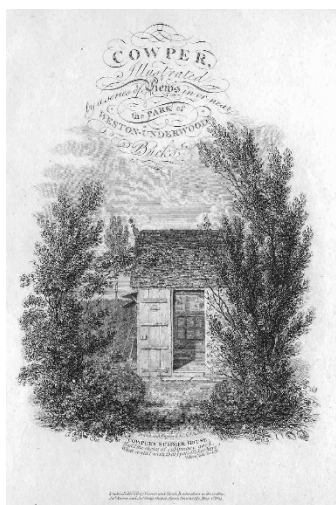


Understanding Historic Parks and Gardens in Buckinghamshire

The Buckinghamshire Gardens Trust Research & Recording Project



Cowper & Newton Museum, Olney

January 2019



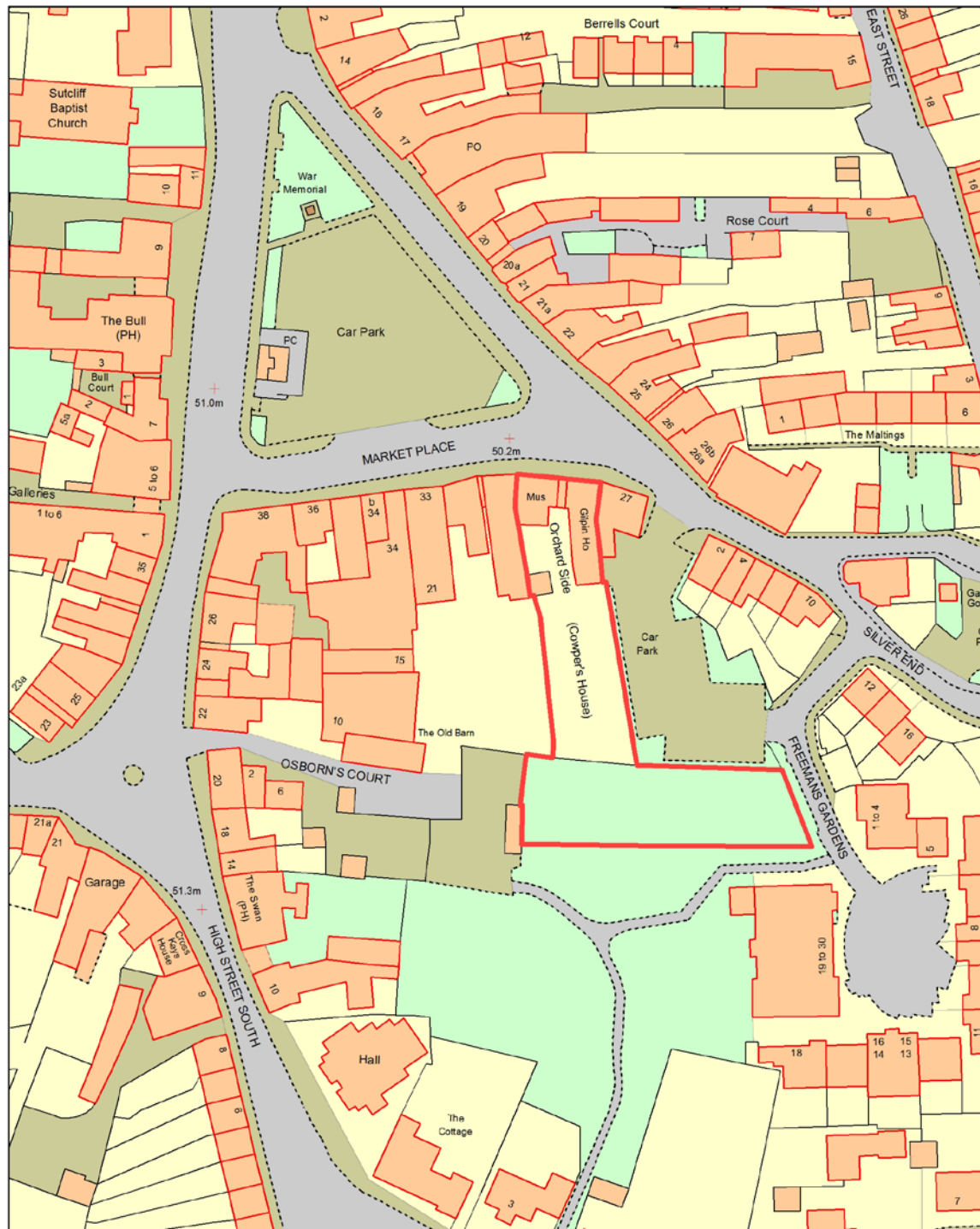
The Stanley Smith (UK)
Horticultural Trust

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Bucks Gardens Trust

HISTORIC SITE BOUNDARY



Cowper & Newton Museum, Olney: boundary of historic designed landscape interest.

Produced by the County Archaeological Service
November 2018

Scale: 1:1,000 at A4



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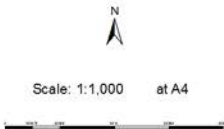
Bucks Gardens Trust



Cowper & Newton Museum, Olney: 2006 aerial photograph

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Produced by the County Archaeological Service
November 2018



Bucks Gardens Trust



INTRODUCTION

Background to the Project

This site dossier has been prepared as part of The Buckinghamshire Gardens Trust (BGT) Research and Recording Project, begun in 2014. This site is one of several hundred designed landscapes county-wide identified by Bucks County Council (BCC) in 1998 (including Milton Keynes District) as potentially retaining evidence of historic interest, as part of the Historic Parks and Gardens Register Review project carried out for English Heritage (now Historic England) (BCC Report No. 508). The list is not conclusive and further parks and gardens may be identified as research continues or further information comes to light.

