation. A long stretch of Stane Street runs straight through Eartham Woods, on an embankment with ditches to each side. But it is unlikely that Hayley knew the road to be Roman. He never mentioned it. He and Cowper proceeded with their translations of Milton's Latin, and their elaborate talk of muses in the groves, without reference to the fact that they were walking where Latin had once been spoken.

It is hard to believe that Cowper did not venture the five miles into Chichester, or set out on foot to see more of the Downs and the springline villages, or request a tour of the great estates at Petworth or Goodwood. Some of the party went down to Felpham to swim in the sea, but (so it appears from the written record) Cowper declined the opportunity. There is little sign of interest in local explorations, and nor would there have been much precedent for it. Sussex was not a county in which to be a tourist. In any case, the very idea of Hayley's arcadia was that it should be a world unto itself.

Anna Seward had stayed with Hayley in 1782, and at the same time of year as Cowper: the ripe late summer. Her impressions (at least for Hayley's benefit, in the poem of thanks she sent to him) were of bounty:

> The full luxuriance of yon sloping wood,
> Circling the golden mead with pomp of shade,
> And, where soft comfort's downy pinions brood,
> The village bosomed in the blooming glade.
>
> The path umbrageous up the steepy side
> Of this sweet mount, where varied beauty glows,
> While in bold curves the forest's lofty pride

Dark on th'opposing hill's high summit flows.[50]

She saw 'golden', 'sweet' and 'glowing' scenes, though part of what she appreciated was the relationship between the comfort of the 'bosomed' village, the beauty of the mount ('beauty' in the Burkean sense of smooth shapeliness), and the contrasting dark pride of Eartham Woods, which she, like Cowper, called a forest. Her sense of place is broadly sculptural and tonal: she is working in terms of circles, curves, opposing masses, lights and darks. One might compare it with abstract art.

As for Hayley, his ways of writing (and talking with his guests) about the Sussex he so loved were entirely generic. His encomiums were to 'tranquil shades' and 'dear retreats'.[51] In his memoirs he described the joy of returning home from travels in Lincolnshire and Derbyshire, but never said what was different about Eartham.[52] To be generic was part of the point: rather than observe the local particularity of his native spot, he wanted to match it with exemplary scenery.

Cowper's friend and follower James Hurdis, who rode over from Burwash to join the party at Eartham, was much more interested than Hayley in locality; his long poem *The Village Curate* (1788) was an appreciation of his own Sussex parish, written in Miltonic style but determinedly moving within a small compass, pointing out the birds and flowers of each season, the vegetables in the garden, the 'distant forge / Deep in the low valley, jutting its low roof / Against the stream'. Yet still his urge when he described a view was to standardise it. The scene 'so wonderful, so fair and good' was scattered with 'ambrosial perfumes'.[53] Soon after leaving Eartham, Hurdis wrote to Cowper to describe the new home in which he was now settled at Bishopstone: 'Our house is screened from an opening between the cliffs to the sea by a narrow but high down, covered by a beautiful green carpet, and fanned by perpetual breezes.'[54] The green carpet, the fanning breezes (recalling the 'gentle gales fanning their odiferous wings' in Milton's Eden): these are ingredients from the landscape repertoire of his milieu.[55]

Reading Hayley and Hurdis, one is struck forcibly by the originality of Cowper's writing about the places dear to him at Olney. He catches the feel of the earth (his foot, perhaps, 'half sunk in hillocks green and soft, raised by the mole'); he envies the inhabitant of the remote 'peasant's nest' and then thinks through what life would be like there, with water only from a 'weedy ditch'.[56] Yet in Sussex such textures and details were less legible to him. In this countryside, then as now, there were small things as well as 'magnificence' to meet the eye: travellers' joy sending its green tendrils out in swags over the hawthorn hedges,

scabious, rampion, dogs, rabbits, local voices. The only creature Cowper wrote about was the Throckmortons' dog Fop.

