

COWPER'S STOCK BUCKLE



A MATERIAL WORLD



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Introduction

We are going to look at a stock buckle owned by William Cowper. It is a fashion accessory Cowper was eager to acquire despite his straitened circumstances.

With this eagerness in mind we will take a look too at some of the other fashionable items Cowper felt it necessary to purchase and consider how and why this might have been.

The Stock Buckle.

The frame of Cowper's stock-buckle forms a rectangle. It is made of silver and the front has been decoratively tooled to show stylized acanthus leaves.

Inset within this rectangular frame is a plain brass bar; there is a small brass bracket over this simple bar ornamenting and bridging its length. The bar swivels and has two important elements swinging from its centre: they are there to fix the stock (a kind of neck-tie) in place. From one side there swings another bar set with three small 'buttons' or tabs; these protrude beyond the silver framework and function to hold one end of a stock in place: they attach to holes - cut and sewn like button-holes - found at one end of a stock.

From the other side of the central brass bar protrude three fork-like prongs. These are used to pierce the other end of a stock - where the fabric is usually gathered and sewn into a tight point. The prongs and the button-like tabs together hold a stock in place, wound neatly round the wearer's neck.

A Stock

A stock was a relatively formal item of neck wear that became fashionable in the 18th century. It was a more constructed and fancier version of either the neckcloth or neck handkerchief.

Throughout the century it was usual for men to wear one of these three kinds of neck attire when in public - so whether labouring or at some fashionable gathering. The distinctions between these pieces of cloth are small but for the fashion conscious and socially aware they were significant.

A neck handkerchief or neck kerchief (more common at this time than the pocket handkerchief) might be worn by men or women. It was the least formal choice of neckwear. Women tended to wear it loosely wrapped round the neck, fixed with a pin, a knot, or some other fancy tie. Men usually rolled the kerchief before pinning or tying it at the front; the ends were then left free to hang down quite casually.



A neckcloth was only slightly different. It was a rectangular length of fabric worn by men; it was first rolled, then wrapped round the neck and tied loosely at the front. A neckcloth might be worn over a shirt collar so as to cover it completely, or with the ends of the collar folded down over it. Neckcloths varied in grandeur, partly depending on the fabric used, but they were in any event considered more formal than the handkerchief. Some were quite plain, others embellished with frills, knots or lace at their ends; these ends hung down, rather flamboyantly, at the front of a shirt. A trimming of lace was particularly fashionable at the start of the century (when lace itself was very popular) but considered rather commonplace by the 1770's.



A stock was the grandest of these three kinds of neckwear. It was made of delicate material, often the very finest linen, whilst kerchief and neckcloth were usually of rather coarser fabric.

The main section of a stock - the part on show - was finely pleated, or gently gathered into a longish sausage-shape; it was often backed with a plainer and heavier material. The ends of a stock did not quite meet round a wearer's neck - that is where the buckle came in. One end would be fitted with small loops or button-holes attached to a stronger material. These would loop onto the 'buttons' of a stock buckle. The fabric at the other end of a stock would be sewn into a point and cinched into place with the prongs of the stock buckle. Thus the fabric went round the neck and the stock buckle held everything together at the back.



But key to the impact of any of this neckwear was its cleanliness. The best neckcloths were white - very white. It is worth recalling perhaps that a decent appearance in the eighteenth century called for freshly laundered linen every day. One on and one in the wash - as the saying goes; or for the more wealthy, seven shirts and one laundry day a week. Clean linen signalled a wearer's self-respect by referring obliquely, as it did, to the hours of steaming and honest labour it obliged.

Cowper's Neckwear and Fashion Statements

It was in 1781 that Cowper resolved to start wearing a stock rather than a 'neck cloth'. We learn this from a letter he wrote to his friend William Unwin in which he asked him to buy the all-important stock buckle with which to hold the stock in place. In some respects he was quite particular about this buckle, but interestingly was at the same time happy for it to be second-hand. (Mrs Unwin also thought second-hand goods quite acceptable - for example she thought it necessary to buy a silver cream pot in 1784 - a second hand one). But here is Cowper registering his shift in neckwear and need for a buckle:

My neck cloths all being worn out, I intend to wear stocks, but NOT unless they are more fashionable than the former. In that case I shall be obliged to you if you will buy me a handsome stock buckle for a very little money; for 20 or 25 shillings perhaps, a second hand affair may be purchased that will make a figure at Olney.

