

# COWPER'S LAVENDER WATER BOTTLE



A MATERIAL WORLD

The best Distilled  
LAVENDER WATER,  
Made by  
JAMES SMYTH,  
and NEPHEW,  
PERFUMERS to His MAJESTY.  
At the *Civet-Cat* in *New Bond-street*,  
L O N D O N.

# LAVENDER WATER BOTTLE

## **Introduction**

In this study we discuss a small bottle that once contained a distillation of lavender. It was purchased for William Cowper from a London, Bond Street, shop owned by James Smyth. We know that William Cowper used this bottle not long before his death.

## **James Smyth and Nephew**

James Smyth was perfumer to King George 11 and George 111. An early record of his business (in the Daily Advertiser of 1743) shows he occupied a shop at Civet Cat, New Bond Street, London. According to a billhead of 1757, made out to the Duke of Bedford's household, he sold a bottle of distilled lavender water to them for 5 shillings and 2 pence (about 25 pence in today's money, but of course 'worth' much more). Household accounts reveal that Smyth and Nephew went on supplying the Bedfords with their 'Best Distilled Lavender Water' until the late 1760's.

The bottle is itself a delight: it is 11 centimetres high and takes the form of a miniature, late Georgian, plain glass decanter. It has a small pontil mark on its base, formed when the glass blower's rod (the pontil) was broken off. It has a cork stopper which was held in place with a black wax seal.

James Smyth's paper label is elegantly shaped to hug the lower,

swollen bellied, two thirds of his bottle. It is printed partly in italics, in a font invented by William Caslon in 1722. This font, and its Roman variation, is the most common one used on eighteenth century print in England and America. Notice the distinctive long 's' in the middle of a word and the way the designer has sized the lettering carefully so that it fits and enhances the narrowing at the bottle's base.



## **Lavender and its Uses**

Lavender has been used as a cosmetic, an unguent and a medicine for centuries. Wealthy, high status Egyptians used it both as a perfume (aromatic traces were detected in urns found in the tomb of King Tutankhamen) and in the embalming process. Both Greeks and Romans used lavender for the healing qualities associated with its scent. According to the Greek philosopher Diogenes, it was important to apply lavender oil to the feet rather than to the head (as the Egyptians did) so that its perfume didn't just fly up and 'benefit the birds', but worked its way gradually up the body and 'gratefully ascended' to the nose.

The first surviving written record of its medical benefits appear in a 5-volume work by Dioscorides - Nero's Greek physician. (Nero was a Roman emperor.) Dioscorides claimed that lavender, when ingested, would relieve indigestion, headaches and sore throats; when applied externally it would help to clean wounds, soothe burns and treat other skin ailments.

Pliny the Elder (a renowned Greek traveller and encyclopaedia writer) noted even more medical applications in his studies of foreign customs. He recorded the considerable use of lavender for internal ailments such as stomach upsets, kidney diseases, jaundice and dropsy. He also reported that women used it to address menstrual problems or might hang it near their beds to 'incite the passions'.

Moving through the centuries to the Middle Ages and over to England, we find many a monastery garden with lavender

amongst its medicinal plants. At this time medicine and drug therapy were almost synonymous. Plants such as Tansy, Rue and Mint, in particular, contained ingredients that became associated with various medicaments; many such therapies survive to this day, carried on through tradition and herbal lore as well as with the support of plant sciences.

Under the Welsh Tudors came the dissolution of the monasteries and with this many of their privileged garden practices. Lavender growing became more domesticated and more widespread. As is perhaps well-known, lavender was much used in sixteenth century Tudor England as a sweetener of the air: it was used on floors as a strew herb, as pot-pourri around rooms, or sewn into bags for personal use. Its scent was much exploited in laundry work as an insect repellent as well as a disinfectant and fabric freshener. Indeed the word 'lavender' probably comes from the latin 'lavare', to wash, and has been used in bathing from Roman times to today.

The sixteenth century also saw the growth of instruction manuals and practical books on how to make and do almost everything. (An off-shoot of the invention of printing.) Amongst such manuals we find Herbals advocating the use of lavender and other plants. One of the first Herbals was written by Antony Ascham in 1525; it was soon followed by, the perhaps even more famous, John Gerard Herbal of 1597.

Both of these Elizabethan writers recommended the growing and using of lavender, and for (by now) fairly traditional reasons. It was the scent which Asham believed made lavender an excellent soak (for weary ankles) or a good bandage for wrapping round aching temples to induce sleep. Gerard contributed the idea that lavender had cosmetic benefits: that it would reduce freckles as well as help with skin complaints such as spots or rashes.

