

LADY
HESKETH'S
SEAL FOB



A MATERIAL WORLD



A SEAL FOB

Introduction

This focusses on a triple seal fob. It dates from the reign of George III (1760-1820) and belonged to Lady Harriot Hesketh Cowper's cousin.

It is of special interest to the museum as the seals are carved with representations of Cowper's three tame hares. Cowper nurtured these hares whilst he lived at Orchard Side, Olney and they were a great source of entertainment and companionship. Their names are incised on the seals: Puss, Bess and Tiney.

Cowper published a long letter about his hare-keeping which gives us such a vivid picture of their characters and habits that we have included it here. We also tell the story behind a splendid snuff-box which the museum owns - the lid depicts his hares - that was given him by his one-time fiancée, his cousin Theadora Cowper.

It is clear from Cowper's writings, and from these two pieces of valuable memorabilia, that Cowper took very close and special interest in his hares, their nature and nurture; so it is perhaps not very surprising to learn that he kept one or two other somewhat rarefied pets during his life along with the more usual cats and dogs and chickens. We shall look at this interest too in what follows.

The Seal Fob

A fob is a small decorative object, usually hung from a chain and carried around in a waistcoat pocket or waistband. Fobs are not much used today though the idea of a fob watch is probably relatively familiar to us. But they were a fashionable male accessory in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and Cowper owned a fob, with a seal attached to it, that he is said to have worn all the time.

Our seal fob is of special interest as it consists of three seals, each carved with the name and image of one of Cowper's three hares. It has a swivel action allowing the user to choose which seal to use on different occasions. It is quite rare to find this triple action – double swivels are more common.

The basic 'U'-shaped structure supporting the seals is made of gold, as are the two jump rings that once connected the fob to a chain. The seal settings are also of gold. These have been soldered together, rim-to-rim, to form a united, rotatable threesome. Both the 'U'-shaped bearing and the seals swivel by being connected to a gold, turning ring that is fitted round a tiny bolt. The whole assembly measures less than three centimetres and the seals measure about one and a half centimetres each: this is fine work.

The seals themselves are oval and each is carved from a different kind of chalcedony - a fine-grained variety of silica quartz that comes in many colours. The hares have been designed to look pretty much alike: they crouch on the ground apparently grazing grass. But they are named and the stones chosen to depict each one is a different colour to distinguish them further.

Bess is carved from bloodstone, that is to say, from a green jasper flecked with red; the red spots are traces of iron.

Tiney appears on a rich brown carnelian - the colouring here is again due to trace amounts of iron. Puss is depicted in grey chalcedony - the name is reserved for a pale colour such as this.

A small circular box, kept near the seal fob contains three wax impressions taken from the seals. The quality of carving is so sharp that the hares' names - just tiny incisions after all - can be read from these impressions even at some distance.



The seal fob originally belonged to Lady Hesketh who had been given it by Princess Elizabeth, the daughter of George III and Queen Charlotte. Harriot moved in courtly circles and apparently met Princess Elizabeth whilst at Weymouth. For such a gift to have been made, Harriot must have become quite well acquainted with the Princess and regaled her at some point with stories of Cowper's domesticated hares.

The seal came into the Museum Collection in 2007. It was purchased at Bonhams, the London Auctioneers, when several items belonging to Cowper, or referring to him, were put up for sale by the family.

Cowper's Hare-Keeping

Many of us today probably find it remarkable that Cowper (or indeed anyone) might keep hares as pets and may be rather curious about the project. What might hares be like as pets? Was Cowper unusual in having some? The answer to this last question seems likely to be 'yes' for Cowper thought it appropriate to write a long letter (for publication in a magazine) in which he explained how and why he came by his hares, how he reared them and described their individual characters. It is through this marvellously detailed letter that we also learn what sort of pets they can make.

This letter has attracted much interest and admiration over the years. The nineteenth century philosopher J. S. Mill, for example, when reflecting back on his literary education wrote:

Cowper's short poems I read with some pleasure, but never got into the longer ones; and nothing in the two volumes interested me like the prose account of his three hares.

The enthusiastic detail in this famous letter may help us engage rather well with the contemporary interest (as well as the gifts) that Cowper's hare-keeping generated. It helps us also to recognise the significance of these animals, and probably others that he kept, for Cowper's well-being. The hare seal fob we have already focussed on, and the snuff box we look at shortly both bear witness to this contemporary fascination and its offspring. And so we turn to it now.

