COWPER'S TAME HARES

THE PHASANTS NEST
PUSS TINEY & BESS

COWPER’S TAME HARES

Introduction

This booklet is about the three tame hares that Cowper reared when he lived at Olney and some of the related hare memorabilia at the Cowper and Newton Museum.

We have relied extensively on a selection of Cowper’s own writings to illustrate and elaborate the story. This collection, taken from letters and poems, contains vivid descriptions of the life, adventures and death of his hares and includes interesting details about their daily care. Cowper’s words also allow us an occasional insight into his views on, and values related to, Nature, Nurture, Life and Death.

We begin with a little of the Olney context.

Cowper at Olney

Cowper was 37 years old when he moved to Olney in 1768. He had already suffered some serious mental breakdowns by this time and continued to be dogged by bouts of acute self-doubt and depression (one severe episode whilst in Olney) to the end of his days. The hares were given him partly to try and help him through these darker times. Nevertheless it was during his time at Orchard Side in Olney that he penned much of his best known work. These include the comic ballad, ‘John Gilpin’, published to much popular, contemporary acclaim, his long and more earnest poem, ‘The Task’ and a share of the Olney Hymns which he wrote in collaboration with the Reverend John Newton. Newton lived just across the way at the Vicarage and was the author of the widely celebrated hymn ‘Amazing Grace’.

Cowper’s residency in Olney is commemorated by the town with a weathervane in the Market Place, just outside Orchard Side. The vane shows a silhouetted quill pen and a hare. These refer respectively to Cowper’s writing, and perhaps less obviously to the uninitiated, to his fondness for hares. And this does not mean a passing fancy for a wild species but Cowper’s particular fondness for the three hares he kept as pets.

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 described how he came by his hares and how he reared them. 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.

This prose account, along with snippets from some of Cowper’s other writings about hares, taken from letters and poems, make up a large part of what follows.

The Three Hares: Puss, Bess and Tiney.

We start with the famous letter so much enjoyed by Mill. In it Cowper explains how and why he came by his hares, describes their individual characters and tells us how he looked after them. It was published in *The Gentleman's Magazine* as a letter to Mr. Urban - the pseudonym of John Nichols, editor, author and publisher. Nichols was involved with this magazine from 1778 as a manager, becoming editor in 1792. He was an eminent scholar himself but Cowper knew him largely through the magazine.

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.

From *THE GENTLEMAN'S MAGAZINE* (June 1784)

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 irected 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 of 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.

Escapade

Several of Cowper's more private letters have survived and make good reading. Many contain delightful pictures of everyday events in Olney and of Cowper's life there; they can be very amusing for he had a dry wit as well as a taste for the amusing anecdote. 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. 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. (The strange spellings are Cowper's own.)

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.

BESS
PUSS

Hare Memorabilia in the Museum

A Seal Fob

A fob is a small decorative object, usually hung from a chain and carried around in a waistcoat pocket or waistband. The museum owns a seal fob that dates from the reign of George III (1760-1820) and once belonged to Lady Harriot Hesketh, Cowper's cousin. It is of special interest as it consists of three seals, each carved with the name and image of one of Cowper's three hares.

The seal settings are of gold and have been soldered together, rim-to-rim, to form a united, rotatable threesome. The whole assembly measures less than three centimetres and the seals measure about one and a half centimetres each: this is fine work.
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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.

A Snuff Box

Another much celebrated memento of Cowper's hares is a fine circular snuff box with the three animals depicted on the lid.

The 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. Cowper wrote twice to Lady Hesketh about this gift, and in his second letter added this to his initial 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.

The box is charming 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.

A Stuffed Hare

There are many other, probably lesser known, commemorative objects in and around the museum. There is for example, the small square hole cut through the wall that divides kitchen and hall. This is currently occupied by a stuffed hare apparently leaping through from the kitchen to the hall. The hole is unlikely to have served as a hare passageway in Cowper's day however – it may merely have been intended as a window for light and heat to pass from the kitchen fire into the hall. But, as we saw from Cowper's published letter, the hall was the hares' indoor resting place and home and this is what the leaping hare commemorates.