By the seventeenth century lavender had become very popular and could be bought fairly easily from street sellers. At this time it was recommended as protection against almost every infection - from cholera and the plague (the Great Plague of 1665 in particular) to the relief of the common cold, with its rheumy headaches, cuts and wounds and general longeurs.

### **Cowper's Garden**

And so to Cowper and to his eighteenth century gardens. When Cowper moved to Orchard Side, Olney, in 1768, he took over the tree, shrub and flower area near the house. He was an avid gardener enjoying all aspects of the work: he sowed from seed and he propagated and nurtured all sorts of plants, vegetables as well as flowering species. Many of these were rare at the time. In his letters Cowper clearly delights in boasting of the exotics he has managed to get flourishing, especially when he achieves this before his neighbouring estate owners. He is quite competitive in this respect and very proud of his self-built greenhouse, 'my favourite recess' and 'summer parlour' that helps him.

He also writes eloquently of the perfumes rising from his flowers: his myrtles, roses, carnations, mignonettes, honeysuckles, jasmines and balsams. A full list of his scented flowers would be very long indeed, and, as he writes in a letter to John Newton of 1784, he is

*... regaled with the scent of every flower in a garden as full of flowers as I have known how to make it*

He must have grown lavender too although this is not mentioned as a favourite. And he would certainly have welcomed its refreshing smell as he brushed by, for Olney was not the complete scented Paradise at that time. In another letter, written



in a hot August, he mentions that he spends most of his time in the greenhouse

*'...as it affords us by far the pleasantest retreat in Olney...not to mention the exchange of a sweet smelling garden for the putrid exhalations of Silver End*

Silver End - just round the corner from the Market Place, and Orchard Side - was the poorest part of Olney and inhabited largely by the hard-worn lace makers of the town.

Beyond Cowper's flower garden was an area originally belonging to, and planted up by the eighteenth century physician Dr. Aspray. His garden would have contained a range of medicinal plants used in his Olney trade - both herbs and woodier spices. He would have grown the most significant herbs from medieval days such as savory, sage, rue, rosemary, peppermint, bergamot, lovage and fennel as well as thyme, horehound, sorrel, lovage, feverfew, lavender, comfrey and tansy (and more besides!). Amongst the spices grown, we could expect to have seen cumin, anise, dill and fenugreek.

In the eighteenth century such plants were prepared in many ways (as teas, poultices or just cleaned) and used for all kinds of ailments, inside and out.

All parts of a plant - flowers leaves, roots, stems, bark or seeds - might be used. The softer parts (leaves and flowers mostly) would usually be infused - that is, soaked in hot water for

about a quarter of an hour as in tea-making, while the tougher bits (stems, roots and bark) would usually be boiled down for longer to make what is called a decoction.

Our lavender bottle contained a distillation – a condensed form of infusion. To make this, the flowers would have been infused in water, then brought to the boil and the steam caught. It is a process distinct again from ‘tincture’ making where a herb is infused in alcohol so as to absorb its soluble parts.

### **Of Meteors and Plague - a Time for Lavender**

We are postponing to another month some details of Cowper’s interesting remedies, described in his letters, for treating various maladies and indispositions. Suffice it to say here that he was very interested in the latest medical ideas as well as in well-worn ways of relieving physical problems. For his part, these included headaches, digestive disorders, sleeplessness and eye complaints. For Mrs. Unwin, his companion, there was a stroke to cope with and for others, appropriate treatments for small pox, consumption, constipation, knock knees and squints.

Cowper was full of advice and enthusiasm for handling such problems. His own distressing melancholia was of course a real issue, but this aside, it seems that Cowper took ailments seriously: he enjoyed their study and he enjoyed attending to them.