The letter was published in 1784, in *The Gentleman's Magazine* as a letter to Mr. Urban - the pseudonym of John Nichols, editor, author and publisher.

Note that in the first paragraph of the letter Cowper mentions 'Puss'. This was a common general name for a hare as well as for a cat (and indeed other animals) in earlier centuries and that is how Cowper uses the word here. He isn't just talking about his hare with that given name.



Mr Urban May 28.

Convinced that you despise no communications that may gratify curiosity, amuse rationally, or add, though but a little, to the stock of public knowledge, I send you a circumstantial account of an animal, which, though its general properties are pretty well known, is for the most part such a stranger to man, that we are but little aware of its peculiarities. We know indeed that the hare is good to hunt and good to eat, but in all other respects poor Puss is a neglected subject.

In the year 1774, being much indisposed both in mind and body, incapable of diverting myself either with company or books, and yet in a condition that made some diversion necessary, I was glad of any thing that would engage my attention without fatiguing it. The children of a neighbour of mine had a leveret given them for a plaything; it was at that time about three months old.

Understanding better how to tease the poor creature than to feed it, and soon becoming weary of their charge, they readily consented that their father, who saw it pining and growing leaner every day, should offer it to my acceptance. I was willing enough to take the prisoner under my protection, perceiving that in the management of such an animal, and in the attempt to tame it, I should find just that sort of employment which my case required. It was soon known among the neighbours that I was pleased with the present; and the consequence was, that in a short time I had as many leverets offered to me as would have stocked a paddock. I undertook the care of three, which it is necessary that I should here distinguish by the names I gave them, Puss, Tiney, and Bess.





Notwithstanding the two feminine appellatives, I must inform you that they were all males. Immediately commencing carpenter, I built them houses to sleep in; each had a separate apartment so contrived that their ordure would pass thro' the bottom of it; an earthen pan placed under each received whatsoever fell, which being duly emptied and washed, they were thus kept perfectly sweet and clean. In the daytime they had the range of a hall, and at night retired each to his own bed, never intruding into that of another. Puss grew presently familiar, would leap into my lap, raise himself upon his hinder feet, and bite the hair from my temples. He would suffer me to take him up and to carry him about in my arms, and has more then once fallen asleep upon my knee. He was ill three days, during which time I nursed him, kept him apart from his fellows that they might not molest him (for, like many other wild animals, they persecute one of their own species that is sick), and, by constant care and trying him with a variety of herbs, restored him to perfect health. No creature could be more grateful than my patient after his recovery; a sentiment which he most significantly expressed, by licking my hand, first the back of it, then the palm, then every finger separately, then between all the fingers, as if anxious to leave no part of it unsaluted, a ceremony which he never performed but once again upon a similar occasion.

Finding him extremely tractable, I made it my custom to carry him always after breakfast into the garden, where he hid himself generally under the leaves of a cucumber vine, sleeping or chewing the cud till evening; in the leaves also of that vine he found a favourite repast. I had not long habituated him to this taste of liberty, before he began to be impatient for the return of the time when he might enjoy it. He would invite me to the garden by drumming upon my knee, and by a look of such expression as it was not possible to misinterpret. If this rhetoric did not immediately succeed, he would take the skirt of my coat between his teeth, and pull at it with all his force. Thus Puss might be said to be perfectly tamed, the shyness of his nature was done away, and on the whole it was visible, by many symptoms which I have not room to enumerate, that he was happier in human society than when shut up with his natural companions.

Not so Tiney. Upon him the kindest treatment had not the least effect. He too was sick, and in his sickness had an equal share of my attention; but if, after his recovery I took the liberty to stroke him, he would grunt, strike with his fore feet, spring forward and bite. He was, however, very entertaining in his way, even his surliness was matter of mirth, and in his play he preserved such an air of gravity, and performed his feats with such a solemnity of manner, that in him too I had an agreeable companion.

Bess, who died soon after he was full grown, and whose death was occasioned by his being turned into his box which had been washed, while it was yet damp, was a hare of great humour and drollery. Puss was tamed by gentle usage; Tiney was not to be tamed at all; and Bess had a courage and confidence that made him tame from the beginning. I always admitted them into the parlour after supper, when the carpet affording their feet a firm hold, they would frisk and bound and play a thousand gambols, in which, Bess, being remarkably strong and fearless, was always superior to the rest, and proved himself the

Vestris of the party. (August Vestris (1760-1842) was a celebrated French dancer.) One evening the cat being in the room had the hardiness to pat Bess upon the cheek, an indignity which he resented by drumming upon her back with such violence, that the cat was happy to escape from under his paws and hide herself.