As Cowper confessed to Cousin Harriot in a letter of 1775 the presence of the hare boxes in the hall greatly added to the general untidiness:

My Dear,
We live you must know in a house that has two small parlours. The Hare has entirely occupied one these past 12 years, and has made it unfit to be the receptacle of anything better than the box in which he sleeps

Cowper used this room anyway as something of a general depositary and the front door which leads into it was not much used as a result - as well as for fear of a hare escaping. People came in the back way as we do now.

Contemporary Commemoratives

The story of Cowper's hares and hare-keeping continues to attract and fascinate people today. We can see this partly from various other hare sculptures which linger around the garden of the museum. We have at the far end of the garden (at the end of what was once Cowper's gravel path, now a paved walk way) a pair of boxing hares. These are made of crushed chicken wire and were sculpted and given us by a local farmer. And at the other end stands a large wooden hare that guards the entrance to the Museum. Meanwhile half way down the garden a Friend of the Museum has cleverly teased a topiary hare from some box hedging.

And so they live on - in memory at least. But to learn a little more about their deaths, we return now to more of Cowper's writings.

On the Death of Cowper's Hares

As we saw in the long published letter, the first we quoted, Bess died relatively young while Puss and Tiney lived to nearly twelve and nine years respectively. These are pretty good ages for a hare to reach. (Thirteen years is said to be the maximum, but is rarely

achieved in the wild.) Cowper appears not to have written anything further about the death of Bess. When Puss died however he recorded the fact in a rather poignant note, later found amongst his belongings, as follows:

Tuesday, March 9th, 1786.

This day died poor Puss, aged eleven years, eleven months. He died between twelve and one at noon, of mere old age, and apparently without pain.

But the death of Tiney in 1783 prompted Cowper to put pen to paper at greater length. He broke the news in a letter to his friend William Unwin with a rather stark announcement followed by a poem. This letter started jovially enough, with Cowper thanking Unwin for the gift of a Halibut and suggesting some fascinating cures for squints and knock-knees, but it ended as follows:

… One of my Hares is dead - behold his

Epitaph

Here lies, whom hound did ne'er pursue,
Nor swifter Greyhound follow,
Whose foot ne'er tainted morning dew,
Nor Ear heard Huntsman's hollow,

Tiney, the surliest of his kind,
Who, nurs'd with tender care,
And to domestic bounds confin'd,
Was still a wild Jack Hare.

Though duely from my hand he took
His pittance ev'ry night,
He did it with a jealous look,
And when he could, would bite.

His diet was of wheaten bread,
And milk and Oats and straw,
Thistles, or Lettuces instead,
With sand to scow'r his maw.

On twigs of hawthorn he regaled,
Or pippins russet peel,
And when his juicey sallads fail'd,
Sliced carrot pleas'd him well.

A Turkey carpet was his lawn
On which he loved to bound,
To skip and gambol like a fawn
And swing his rump around.

His frisking was at evening hours,
For then he lost his fear ,
But most before approaching show'rs,
Or when a storm drew near.

Eight years and 5 round rolling moons
He thus saw steal away,
Slumbr'ing out all his idle noons,
And ev'ry night at play.

I kept him for old service sake
For he would oft beguile
My heart of thoughts that made it ache,
And force me to a smile.

But now beneath this Wallnut shade
He finds his long, last home,
And waits in snug concealment laid,
'Till gentler Puss, shall come.

She still more ancient, feels the shocks
From which no care can save,
And partner once of Tiney's box,
Must soon partake his grave;

We shall be happy to see you and Mrs. U. with you, or any part of your family. I hope to be able to send a Melon or two. Yours ever, with our united Love,   Wm. C.