It is quite hard to work out how serious Cowper was about looking fashionable; he was clearly teasing himself (and Unwin) about 'cutting a figure' in poverty stricken, rural Olney with a purchase he insisted should be modest as well as 'handsome'. And he had, a week or so earlier, written at length, wryly and with evident tongue in cheek, about 'fashion' to Mrs. Newton (the Reverend John's wife):

I thank you for your little abridgment of my family's history. Like everything that relates to the present world, in which there seems to be nearly an equal mixture of the lamentable and the ridiculous, it affords both occasion to laugh and to cry. In the single instance of my Uncle I can see cause for both.

He trembles on the verge of fourscore. A white hat with a yellow lining is no indication of wisdom suitable to so great an age...He is a very little man, and had he lined his hat with pink instead of yellow, might have been gathered by a natural mistake for a mushroom and sent off in a basket.

While the world lasts fashion will continue to lead it by the nose. And after all what can fashion do for its most obsequious followers? It can ring the changes upon the same things and it can do no more. Whether our hats be white or black, our caps high or low, whether we wear two watches or one, is of little consequence. There is indeed an appearance of variety, but the folly and vanity that dictates and adopts the change, are invariably the same. When the fashions of a particular period appear more reasonable than those of the preceding, it is not because the world is grown more reasonable than it was, but because in a course of perpetual changes, some of them must sometimes happen to be for the better. Neither do I suppose the preposterous customs that prevail at present a proof of its greater folly. In a few years, perhaps next year, the fine gentleman will shut up his umbrella and give it to his sister, filling his hand with a crab-tree cudgel instead of it. And when he has done so, will he be wiser than now? By no means. The love of change will have betrayed him into a propriety which in reality he has no taste for, all his merit on the occasion amounting to no more than this, that being weary of one play thing he has taken up another.



In practice however, Cowper seems to have been more concerned to keep company with contemporary fashion than admitted to here. And this seems to have been particularly true when it came to his personal attire. It patently mattered to him that he looked ‘right’. Right in the sense of presenting an appropriate image as well as an authentic one. An appropriate bit of Cowper self-portrayal did not focus on demonstrating wealth (hard to do anyway as he had little money) nor his social standing (which he was inclined to mock), though it might hint at an acquaintance with such things. ‘Looking right’ and ‘dressing right’ referred more to contemporary ideas of ‘taste’. Good taste was connected with and in the case of apparel, made manifest, important moral values including modesty and decency. It also indicated humane and educated qualities such as sensibility, discrimination and refinement.

Cowper seems to have thought these qualities were learned rather than in-bred. We glean this from some of his comments to William Unwin. For example he wrote in 1782, as he reflected on a child’s development:

It is not in general till reading and observation have settled the taste that...we are able to execute what is good in ourselves.:

And again in a later letter to William (having mentioned our ancestors’ strange preference for ‘*the slashed sleeve*’ or the ‘*trunk hose*’) Cowper went on to muse:

...in everything else I suppose they were our counterparts exactly... The inside of the man has undergone no change, his passions, appetites and aims are just what they ever were: they wear perhaps a handsomer disguise than they did in the days of yore, for philosophy and literature will have their effect upon the exterior, but in every other respect, a modern is only an ancient in disguise.

So it is perhaps in the guise of an educated ancient that we discover Cowper, within so many of his letters, ordering dress fabrics and personal accessories with such precision. His attention to detail was such that it seems he minded enough what people thought of the result and though sometimes his requests sound - to a 21st century ear at least - a little extravagant, it is pretty certain that luxurious ostentation was not his goal; for this was a general target for contemporary criticism.

Luxury - something you could really do without - was one thing, and open to moral debate, but Cowper was outraged in 1785 by a tax imposed upon gloves:

I feel myself a little angry with a minister who when he imposed a tax upon gloves was not ashamed to call them a luxury. Caps and boots lined with fur are not accounted a luxury in Russia, neither can gloves be reasonably deemed such in a climate sometimes hardly less severe than that. Nature is indeed content with little, and luxury seems in some respect rather relative than of fixed construction.