You observe, Sir, that I describe these animals as having each a character of his own. Such they were in fact, and their countenances were so expressive of that character, that, when I looked only on the face of either, I immediately knew which it was. It is said, that a shepherd, however numerous his flock, soon becomes so familiar with their features, that he can by that indication only distinguish each from all the rest, and yet to a common observer the difference is hardly perceptible. I doubt not that the same discrimination in the cast of countenances would be discoverable in hares, and am persuaded that among a thousand of them no two could be found exactly similar; a circumstance little suspected by those who have not had opportunity to observe it: these creatures have a singular sagacity in discovering the minutest alteration that is made in the place to which they are accustomed, and instantly apply their nose to the examination of a new object.



A small hole being burnt in the carpet, it was mended with a patch, and that patch in a moment underwent the strictest scrutiny. They seem too to be very much directed by the smell in the choice of their favourites; so some persons, though they saw them daily, they could never be reconciled, and would even scream when they attempted to touch them; but a miller coming in, engaged their affections at once; his powdered coat had charms that were irresistible. You will not wonder, Sir, that my intimate acquaintance with these specimens of the kind has taught me to hold the sportsman's amusement in abhorrence; he little knows what amiable creatures he persecutes, of what gratitude they are capable, how cheerful they are in their spirits, what enjoyment they have of life, and that, impressed as they seem with a peculiar dread of man, it is only because man gives them peculiar cause for it.

That I may not be tedious, I will just give you a short summary of those articles of diet that suit them best, and then retire to make room for some more important correspondent.

I take it to be a general opinion that they graze, but it is an erroneous one, at least grass is not their staple; they seem rather to use it medicinally, soon quitting it for leaves of almost any kind. Sowthistle, dent-de-lion, and lettuce are their favourite vegetables, especially the last. I discovered by accident that fine white sand is in great estimation with them; I suppose as a digestive. It happened that I was cleaning a bird-cage while the hares were with me; I placed a pot filled with such sand upon the floor, to which being at once directed by a strong instinct, they devoured it voraciously; since that time I have generally taken care to see them well supplied with it. They account green corn a delicacy, both blade and stalk, but the ear they seldom eat; straw of any kind, especially wheat-straw, is another of their dainties; they will feed greedily upon oats, but if furnished with clean straw never want them; it serves them also for a bed, and, if shaken up daily, will keep sweet and dry for a



considerable time. They do not indeed require aromatic herbs, but will eat a small quantity of them with great relish, and are particularly fond of the plant caned musk; they seem to resemble sheep in this, that, if their pasture be too succulent, they are very subject to the rot; to prevent which, I always made bread their principal nourishment, and, filling a pan with it cut into small squares, placed it every evening in their chambers, for they feed only at evening and in the night; during the winter, when vegetables are not to be got, I mingled this mess of bread which shreds of carrot, adding to it the rind of apples cut extremely thin; for tho' they are fond of the paring, the apple itself disgusts them.

These, however, not being a sufficient substitute for the juice of summer herbs, they must at this time be supplied with water; but so placed, that they cannot overset it into their beds. I must not omit that occasionally they are much pleased with twigs of hawthorn and of the common briar, eating even the very wood when it is considerable thickness.



Bess, I have said, died young; Tiney lived to be nine years old and died at last, I have reason to think of some hurt in his loins by a fall. Puss is still living, and has just completed his tenth year, discovering no signs of decay nor even of age, except that he is grown more discreet and less frolicksome than he was. I cannot conclude, Sir, without informing you that I have lately introduced a dog to his acquaintance, a spaniel that had never seen a hare to a hare that had never seen a spaniel. I did it with great caution, but there was no real need of it. Puss discovered no token-of-fear, nor Marquis (Cowper's spaniel) the least symptom of hostility. There is therefore, it should seem, no natural antipathy between dog and hare, but the pursuit of the one occasions the flight of the other, and the dog pursues because he is trained to it: they eat bread at the same time out of the same hand, and are in all respects sociable and friendly.

Yours, etc.

W.C.

p s. I should not do complete justice to my subject, did I not add, that they have no ill scent belonging to them, that they are indefatigably nice in keeping themselves clean, for which purpose nature has furnished them with a brush under each foot; and that they are never infested by any vermin.

This letter is justly renowned for its fascinating, well-observed and accurate information about the needs and habits of hares as a species. But it is also a lovely example of Cowper's engaging prose style: he clearly delights in describing the individual character of his three hares; and his obvious pleasure in their companionship and in their independence is something many of us will recognise from our own knowledge of pet-keeping.