However there was one notorious year of ill health in Olney which we focus on next. There were a four miserable months in particular, when non-pernicious refreshers and curatives such as lavender water must have felt like a necessity not just a bonus. This was in 1783, and it all began in the June of that

year. On June 13<sup>th</sup> Cowper wrote to John Newton describing some fearful weather and galactic events:

*The fogs I mentioned in my last still continue, though till yesterday the Earth was as dry as intense heat could make it. The sun continues to rise and set without his rays and hardly shines at noon even in a cloudless sky. At eleven last night the moon was of a dull red, she was nearly at her highest elevation and had the colour of heated brick... We have had more thunderstorms than have consisted well with the peace of the fearful maidens of Olney, though not so many as have happened in places at no great distance, nor so violent. **Yesterday morning however at 7 o'clock, two fire balls burst either in the steeple or close to it. William Andrews saw them meet at that point, and immediately after saw such a smoke issue from the apertures in the steeple as soon rendered it invisible...** when Joe Green went afterward to wind the clock, flakes of stone and lumps of mortar fell about his ears in such abundance that he desisted and fled terrified. **The noise of that explosion surpassed all the noises I ever heard, you would have thought a thousand sledge hammers were battering great stones to powder, all in the same instant.***

*The weather is still as hot, and the air as full of vapor, as if there had been neither rain nor thunder all summer.*

And on June 29<sup>th</sup> he continues:

*So long, in a country not subject to fogs, we have been covered with one of the thickest I remember. We never see the sun but shorn of its beams, the trees are scarce discernable at a mile's distance, he sets with the face of a red hot salamander and rises*

*with the same complexion...some fear to go to bed, expecting an earthquake...some assert that the day of judgment is at hand.*

In August, Cowper tells the Reverend William Bull, of Newport Pagnell, about ongoing storms:

*I was always an admirer of thunderstorms...and...we have indeed been regaled with some of these bursts of ethereal music, the steeple has been shaken and a glazier has been knocked down, the former still stands and the latter is on his legs again.*

And on September 3<sup>rd</sup> Cowper is still reflecting on the bad weather of that summer and on consequent illnesses:

*...having been myself seized with a fever immediately after your departure...The reveries your head was filled with while your disorder was most prevalent, though they were but reveries and the offspring of an heated imagination...I had none such. It would have been wonderful if I had. Indeed I was in no degree delirious, nor has anything less than a fever really dangerous ever made me so. In this respect if in no other I may be said to have a strong head ... an ordinary degree of fever has no effect upon my understanding. The epidemic begins to be more mortal as the autumn comes on. Two men of drunken memory have died of it since you went, and in Bedfordshire it is reported, how truly I cannot say, to be nearly as fatal as a plague...*

On 23<sup>rd</sup> September, Cowper, writing again to John Newton, still sounds poorly, but the it is the number of townsfolk dying around him that is striking:

*For my own part, though I have not been laid up, I have never been perfectly well since you left us. A smart fever, which lasted some time and still makes me unfit for my favourite occupations,*

*Indeed but a few hours, succeeded by a lassitude and want of spirits that seemed to indicate a feverish habit, has made me for writing and reading; so that even a letter and even a letter to you, is not without his burthen. An emetic which I took yesterday has I believe done me more good than any thing...John Line has had the epidemic and has it still...Bett Fisher was buried last night – she died of the distemper, Molly Clifton is dying, but of a decline...poor John has been very ready to depart... Oh what things pass in cottages and hovels which the Great never dream of.*

It has clearly been an appalling time, a stretch of four months of oppressive air, darkness, humidity and illness. Cowper, right at the end of September, writes to William Unwin (Mrs Unwin's son) and looks back over the summer:

*You are happy in having hitherto escaped the epidemic fever which has prevailed in this part of the Kingdom, and carried many off. Your Mother and I are well after more than a fortnight's indisposition ... I am at length restored by a grain or two of an Emetic Tartar. It is a tax I generally pay in Autumn. By this time, I hope a purer ether than we have seen for months, and these brighter suns than the summer had to boast... The cattle in the fields show evident symptoms of lassitude and disgust in an unpleasant season and we their lords and masters are constrained to sympathise with them.*

A time indeed for the soothing scent of lavender water.

## **The Wordsworth Connection**

There is a note that comes with the bottle in the museum collection saying that Cowper had used the lavender water not long before he died in 1800. At this time he was a much celebrated poet, admired by his peers for the innovative way he moved the writing of Nature poetry on. In Cowper's work we find traces both of an (earlier) generalised pastoral idyll and of a more modern Romantic and personalised approach. It was the latter that so impressed and inspired Wordsworth with its new luminous immediacy, intimate style and natural diction.

In recognition of Wordsworth's respect for Cowper (who was generally regarded as the foremost poet of his time) our lavender bottle was given to him on Cowper's death. But the bottle found its way back to Olney through a gift from Dorothy Dickson, the great granddaughter of Wordsworth. Our tiny flask has a giant's provenance and allows powerful reflections on an eighteenth century rural life.



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for The Cowper and Newton Museum  
OLNEY

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