So what are we to make of the shift to a stock? Was this just a desire for a change? Was Cowper really interested in being thought fashionable? Or was there something else about the look of a stock that appealed to him?

Let's have a look at some other purchases destined for Cowper's dressing-room and see if there is anything common to them all.

A Cowper Ruffled

We'll start with the ingredients of a letter of January 1771, that Cowper wrote to Joseph Hill, a London friend who managed his

financial affairs. In it Cowper mentioned TWO tailors' bills; and it seems to some relief, he was not overspent on this occasion so he went on to put in an order for handkerchiefs and fabric.

I...am glad to find that after payment of my two taylors, there is a surplus left. I should be glad to have ten pounds sent hither in a note. The remainder I purpose to dispose of in the purchase of a dozen and a half, red and white, small patterns handkerchiefs at half a crown apiece (12.5 modern pence) and a yard and a half narrow striped muslin for a gentleman's ruffles. If either of your sisters should chuse a walk...I shall be glad of her assistance to procure them for me.

We might note in passing - with an eye to 18th century buying power - that Cowper seems to think that women, rather than men, had the appropriate eye (or knowledge) for purchasing such things as the 'right' fabric. We might also note, out of biographical interest this time, that this letter was written in 1771 - apparently before the women in Cowper's life got wind of his taste for ruffles. By the 1780's Cowper and ruffles were patently an item and it seems unlikely he needed ever to purchase them again: 'his women' produced them for him. Ruffles at this date appear to have become the modern equivalent of a pair of socks or a tie - a seemly gift to a man from a woman. Cowper received several.

But before we go into this, what were these ruffles exactly?

They were a costume accessory. They were made from short lengths of fine material - muslin, lace or a delicate cotton lawn - gathered into fullish flounces and worn at the end of a shirt sleeve. The gathered fabric draped elegantly over wrist and hand and added a graceful flourish to polite arm and wrist movements. They were an extension and embellishment of a plain shirt-cuff as

well as a bit of body theatre. They probably even contributed an elegance to snuff-taking - and Cowper was a keen snuff-taker. Ruffles were definitely a fashionable rather than a necessary addition to male attire. And they could have been seen as a luxury - but for the fact they tended to be home-made and thus not an expensive consumer good.

And so to the female ruffle conspiracy.

We know that a Miss Shuttleworth (William Unwin's sister-in-law) made Cowper a pair which she sent on to him after a brief visit on her way home from 'the North'. And Cowper's flamboyant, would-be amour, Lady Austen, also made him several pairs. (It seems likely that ruffle-making was another of those needlework crafts which manifested a lady's purposeful skill as well as her refinement.) Her beneficence did not go down well. At times Cowper evidently found Lady Austen's attentions just rather too much; and rather curiously, these times seem to have coincided with gifts of ruffles.

In 1782 for example, Cowper wrote to William Unwin to describe, with evident alarm, Lady Austen's all-pervading, if exciting presence. He also mentioned her worrying ruffle-giving tendency:

She is exceedingly sensible, has great quickness of parts, and an uncommon fluency of expression, but her vivacity was sometimes too much for us; occasionally it might refresh and revive us, but it more frequently exhausted us, neither your mother nor I being in that respect at all a match for her. But after all, it does not entirely depend upon us, whether our former intimacy shall take place again or not, or rather whether we shall attempt to cultivate it, or give it over, as we are most inclined to do, in despair. I suspect a little by her sending the ruffles...

Just one month earlier Cowper had referred anxiously (again in a letter to William Unwin) to multiple pairs of home-made ruffles presented him by Lady Austen after a quarrel between them. Their arrival had caused similar perturbation:

Having imparted to you an account of the fracas between us and Lady Ann, it is necessary to that you should be made acquainted with every event that bears any relation to that incident. The day before yesterday she sent me...three pair of worked ruffles with advice that I should soon receive a fourth. I knew they were begun before we quarreled...the fear of giving offence to a temper too apt to take it, is ... absolutely incompatible with the pleasures of real friendship.

How effectively this frothy, light-weight accessory could ruffle the equilibrium of those at Orchard Side!