A Hairy Escapade

Several of Cowper's more private letters contain delightful pictures of everyday events in Olney and of Cowper's life there. In them, Cowper often mentions his hares in passing and it is clear that they played an important part in his day-to-day routines and thinking. But they could also be the source of a good story – the sort of story that helps to account for a gift such as the fob seal.

We read of the important but unexpected visitor for example whom Cowper couldn't receive promptly, or attend to with appropriate civility, because his hares were running loose and liable to escape or cause some sort of furore. In this next letter, written in 1780, Cowper regales his friend the Reverend John Newton with just such a story about Puss:

My dear Sir,

... Last Wednesday Night, while we were at Supper, between the Hours of 8 and 9, I heard an unusual Noise in the Back Parlour, as



if one of the Hares was entangled, & endeavouring to disengage herself. I was just going to Rise from Table, when it ceased. In about 5 Minutes, a Voice on the Outside of the Parlour Door, Enquired if One of my Hares had got away. I immediately rushed into the next Room, and found that my poor Favorite Puss had made her Escape. She had gnawed in sunder the Strings of a Lattice Work, with which I thought I had Sufficiently secured the Window, and which I preferred to any other sort of Blind, because it admitted Plenty of Air. From thence I hastened to the Kitchen, where I saw

the redoubtable Tom Freeman, who told me, that having seen her just after she had dropped into the Street, he attempted to Cover her with his Hat, but she Screamed out, and leaped directly over his Head, I then desired him to pursue as fast as possible, & added Richard Colman to the Chase, as being Nimbler & carrying less Belly than Tom; not expecting to see her again, but desirous, if possible to Learn what became of her. In somewhat less than an Hour, Richard returned almost Breathless, with the following Account. That soon after he began to Run he left Tom behind him, and came in Sight of a most numerous Hunt, consisting of Men, Women, Children, and Dogs; that he did his best to keep back the Dogs, and presently outstripp'd the Crowd, so that the Race was at last disputed between himself and Puss. She ran right through the Town, and down the Lane that leads to Dropshort. A little before she came to the House, he got the Start and turned her.

She pushed for the Town again, and soon after she Enter'd it, sought Shelter in Mr. Wagstaff's Tan Yard, adjoining to Old Mr. Drake's. Sturges's harvestmen were at Supper, and saw her from the opposite Side of the way. There she encountered the Tan Pits full of Water, & while she was struggling out of One Pit & Plunging into another, and almost drowned, one of the Men drew her out by the ears and secured her. She was then well washed in a Bucket, to get the Lime out of her coat, and brought home in a Sack at 10 o'clock. This Frolic cost us four Shillings, but you may suppose we did not grudge a Farthing of it. The poor Creature received only a little Hurt in one of her claws, and in one of her Ears, & is now almost as well as ever.

A Snuff Box

It seems likely that striking stories such as this were partly behind another much celebrated memento of Cowper's hares. It is a fine circular snuff box made of tortoiseshell and gold, its lid inset with a painting of the three hares. It was a very special present to Cowper.

This hare snuff box (it lives in the Museum Parlour with other personal accessories that belonged to him) was given to Cowper by 'Anonymous' – in fact, Harriot's sister Theadora, to whom Cowper had once been engaged. She was behind many gifts to Cowper and he always pretended (and we think it must have been a pretence) not to know who 'Anonymous' was, not to recognise her hand-writing and to assume 'she' was male. For example on the receipt of one present from her he wrote to Harriot

Anonymous is come again; - may God bless him, whosoever he be, as I doubt not that he will

And when he received the snuffbox he felt moved to write a proper 'thank you' letter to Harriot - surely with the intention that Harriot would convey his delight and gratitude to her sister. Here is some of that letter, with a description of the snuff box. He thanks his 'cousin' (but which one?) thus:

It is very pleasant, my dearest Cousin, to receive a present so delicately conveyed as that which I received so lately from anonymous, but it is also very painful to have nobody to thank for it. I find myself therefore driven by stress of necessity to the following resolution – viz – that I will constitute you my Thank-receiver General for whatsoever gift I shall receive hereafter, as well as for those I have already received, from a nameless benefactor.

I therefore thank you my Cousin for a most elegant present...For a snuff-box of tortoise-shell with a beautiful landscape on the lid of it glazed with chrystal, having the figures of three hares in the foreground, and inscribed above with these words, The Peasant's Nest and below with these – Puss, Tiney and Bess.