**'Melancholy wildness'**

Hayley regarded Cowper's summer visit as a prelude to more extended stays in future. He saw that Mary Unwin might not live much longer, and that the bereaved Cowper would find it difficult to cope alone. Hayley could offer fine rooms, a library, pleasure grounds, servants, medical attention, and loving company. He was eager to do so: to tend Cowper in his declining years seemed to Hayley a noble project. Cowper, however, had no intention of spending much more time at Eartham.

After five weeks he arranged his departure for mid-September. He was particularly keen to get away from the tremendous cold, which had been bothering him both inside and out. The villa, like most neo-classical buildings, had large rooms, high ceilings, and bare stone surfaces, all of which came at the expense of the kind of contained firelit comfort Cowper loved and had articulated in the 'The Winter Evening' of *The Task*. Hayley even disliked fires, though he must have made some compromise to comfort his frail guests. Outside, the village is not noticeably colder than Weston, though the high ground above it is more exposed to wind. The cold, perhaps, was not so much a temperature to be measured on the thermometer but a perceived coldness in the character of the landscape. Once safely home, Cowper evoked the coldness he had suffered by describing the wildness: 'we shiver'd constantly with cold during the last 5 weeks' (they were only there for six); 'Two degrees farther South might have been expected to be proportionately warmer, but the aspect of the country is bleak and wild and the land lofty.'[57]

On a visit to Weston in the spring, Johnny had proposed that Cowper might think of living with Hayley. Cowper answered simply, but twenty years of thinking about the meanings of home and familiarity went into what he said: 'There is nothing like a home of one's own. No. I shall hope to die at Weston and be buried in yonder churchyard'.[58] His visit to Eartham only deepened that hope.

In the winter of 1792, when Mary Unwin was close to death and the summer's laughter was far behind them, Cowper thought of the Downs with instinctual horror. John Johnson again (at Hayley's behest) suggested that Cowper might be taken to Eartham. Johnson reported the response in a letter to his sister Kate:

> he told me yesterday that the *melancholy wildness* of the scenes about Eartham is more than he can bear – the extensive prospects that present nothing to the view but uncultivated Hills, rising beyond Hills, and the vallies are so uninhabited that you see no signs of life look where you will – nothing but one vast and desolate country, much like that where Don Juan Fernandez uttered his mournful soliloquy.[59]

Some of this is Johnson giving his own view of the matter: he did not like Hayley's influence on Cowper and was set against the idea of a move to Eartham. It was in his interests to confirm the unsuitability of the landscape. But the passage has a rhythm and force to it which suggest that Johnson gives some approximation of what Cowper said.

The comparison to the country of Juan Fernandez may be Johnson's emphatic addition, or it may be Cowper's; either way it is extraordinary. A Sussex village is being likened to the uninhabited Pacific island on which Alexander Selkirk was washed up and where he survived alone. In his 'Verses, Supposed to be written by Alexander Selkirk during his Solitary Abode in the Island Juan Fernandez', Cowper had imagined that island, and Selkirk's lament on its 'desolate shore'. He had tried to affirm that 'There is mercy in ev'ry place'.[60] But this is a poem about abandonment, about being stranded far out from all help. It anticipates the final and complete desolation of 'The Castaway'.

Although the time at Eartham had been the most sociable period of his post-conversion life, and although Cowper continued to correspond lovingly with his 'dear brother' Hayley, the scenes he had stored in memory were of loneliness. In his own great sadness, Cowper could not stand the thought of the exposed slopes. The 'well cultivated valley' he had described in his first excitement at the new scene was now less remembered than the 'uncultivated Hills'. He needed the 'snug concealment' of Weston. Hayley had turned a square mile or so of Sussex into a version of eighteenth-century paradise, but in Cowper's mind it had become a comfortless, threatening place, intolerably far from home.

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## Notes

[1] Cowper to William Hayley, 24 March 1792, *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, ed. James King and Charles Ryskamp, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979-86), IV, 37.

[2] Cowper to John Newton, 27 July 1783 (*Letters*, II, 150).

[3] Cowper to William Hayley, 24 March 1792 (*Letters*, IV, 37).