And ruffles were clearly social fripperies. Although Cowper must have thought they were a good idea when he ordered material for a pair back in 1771, it is not obvious how this accessory related to ideas of modesty and decency in dress. Perhaps the fact that ruffles were home-made, rather than purchased as a finished consumer item, lent them home-spun virtue. Perhaps too they expressed that part of Cowper that enjoyed being the elegant entertainer and the witty companion.



A Cowper Bewigged

So let's now move up to Cowper's head – for he tells us quite a bit about his hats and wigs. Head attire was complicated in the eighteenth century - for both men and women - and it could be expensive. Cowper was attentive to its demands too, and his purchases suggest he sought a mixture of convenient and necessary headgear as well as relishing an element of the superfluous.



Mrs Unwin also needed a range of caps, hats and bonnets to meet the different demands of mourning, visiting, and walking in bad weather. And since he procured them for her let us look, first of all, at Cowper putting in an order to his cousin Harriot, Lady Hesketh for a bonnet for Mrs. Unwin. He asked that the bonnet should be:

...just the bonnet of all the world that will please the most... a bonnet is not to be procured at Olney. The wind alone confines us when it is brisk as the hat she wears being broad and stiff is so susceptible of all its force, that to keep it on at such times is impossible...

When asked for a bit more helpful detail, he added:

The lady says that she is not fond of black bonnets; the lady likewise says that she is not young, and therefore does not wish for a very airy one. Something decent yet smartish, neither Quakerly nor gay, will exactly suit her.

The resulting purchase was so successful that:

Never since it arrived has she crowned herself with any other covering of the kind.

So ‘decent’ and ‘smart’ were keywords for her ‘look’. Meanwhile, Cowper had exacting demands for an appropriate hat for himself:

And my head will be equally obliged to you for a hat of which I enclose a string that gives you the circumference. The depth of the crown must be 4 inches and one eighth. Let it not be a round slouch which I abhor, but a smart, well-cocked fashionable affair.

This order was made in 1784, when the three sided cocked hat (the tricorne) had gone out of fashion to be replaced by the bicorne - a hat turned up at both sides or just at front and back. Presumably a bicorne was what Cowper required. It seems clear that he would be ‘up to date’, but also, and like Mrs Unwin, ‘smart’ in appearance.

Then in 1784 he ordered another hat. Again a fashionable one - nothing merely plain and warm:

I will subjoin the measure of my hat. Let the new one be furnished a la mode...The outside circumference of the hat-crown is two feet one inch and an 8th.

This sounds enormous – a crown of around 64 centimetres; surely there are hints of a Cowper dedicatedly following fashion just here. Let’s see what he did about wigs.

Wig fashions also changed along with hats, and we know that Cowper’s wigs - or their fittings at least – altered too. And it seems he was partly concerned to please others as well as himself as he ‘progressed’ from one style to another. We get a glimpse of such

things when we enter bagwig territory.

A ‘bagwig’ is a wig worn with a bag at the back that holds loose ends of hair. We’ll uncover more about them shortly as we look at Cowper’s shifting tastes in wigwear. Cowper first mentioned this kind of wig in a letter to cousin Harriot written in late 1785:

As for me I am a very smart youth of my years. I am not indeed grown grey so much as I am grown bald. No matter; there was more hair in the world than had ever the honour to belong to me. Accordingly having found just enough to curl a little at my ears, and to intermix with a little of my own that still hangs behind, I appear if you see me in an afternoon, to have a very decent headdress, not easily distinguished from my natural growth; which being worn with a small bag and a black-ribband about my neck, continues to me the charms of my youth, even on the verge of age.

He mentioned this, his ‘bagwig’, again to Harriot in 1786; and here he explained why he had bought into this style:

I will promise you that your squire shall not be dressed in a bag. By some instinct in me it has come to pass, that immediately after telling you I wore a bag, I of my own motion exchanged it for a queue. That ever I wore a bag constantly was owing to Lady Austen, who in France had been used to see nothing else. Nevertheless I shall not be altogether taken as a Beau for leather breeches I have none, and boots I have none, having ever had an antipathy to a saddle. But in so unfashionable a place as Newport, I shall be taken for a gentleman even though I should happen to be dressed like one.