The 'Peasant's Nest' referred to is the name of a farm house near the village of Weston Underwood, itself only a mile or so away from Olney.



A week later Cowper wrote again to Lady Hesketh to add this to his description of the snuff box:

I forgot to observe to you in the description that I gave of the Landscape that embellishes the snuff box sent me by Anonymous, that the drawer of it has attended particularly to the characters of the three hares given in the Gentleman's Magazine. One is sprightly, one is fierce, and one is gentle. The box has done me no small honour in the eyes of 2 to 3 to whom I have shown it.

‘The drawer’ was George Romney, a renowned portrait painter particularly in the second half of the eighteenth century. His work at that time was the height of fashion and he was patronised by many of the socially great and good; these included, for example, Emma, Lady Hamilton. Romney was also a friend of William Haley, himself an admirer and, later, a biographer of Cowper. This connection may have influenced Theadora’s choice of artist – a man from the top drawer.

A snuff box would in any event have made a good present as Cowper was evidently a great snuff taker. (So apparently was Mrs. Unwin. She too received a present of a snuff box - hers a silver one from Harriot.) Perhaps one of the most vivid references to his habit was written by Cowper’s young cousin Johnny Johnson, in his memoirs. In these, Johnny described a walk he and Cowper used to take to the striking Neo-classical alcove at the top of a hill by Weston Underwood – the village near Olney to which Cowper moved when he left Orchard Side:

On his entering this delectable alcove, poetically stiled proud from the commanding richness of the prospect, the first thing he did was to seat himself in the centre of the building, that the wings of the bird of paradise, which were spread out before him, might be

visible from tip to tip. The second, to throw his legs into the posture of a crusader – supposing him to rise from his alabaster bed and to sit upright. The third, to invest his knee with the order of the silk handkerchief; and the last to take out his box, with a – “Now, Johnny boy, for a pinch of snuff.”

But our hare box is a particularly charming snuff container and was obviously a very generous gift. And there is a certain added poignancy to looking at it once we are aware that it came from Theadora: it stands in touching evidence of her continuing affection for Cowper.

Traces of their relationship and of Theadora’s ongoing devotion weave their way through Cowper’s life through a series of spectacular gifts as well as financial support from ‘Anonymous’. Their break-up was evidently a nerve-wracking event for both young cousins and though Theadora is not directly mentioned in Cowper’s letters she remains a weighty silent presence. Only at his death is Cowper said to have directly mentioned her again and this with reference to a repeater watch that had belonged to his uncle, Ashley Cowper - Theadora and Harriot’s father. The watch was another of Theadora’s gifts to him. When Harriot was sorting out Cowper’s assets - he left no will - she wrote to Johnny Johnson about the watch and Cowper’s last wishes concerning it:





I rejoice from my inmost soul that the dear soul himself THOUGHT OF GIVING it; I mean his watch to my sister Theadora. Yes, indeed he said very truly, “that is well known” – it is well known to me that watch was given him by my sister and was a repeater of my father’s – she gave it our dear cousin because she knew he would value it for that reason – pray dear Johnny take great care of it – wind it up exactly at the same hour every night, and take the first and good opportunity that may offer of sending it to Mr Hill, who I will take care shall deliver it to my sister... I am indeed so rejoiced that he thought of giving it her and that he said those words, which shall be safely transcribed to her with the watch and will make it seem a diamond!

Cowper's defiant silence about Theadora takes on an almost deafening resonance at his death - and the little hare snuff-box stands as an echo of their tense relationship.

Cowper's Other Pets

Perhaps not too surprisingly, given what we know of his tenderness towards his hares, Cowper enjoyed caring for other creatures too and his letters about them make interesting related reading.

He made a few comments about his general love of animals in a letter of 1791 to the Reverend Hurdis:

I am glad your amusements have been so similar to mine; for in this instance too I seemed to have need of somebody to keep me in countenance, especially in my attention and attachment to animals. All the notice that we lords of the creation vouchsafe to bestow on the creatures, is generally to abuse them: it is well therefore that here and there a man should be found a little womanish, or perhaps a little childish in this matter, who will make some amends, by kissing, and coaxing, and laying them in one's bosom.

But he is more specific in other letters. For instance, he once told Harriot that he'd kept mice as a schoolchild. But only briefly:

The affair of the tame mouse. That I kept one is certain, and that I kept it as they say, in my bureau - but not in the Temple. It was while I was at Westminster. I kept it till it produced six young ones, and my transports when I first discovered them cannot easily be conceived - any more than my mortification, when going again to visit my little family, I found that mouse herself had eaten them! I turned her loose, in indignation, and vowed never to keep a mouse again.