You may have noticed the rather barbed reference to hunting in the opening lines of this epitaph: Cowper detested the sport which he regarded as a cruel violation of nature rather than as anything corresponding to entertainment. Indeed, according to a descendent of Cowper’s Norfolk cousins (Catherine Barham Johnson) he makes only one reference to ever using a gun:

Let her guess what I muse on, when rambling alone,
I stride o’er the stubble each day with my gun,
Never ready to shoot till the covey is flown.

She added then this comment:

Although he enjoyed eating partridges and pheasants, one cannot imagine him enjoying shooting them.

It seems the same might be said about hares. Cowper on at least two occasions referred obliquely to hares as food. Here is one example from a letter to John Newton:

Mrs. Unwin hopes that a hare she sent before Mrs. Newton went her journey, arrived safe. By this week’s coach she also sent three fowls and a ham with cabbages, of whose safe arrival she will likewise be glad to hear.

Nevertheless, Cowper campaigned for many anti-cruelty and humanitarian causes during his life. He was for instance, a fierce opponent of slave trading and was greatly distressed by, and concerned to help the poverty-stricken of Olney, in particular the local lace-makers. His hymn writing too can be partly understood as evidence of his commitment to securing the spiritual well being of humankind and of his determination to bring people to God and so to Salvation.

Hares and their Hunting

In the poem below, Cowper addresses quite directly his anti-hunting views. It is taken from one of his most celebrated works called *The Task,* from the section called *The Garden.* As you can see from this extract, Cowper calls upon his first-hand knowledge of hares and his love for Tiney to vivify his attack upon hunting.

From 'The Garden' *(1785)*

They love the country, and none else, who seek
For their own sake its silence and its shade.
Delights which who would leave, that has a heart
Susceptible of pity, or a mind
Cultured and capable of sober thought,
For all the savage din of the swift pack
And clamours of the field detested sport,
That owes its pleasures to another's pain,
That feeds upon the sobs and dying shrieks
Of harmless nature, dumb, but yet endued
With eloquence that agonies inspire
Of silent tears and heart-distending sighs!
Vain tears alas! and sighs that never find
A corresponding tone in jovial souls.
Well-one at least is safe. One shelter'd hare

Has never heard the sanguinary yell
Of cruel man, exulting in her woes.
Innocent partner of my peaceful home,
Whom ten long years experience of my care
Has made at last familiar, she has lost
Much of her vigilant instinctive dread,
Not needful here, beneath a roof like mine.
Yes- thou may’st eat thy bread, and lick the hand
That feeds thee; thou may'st frolic on the floor
At evening, and at night retire secure
To thy straw-couch, and slumber unalarm'd.
For I have gain'd thy confidence, have pledg'd
All that is human in me, to protect
Thine unsuspecting gratitude and love.
If I survive thee I will dig thy grave,
And when I place thee in it, sighing say,
I knew at least one hare that had a friend.

Cowper's Reflections on Death

Cowper was much pre-occupied with bleak thoughts about death especially his own death. As a convert to Evangelicalism he was particularly sensitive to ideas of damnation and salvation and somewhat tortured by the thought of his own sins. The thought of death more generally appears to have been on his mind when he wrote Tiney's epitaph for example; for he did not stop at an individualised memorial, he went on to muse on *'gentler Puss'* and his third hare's inevitable, future demise.

EPITAPHIUM ALTERUM

Hic etiam jacet
Qui totum novennium vixit
Puss.
Siste paulisper
Qui praeteriturus es,
Et tecum sic repute –
Hunc neque canis venaticus
Nec plumbum missile
Nec imbres nimii
Confecere
Tamen mortuus est –
Et moriar ego.

The Latin translates like this:

'Here Puss still rests, after nine whole years of life. Stay a while, you who would pass by, and thus reflect: no huntsman's bound, no leaden ball, no snare, no drenching downpour, brought about his end – yet he is dead, and I too shall die.'

The reference to *Puss* in the third line could be rather confusing - since Cowper's epitaph is to Tiney and Puss was still alive - until we recall that Puss was the general name for a hare (and other species) at the time.

Cowper's Love of Nature

We end this collection with another snippet from a Cowper letter in which he describes his second parlour - his garden retreat that was really a greenhouse.