[4] 'Exploit': Cowper to William Bull, 25 July 1792 (*Letters*, IV, 157); 'Monsters': Cowper to Lady Hesketh, 21 July 1792 *(Letters*, IV, 152).

[5] Hayley, 'Elegy 1774', in William Hayley, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of William Hayley*, ed. John Johnson, 2 vols (London: Henry Colburn, 1823), I, 129.

[6] James King, *William Cowper: A Biography* (Duke University Press, 1986), 238-248; Lisa Gee, "'William the Conqueror': The Friendship between William Hayley and William Cowper', *Cowper and Newton Journal*, 3 (2013), 31-49; Tom Clucas, 'Editing Milton during the French Revolution: Cowper and Hayley as "Brother Editor[s]"', *Review of English Studies*, 65 (2014), 866-887.

[7] Fiona Stafford, *Local Attachments: The Province of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 23.

[8] See Hayley, *Memoirs*, I, 425-8. Cowper was editing Milton for an edition to be illustrated by Fuseli and published by Joseph Johnson. Hayley was writing a biography of Milton to be illustrated by Romney and published by the Boydell Press.

[9] Cowper to William Bull, 25 July 1792 (*Letters*, IV, 157).

[10] 'General Remarks upon the County of Sussex', *The Topographer* (London: J. Robson, J. Walker and C. Stalker), IV: 25 (April 1791), 200.

[11] Cowper to Samuel Greatheed, 6 August 1792 (*Letters*, IV, 165).

[12] Cowper to Samuel Teedon, 5 August 1792 (*Letters*, IV, 163).

[13] Gilbert White to Daines Barrington, 9 December 1773, *The Natural History of Selbourne* (1789) ed. Richard Mabey (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1987), 152.

[14] William Hayley, 'Elegy, 1774', in *Memoirs*, I, 129. On Hayley's move to Eartham and his work there see Tracey Carr, 'Hayley at Eartham', in *William Hayley: Poet, Biographer and Libertarian: A Reassessment*, ed. Paul Foster and Diana Barsham (Chichester: Univeristy of Chichester, 2013), 57-79.

[15] 'Description of Eartham, in Sussex', *The Topographer*, IV: 25 (April 1791), 228-32; 229.

[16] Hayley, *Memoirs*, I, 160.

[17] Cowper to Greatheed, 6 August 1792 (*Letters*, IV, 165).

[18] Cowper to Mrs Courtenay, 12 August 1792 (*Letters*, IV, 170).

[19] For example, Cowper to John Newton, 16 August 1792 (*Letters*, IV, 174): 'in a bower on that summit Mrs U. and I were sitting when Samuel brought me your welcome letter.'

[20] John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book IV, ll. 140-42.

[21] Shaw, *Topographer*, IV: 25 (April 1791), 228-32.

[22] Cowper *The Task*, Book III, l. 765, *Poems of William Cowper*, ed. John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980-95), II, 182.

[23] James Dalloway, *A History of the Western Division of the County of Sussex*, 2 vols (London: T. Bensley, 1815), I, 145.

[24] John Johnson to his sister Kate, 19 August 1792, in *Letters of Lady Hesketh to the Rev. John Johnson* (Jarrold and sons, 1901), 20.

[25] Charlotte Smith, Sonnet XXVI 'To the River Arun', *The Poems of Charlotte Smith*, ed. Stuart Curran (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 30.

[26] John Milton, 'Il Penseroso', l. 69.

[27] Cowper to William Hayley, 24 July 1793 (*Letters*, IV, 372); 'Inscription for the Hermitage', *Poems*, III, 193.

[28] Cowper to William Hayley, 15 August 1793 (*Letters*, IV, 380).

[29] Cowper to Samuel Teedon, 19 August 1792 (*Letters*, IV, 176).

[30] William Hayley, *The Life and Letters of William Cowper*, 3 vols (London: J. Johnson, 1803), III, 415.

[31] See note 24 above.

[32] Ibid.