And also somewhat exotically - from today's perspective at least - he kept linnets and goldfinches. These lived in cages he had made himself and hung, sometimes in the house and sometimes, in the summer, in his 'boudoir' – that is, in the glass house he converted into a second parlour when warmer weather so allowed.

He told William Unwin a rather charming story about his pair of goldfinches:

I have two goldfinches which in the summer occupy the greenhouse. A few days since, being employed in cleaning out their cages, I placed that which I had in hand upon the table, while the other hung against the wall: the windows and the doors stood wide open. I went to fill the fountain at the pump, and on my return was not a little surprised to find a goldfinch sitting on the top of the cage I had been cleaning, and singing to and kissing the goldfinch within. I approached him, and he discovered no fear; still nearer and he discovered none. I advanced my hand to wards him, and he took no notice of it. I seized him and supposed I had caught a new bird, but casting my eye upon the other cage perceived my mistake. Its Inhabitant, during my absence, had contrived to find an opening, where the wire had been a little bent, and made no other use of the escape it afforded him, than to salute his friend and converse with him more intimately than he had done before. I returned him to his proper mansion, but in vain. In less than a minute he had thrust his little person through the aperture again, and again perched upon his neighbour's cage, kissing him, as at the first, and singing, as if transported with the fortunate adventure. I could not but respect such friendship, as for the sake of its gratification had twice declined an opportunity to be free, and, consenting to their union, resolved that for the future one cage should hold them both. I am glad of such incidents; for at a pinch, and when I need entertainment, the versification of them serves to divert me.

More predictably Cowper liked small cats, as we learn from this note to Harriot:

I have a kitten, my dear, the drollest of all creatures that ever wore a cat's skin. Her gambols are not to be described, and would be incredible, if they could. In point of size she is likely to be a kitten always, being extremely small of her age, but time I suppose, that spoils everything, will make her also a cat...She is dressed in a tortoiseshell suit and I know that you will delight in her.

At one time he had three kittens. These were famously spotted one day by the barn door:

...looking with fixed attention at something which lay at the threshold of the door, coiled up. I took but little notice at first; but a loud hiss engaged me to attend more closely, when behold - a viper! the largest I remember to have seen, rearing itself, darting its forked tongue, and ejaculating the aforementioned hiss at the nose of a kitten almost in contact with its lips. I ran to the hall for a hoe, with a long handle, with which I intended to assail him, and returning in a few seconds missed him: he was gone...

Cowper kept dogs too of course: Marquis a spaniel that died in 1787, was followed by two other spaniels, both called Beau. Beau it was who plunged into the river Ouse during one walk to collect a flowering water-lily that he had watched Cowper trying in vain to gather:

He swam to land with a lily in his mouth, which he came and laid at my foot.

Cowper gave Harriot a quite detailed account of how he looked after Beau:



With respect to his diet, it is always of the most salutary kind: lights he never eats, and liver, having observed it makes him sick, we never give him. Bread he eats in abundance, and it is the only thing for which he begs with much impunity. He is regularly combed, and his ears, which are remarkably handsome, are my own particular care. They gather burrs while he threads all the thickets, from which I deliver them myself as soon as we get home. But having taught him to take the water, and even to delight in it, I never give him a forced washing, lest he should contract a hydrophobia, and refuse the river.

There was also Mungo; some say he was a bull-dog, others suggest a St. Bernard, but according to the late Catherine Barham Johnson, a descendent of Johnny Johnson:

He was more likely the true Newfoundland dog, shaggy and with a black muzzle.

Cowper described how well his dogs got along with his hare Puss in this letter to Harriot:

My Puss is in good health, except a cough which never troubled her until this day. Herself, a house dog and a small spaniel, were just now basking in the beams of our fire-side, very comfortably in a group, but the great Mungo desired to be let into the kitchen just before I could tell you so. He is very fond of Puss, often salutes her with his black muzzle, and licks her face. The bread she happens to leave is his constant perquisite, so he may not be altogether disinterested in his attachment.

An everyday, benign domestic scene if ever there was one - and yet, as so often where Cowper is concerned, it has an unusual ingredient: one that both the seal fob and snuff box celebrate.





© Nicola Durbridge 2012

for The Cowper and Newton Museum
OLNEY

Photographs by Deborah Hopson-Wolpe