In it Cowper invites Cousin Harriet to visit him, partly it would seem to admire his garden and partly also to admire his carpentry: the home-made wooden 'hare box', or hutch, that he's obviously rather proud of. The extract fairly ripples with the names of some of the flowers in his beloved garden at Orchard Side. It is a romantic evocation of a cultivated paradise that is in striking contrast to some of Cowper's more apprehensive views of 'the Country' and of Nature seen earlier. This is Cowper apparently in more buoyant mood - indeed he appears quite calm about Puss' declining health and impending death.

My Dear,
I will not let you come 'till the end of May or beginning of June, because before that time my greenhouse will not be ready to receive us, for it is the only pleasant room belonging to us. When the plants go out, we go in. I line it with mats, and spread the floor with mats, and there you shall sit with a bed of Mignonette at your side, and a hedge of Honeysuckles, Roses and Jassamine; and I will make you a bouquet of Myrtle every day. Sooner than the time I mention the Country will not be in complete beauty. And now I will tell you what you shall find on your first entrance. Imprimis, as soon as you have enter'd the Vestibule, if you cast a look to either side of you, you shall see on your right hand a box of my making. It is the Box in which have been lodged all my hares, and in which lodges Puss at present. But he, poor fellow, is worn out with age, and promises to die before you can see him.

Appendix.

Some Nature Notes.

If you are interested in hares as a species you might like to look at the following information which has been gleaned from various Natural Science sources. Much of it tallies well with Cowper's own observations.

A general word about Hares.

There are three types of hare common in the British Isles: the 'blue' or 'mountain' hare indigenous to Scotland and found mainly in the highlands; the Irish hare, also preferring highland and moor; finally the brown hare. The brown hare is the most common of the three types; it lives on down-land and farming country throughout England and southern Scotland. Unlike the other two the brown hare is an import: it was introduced to Britain by the Romans, and brought here to sustain their love of coursing. (Cowper's hares were of this last sort.)

Modern farming methods have tended to encourage a decline in the hare population of Britain. It is thought to have fallen by about 75% over the last century - and is certainly far lower than in Cowper's day. The decline in traditional mixed farming has adversely affected both the wild hare's regular sources of food and the protection that ongoing crops offered them from their predators. Their main predator is the fox and it is the young hares – leverets – which are so vulnerable to these.

Wild hares live above ground and tend to nestle in 'forms' or hollows scraped out of the ground – usually out of plough land or

stubble. In very bad weather they may seek shelter in woods or under the lee of ridges or other high ground. They are particularly vulnerable to illness in wet weather and in a very rainy season leverets have been known to drown in their own forms.

A female hare, or ‘doe’ can produce up to four litters a year (though two is more common) each with three or more leverets. Leverets are born fully furred and open-eyed. The doe may settle her young in separate forms as part of their preparation for survival. This means she will need to visit them by turn to suckle them. But the doe usually leaves her young to fend for themselves after only a fortnight of such care. The male hare, or ‘buck’ plays no part in the rearing of his young. (Cowper’s three hares were all male.)

Hares feed at night enjoying a very varied diet that changes with the seasons in accord with what is available. Their preferred food includes cereals, root crops and weeds. But as just noted, the decline in traditional mixed farming can mean some hares starve at fallow times of the year, and that they lack the all year round crop growth in which they used to hide.

Hares do not usually live in communities. In this and in other respects they differ from rabbits. For instance, rabbits are born blind and naked and live in colonies in underground burrows. They are usually smaller than hares. Hares have distinctive ears - longer than a rabbit’s and with black markings - and they can outleap rabbits easily given their longer hind legs and larger hind feet.

Both hares and rabbits were once classified as rodents because, like rats, mice and squirrels, they have strong chisel-like front teeth for gnawing. But they differ from rodents in that they have two small cutting teeth (incisors) behind the larger ones in the upper jaw. Today rabbits and hares are classed as members of the Leporidae family within the order Lagomorpha.

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