There is quite a bit of wig detail to unpick in the last two extracts. ‘The bag’ that Cowper referred to was a black pouch, often made

of taffeta, into which the long ends of hair at the back of a wig were stuffed. The bag usually came with long ribbons which would be tied into a bow to keep the bag closed. A bag like this was an important addition: in particular it kept greasy wig hair out of harm's way as well as tidy. For the hair of a wig was thoroughly oiled before being powdered to help glue the powder on. (The fashionable, light powders of mid to late century were starch-based – usually rice or wheat flour; and the oils used were often fragranced with lavender or orange water.) It was the oily residue - the powder's fixative - that was the problem. It stained shirt collars and other neckwear and could easily ruin a good silken jacket.

The 'queue' that Cowper said he switched to was popular at the same time as the 'bag wig'. By 'queue' he meant the tail ('queue' in French) or small plait that the ends of a wig might be tied into. Another very tidy solution to loose back hairs.

Diderot - the prime mover behind the French *Encyclopedie* of the 1760's (a publication in several volumes purporting to be the encapsulation of all knowledge) - included bagwigs and queues in his entry about wigs. According to Diderot bagwigs were 'the most modern' kind of wig. But apparently they were invented to deal with the hustle and bustle of everyday life. They were just worn when travelling, running errands or in the rain. So a bagwig was a practical, rather mundane solution to the demands of a modern world. As such, it was originally regarded as casual garb; it would have had no place at formal occasions. However the bagwig became very popular due to its convenience, and before long was considered the very best fashionable wear and an indicator of the progress of the age. Lady Austen was clearly right: nothing else would have done in fashionable France.

Cowper we might also note, mentioned his being a 'Beau' in his letter to Lady Hesketh. So in those few sentences he nodded more than once, and in a quite friendly way, at the shapings of fashion; he may not have been an 'obsequious follower' but he wittingly went with it when he felt like it.

But it is important to emphasise too that Cowper was clear that he would decide on his appearance for himself. His personal purchases, particularly those related to clothing and thus his appearance, were part of a kind of determined self-expression or a tempered self-fashioning. Or so we are asked to believe.

And so it is with interest we discover that in 1790, some four years after the bagwigs, Cowper changed his hairstyle again:

My periwig is arrived and is the very perfection of all periwigs, having only one fault which is that my head will only go into the first half of it, the other half or upper part of it continuing still unoccupied. My artist at Olney has however undertaken to make the whole of it tenantable and then I shall be twenty years younger than you have ever seen me.

It is not obvious what Cowper meant by a 'periwig' here. The word was more commonly used of the long, heavily powdered wigs of the seventeenth century - a very extravagant, 'over-the-top' and posh affair. The term 'wig' that came into later use was of course just short form for periwig. (Periwig itself was a corruption of the French word *Peruque*.) It is possible that Cowper was referring - half-jokingly - to his purchasing a rather more formal item of headwear than was his norm.

If so, perhaps this addition to his wardrobe had something to do with his move to Weston Underwood and his growing friendship

with the aristocratic Throckmortons. (The extract above is taken from a letter to Lady Throckmorton.) For wigs by now were worn mostly just by the older generation and the more conservative; they were no longer the height of youthful fashion.

But then eighteenth century male wigs were probably never much of a conspicuous fashion statement - they were too commonplace and too useful to be regarded as frivolous: as we have just seen, Cowper himself rejoiced in the way a wig could conveniently disguise his age and of course keep his balding pate warm.

We can see from his taste in headwear that Cowper liked to look 'smart' and orderly. A stock was clearly 'smart' and tidy too. It rounded off the neck neatly and cleanly and made a similarly decent fashion and personal statement. Maybe there is modest commonality here.





All Buttoned Up

It is rather hard to believe that Cowper did not enjoy looking a little bit special. He clearly relished the more expensive materials that he ordered for himself and Mrs. Unwin - sourced for him by friends and family. The silks, satins, muslins and fine worsteds he requested are too particularised not to have mattered.

His demand, in 1784, of William Unwin, is typical:

I want a yard of green satten to front a winter under waistcoat

And he seems to have been especially fond of waistcoats and buttons. Not just the gold buttons that had belonged to his father - clearly of sentimental as well as monetary value - but new buttons that gave his clothing a distinctive finish.

For example he wrote to cousin Harriot in 1787:

Thanks to your choice I wear the most elegant buttons in all this country; they have been much admired at the Hall. When my waistcoat is made I shall be quite accomplished.