[33] George to John Romney, 10 October 1792, repr. in John Romney, *Memoirs of the Life and Works of George Romney* (London: Baldwin and Cradock, 1830), 226 and quoted in James King, *William Cowper: A Biography* (Duke University Press, 1986), 245.

[34] Ibid.

[35] John Johnson to Kate, 19 August 1792, *Letters of Lady Hesketh*, 15.

[36] See also Joan Addison, 'William Cowper and George Romney: Public and Private Men', *Cowper and Newton Journal*, 5 (2015), 51-62.

[37] Cowper to Lady Hesketh, 9 Sept 1792 (*Letters*, IV, 189).

[38] Cowper to Mrs Courtenay, 25 August 1792 (*Letters*, IV, 178).

[39] Cowper to Newton, 18 October 1792 (*Letters*, IV, 216): 'The season was, after the first fortnight, extremely unfavourable, stormy and wet.'

[40] David Cecil, *The Stricken Deer* (1929; London: Constable, 1943), 262.

[41] King, *William Cowper*, 246, refers to John Johnson's letter to his sister of 3 September 1792 describing stale bread, sour beer, few fires, and Cowper's sadness at Hayley's having 'put away his wife' (which certainly he had). As King observes, the tirade tells us more about Johnson's jealousy of Cowper's intimacy with Hayley than about Cowper himself. Cowper's friendship with Hayley remained an intense 'brotherhood' long after this visit. He even managed to be 'delighted' by Hayley's *Essay on Old Maids* when he eventually read it in April 1793.

[42] See Cowper's letter to Lady Hesketh, 26 August 1792 (*Letters*, IV, 181).

[43] *Paradise Lost*, Book IV, l. 75. On Cowper's varying identification with both Adam in the garden and with Satan as a damned visitor there, see Dustin Griffin, 'Cowper, Milton and the Recovery of Paradise', *Essays in Criticism*, 31 (1981), 15-26.

[44] Cowper to Lady Hesketh, 9 September, 1792 (*Letters*, IV, 189).

[45] Ibid.

[46] *The Task*, Book I, ll. 288-90: 'Now roves the eye / And, posted on this speculative height / Exults in its command', *Poems*, II, 124.

[47] Cowper to Newton, 18 October 1792 (*Letters*, IV, 216).

[48] 'Ha'nacker Mill' (1923) in *The Verse of Hilaire Belloc* (Nonesuch Press, 1954), 64.

[49] On Burrell, and on eighteenth-century antiquarianism and tourism in Sussex more generally, see John Farrant, *Sussex Depicted: Views and Descriptions 1600-1800* (Lewes: Sussex Record Society, 2001). Stebbing Shaw's *The Topographer*, in which Eartham itself appeared, included the valuable results of Shaw's 1790 investigation of 'hidden parts' of Sussex, but the journal ceased after four volumes (see note 15 above).

[50] Anna Seward, 'To William Hayley Esq., on Leaving Eartham', in Hayley, *Memoirs*, I, 279, and *Collected Poems of Anna Seward*, ed. Lisa L. Moore, 2 vols (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), II, 188.

[51] Hayley, 'Elegy 1774', in *Memoirs*, I, 129.

[52] See for example Hayley, *Memoirs*, I, 160.

[53] James Hurdis, *The Village Curate* (1788; Newburyport: Blount and Robinson, 1793), 81, 32.

[54] James Hurdis to William Cowper, 31 August 1792, *Letters of the Reverend James Hurdis to William Cowper* (Eastbourne: T.R. Beckett, 1927), 25.

[55] Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book IV, l. 157.

[56] *The Task*, Book I, l. 241.

[57] Cowper to Mrs Cowper, 30 Sept 1792 (*Letters*, IV, 204)/

[58] John Johnson to Kate, 19 August 1792, *Letters of Lady Hesketh*, 20.

[59] John Johnson to Kate, n.d., late autumn 1792, *Letters of Lady Hesketh*, 22.

[60] 'Verses, Supposed to be written etc' (1782), *Poems*, I, 403.