

## Peter Cowper c1706-1782

### Vicar 1729-1782

Peter Cowper was vicar of St Helen's Church for 53 years. He came from a family of minor gentry in Chester, who owned a house in Bridge Street (photo) and a property in nearby Overleigh. Their ancestor, Thomas Cowper, arrived in Chester in 1498 and the property at Overleigh was purchased in 1660. A new house was built of brick from the nearby brick fields.



*The Cowper house at 12 Bridge Street, Chester. Built for Thomas Cowper in 1664. Now a shop.*

*Photo from Wikimedia Commons.  
Photographer: Peter I Vardy.*

Peter Cowper was the 6th of 9 children of Rev John Cowper (1671-1718) and his wife Catherine Sherwin (d. 1727). Catherine was the daughter of William Sherwin, beadle of divinity and bailiff of Oxford University. Rev John Cowper was a graduate of Brasenose College, Oxford, became chaplain to William Stanley, the 9<sup>th</sup> Earl of Derby and was vicar of Middlewich, Cheshire, from 1702-1718.

Peter's elder brother William became a respected doctor in Chester and in 1754 was elected mayor. William was an antiquary and was responsible for preserving many valuable manuscript collections in the town.

Peter Cowper was born around 1706. Like his father, he was a student of Brasenose College, Oxford, graduating with a BA in 1728. He was instituted vicar of St Helen's in June 1729, his Patron being Theophilus, the 9<sup>th</sup> Earl of Huntingdon.

Few records remain of Peter Cowper's time in Ashby but it is known that the period of 1731-1783, which roughly coincides with his tenure of the living, was the richest period for giving books to the Ashby Parish Library. In 1730, just a year after his arrival, Cowper built a library building in the vicarage garden, with a slate plaque in Latin containing the name of Thomas Bate (the instigator of the library) over the

threshold. By 1852, when the books were returned to the vicarage building itself, the library may have contained up to 1200 books. Many books in the library contain the inscription, "the gift of P Cowper."<sup>1</sup>

In 1750, Peter Cowper was appointed Rector of Sutton cum Duckmanton, just to the south east of Chesterfield. He held this post until 1773. It's hard to imagine how this role was compatible with his position in Ashby as the parishes are 42 miles apart, which would have been a good day's journey on horseback. It's also apparent from the contents of the Parish Register that Cowper was presiding over all marriages in Ashby, which would give him little



*Slate plaque from Cowper's building for the Bate Library.*

*Dated MDCCXXX (1730)*

<sup>1</sup> The Ashby de la Zouch Parish Library is housed in the Special Collections of the University of Nottingham.

time to travel such a distance on a regular basis. It seems likely that a resident Curate would have looked after the day to day spiritual health of Sutton cum Duckmanton.

Looking at the St Helen's registers, it is clear that the hand which writes them changes from around September 1772. The marriage registers, written in much more detail than baptisms and deaths, indicate that the new hand is that of John Prior, the curate. Peter Cowper's writing does not appear in any of the registers after the end of August 1772. Is it possible that Cowper was too ill or infirm after August 1872 to carry out his duties in Ashby? This could also explain why he resigned his post at Sutton cum Duckmanton in April 1773.

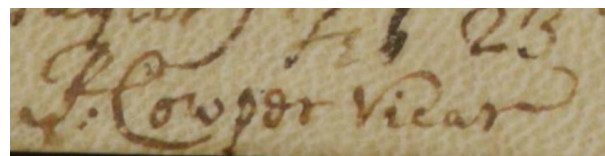
Another detail in the life of Peter Cowper was his appointment as domestic chaplain to Laurence, 4<sup>th</sup> Earl Ferrers, in September 1745, a post he held until Ferrers' death by hanging in 1760. The 4<sup>th</sup> Earl Ferrers was the notorious Laurence Shirley, the last peer to be hanged in England, having been found guilty of murdering his steward, John Johnson. A chaplain was present at his hanging, but it wasn't Cowper, it was a Mr Humphries. Nevertheless, Cowper, as his personal chaplain, should have known the man well, though he is not mentioned in the extensive and well documented statements of respected local doctor, Thomas Kirkland, who attended the dying man.

Cowper would also have known Selina Shirley (1707-1791), Laurence's cousin and the wife of Cowper's patron, the 9<sup>th</sup> Earl Huntingdon. In fact, they were almost exact contemporaries, born within a year of each other. By the late 1740s, after her husband's death, Selina was living at Ashby Place, a house which stood adjacent to St Helen's Church, where the Manor House now stands. There, she received visits from prominent Methodists such as the Wesleys and George Whitefield and in May 1750 there was a riot outside Ashby Place when Whitefield preached. Selina was aware that people in Ashby were antagonistic towards the Hastings family at that time. It could have been due to the rents on their farms and properties, but Selina was convinced that it was her *'identification with the despised Methodists that angered the people in this strongly Royalist area.'*<sup>2</sup> Public anger was still rumbling on in July 1750. *'As a loyal member of the Church of England she wished above everything else to see the Church reformed from within. ..no services were held in the Methodist preaching houses during the stated times of the parish church services.'*<sup>3</sup>

Despite all this activity surrounding the widow of his patron, just a matter of yards from his church and vicarage, Cowper is not mentioned in any contemporary descriptions of the period, even though it is very well documented.

It's tempting to assume that he was an ineffective vicar of Ashby, as none of his contemporaries seems to have had anything to say about him. Perhaps he spent his life absorbed in his books? In contrast, his curate John Prior, who became vicar after Cowper's death, took a prominent and active role in local life.

Cowper never married. He died in 1782 and was buried at St Peter's Church in Chester. Even the entry in the church burial register for October 21<sup>st</sup> 1782 describes him at second hand. It reads, *'Peter, son of John Cowper vicker of Middlewich.'*



*Signature from St Helen's Parish Register*

**Julie Starkey**  
**January 2022**

<sup>2</sup> Selina Countess of Huntingdon by Faith Cook. Published by the Banner of Truth Trust. 2001. P105.

<sup>3</sup> Selina Countess of Huntingdon by Faith Cook. Published by the Banner of Truth Trust. 2001. P135.