Which turned out to be true; they had a good reception:

A thousand thanks my dear for my waistcoat, which I wore the last time I dined at the Hall, to the great admiration of the ladies. It is perfectly genteel and elegant.



We know a little more about his fancy for nicely fashioned waistcoats from those in the Museum collection. It has for example, a waistcoat in natural leather, smartly finished with small metal buttons down the front. (Cowper is said to have died in this.) There is also a delightful green and cream striped silk example, with pockets and a rolled collar as well as trimmed with buttons covered in the same material: both quietly tasteful, and tidily elegant objects.



The museum also owns a few small accessories which belonged to Cowper: things he carried round with him or wore and which contribute to our picture of him. These include two large metal buttons cut with a star-like motif and the pairs of two pronged glittering shoe buckles that would have ‘finished him off’ smartly.



Then there are the snuff boxes (examples in silver, papier mache and wood) and the fine gold seal set with carnelian, all of which played their part in the private and public, self-fashioned Cowper.



Perhaps the most unusual of his fancier accoutrements, is a small leather pocket book with a fine, decorative silver clasp. It's the size of a pack of modern playing cards, and may be the one he thanked Harriot for in this note:

I thank you also My Dear for a neat little pocket-book, containing in each of its two pockets, a note for £10...



Cowper's reliance on friends and family for money and materials - the makings of an appearance - are what help us gather together a picture of him and what mattered to him related to this picture. His written 'pleases' and 'thank-yous' tell us so much.

And so finally we come to a garment that he wanted to complete the picture. It comes in a letter to Lady Hesketh again, written in 1790 and again the buttons are apparently important:

I want a new coat, but must first, it seems have a fashionable pattern. Wilt thou send me one when thou sendest, or dost send the MSS? A pattern button is wanted also.



Johnny Johnson - Cowper's much younger cousin - described Cowper clad in a brown overcoat on a daily walk from Weston Underwood as follows:

*While the walking shoes his valet bore
And what were buskins termed in days of yore,
Short, and of black material meant to sheathe
From dirt the speckled honours underneath:
The wig, whose name verse hesitates to tell,
An incanorous monosyllable;
The brown surtout with velvet collar matched
Though a poet's garment, nowhere patched,
The hat and gloves; and fitted to one hand,
Rough-coated as it grew; the hazel wand -
All these into his study brought.*

Rather a mixture.

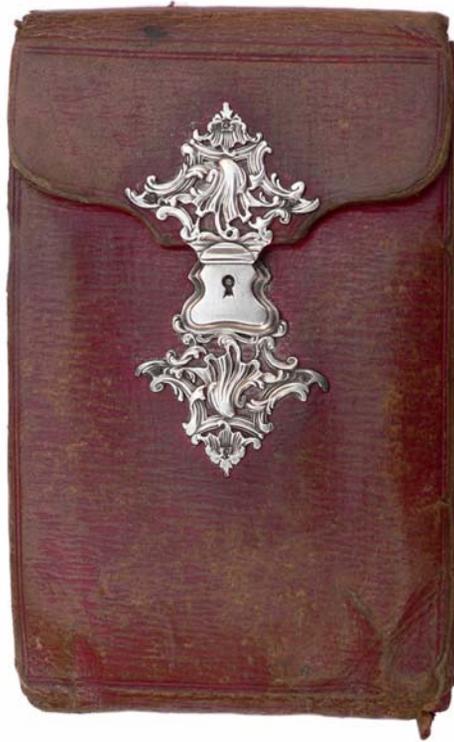


Indeed looking across from his seriously fine stock and finer stock buckle and those tidily smart wigs but rather cocky hats, and from his pleasure in flouncing ruffles and for fancy (but tidying) buttons and delicate and expensive fabrics - across to his spurning of fashionable leather boots in favour of 'buskins' we do see quite a range. He is practical, smart, tidy and decent - orderly with a twist.

As so often where Cowper is concerned there is a tension. We can see him exercising, even in his choice of apparel and accessories, a modern desire for authentic self-expression, or 'candour' as he called it; and we can see how this was balanced by the constraints of cultural propriety and commercial opportunity.



Cowper's shoe buckles with leather straps.



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OLNEY

Photographs by Deborah Hopson-Wolpe