Content

BGT has taken the Register Review list as a sound basis from which to select sites for appraisal as part of its Research and Recording Project for designed landscapes in the historic county of Bucks (pre-1974 boundaries). For each site a dossier is prepared by volunteers trained on behalf of BGT by experts in appraising designed landscapes who have worked extensively for English Heritage (now Historic England) on its Register Upgrade Project.

Each dossier includes the following for the site:

- A site boundary mapped on the current Ordnance Survey to indicate the extent of the main part of the surviving designed landscape, also a current aerial photograph.
- A statement of historic significance based on the four Interests outlined in the National Policy Planning Framework and including an overview.
- A written description, derived from documentary research and a site visit, based on the format of the English Heritage/ Historic England *Register of Parks & Gardens of special historic interest* 2nd edn.
- A map showing principal views and features.

The area within the site boundary represents the significant coherent remains of the designed landscape. It does not necessarily include all surviving elements of the historical landscape design, which may be fragmented. It takes no account of current ownership.

NOTE: Sites are not open to the public unless advertised elsewhere.

Supporters and Acknowledgements

The project was supported by The Gardens Trust (formerly the Association of Gardens Trusts and the Garden History Society) and funded by BGT with significant grants from the Stanley Smith Horticultural Trust and the Finnis Scott Foundation. BCC generously provided current and historic mapping and access to the Historic Environment Record.

The Trust would like to thank the volunteers and owners who have participated in this project and given so much time and effort to complete this challenging and rewarding task.

Further information is available from: www.bucksgardenstrust.org.uk

COUNTY:	BUCKINGHAMSHIRE	COWPER & NEWTON MUSEUM, OLNEY
DISTRICT:	MILTON KEYNES	
PARISH:	OLNEY	
OS REF:	SP 889 512	

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Overview

The town garden of the renowned and influential late C18 poet and letter writer William Cowper who for 18 years both gardened in it enthusiastically and drew inspiration from it for his poetry and letters during his retired life there. The extent and framework of the walled garden survives intact with it seems minor changes internally since he left it in 1786. The main feature is the diminutive, vernacular Summer House in which he spent much time musing and writing, and which continues to enjoy views of the setting he knew, particularly the orchard between the former Vicarage and the Summer House Garden and the fine church spire beyond. The character of this small C18 gentry garden has probably changed little since Cowper left. Several mature trees of the C19 or early C20 include a yew in the Flower Garden.

Archaeological interest

Two burgrave plots were apparently associated with the house before it became a garden. Archaeological potential exists for uses and structures relating to the former use although it is likely that evidence was lost when the garden layout and structures were developed. Potential exists for evidence of lost features of the garden layout including garden buildings such as Cowper's green house and a small structure at the east end of the Summer House Garden present by the late C19 (OS), path systems, beds, walls, etc.

Architectural interest

The principal building is the house, comprising two C18 town houses with earlier origins, united and remodelled in an imposing early C18 frontage to the Market Place at the heart of the town. The building defines the north end of the site and its uniform roadside frontage heralds the interior and garden with considerable style. By contrast the rear facade is not united in style, reflecting successive alterations and extensions, and does not contribute ornamentally to the garden. A group of service buildings of various periods and forms largely enclose the courtyard to the rear. The most important garden building is the mid-C18 Summer House (predating Cowper), the focal feature which stands towards the centre of the rear Summer House Garden, enjoying Cowper's view of the church spire. This modest building was Cowper's frequent retreat and scene of his writing. It was made famous after his death in books about him in which it was frequently illustrated and in its modest scale and vernacular style became an iconic symbol of his creativity. The local stone and brick boundary walls make a major contribution to the garden design.

Artistic interest

The garden design is a rare survival largely intact of an C18 town garden, retaining much of its character as it had developed by 1800. It is principally of interest for its close association with the great poet Cowper during the 1760s-80s, and his well-recorded gardening activities, although none of his planting appears to survive. Elements of later planting survive including several mature trees and the whole remains enclosed by considerable stretches of the boundary walls and the house. The well preserved Summer House is the main ornamental feature and this, together with the garden remains closely visually related to the setting much as Cowper knew it, particularly the adjacent former orchard (now a public green space) and the church spire beyond.

Historic interest

The historic interest of the garden is based on the association with William Cowper, a nationally important literary figure whose output is now largely forgotten. Here he lived for 18 years as he set out to make the best of a retired life with his friend Mrs Unwin, and nearby friend and collaborator the Revd Newton. He was celebrated in his day particularly for the wit, humour, and acuteness of observation in his letters, which embrace subjects from everyday life to politics and literary events. Almost 90 years after his death he was described as 'the most popular poet of his generation and the best of English writers' which is underlined by the fact that George III awarded him a pension of £300 a year in 1794. In period and style Cowper straddled the divide between the classicism of Dryden and Alexander Pope, and the romanticism of Wordsworth, Keats and Shelley. Shortly after his death it was said that, 'Among the literary characters that, in the present age, have attained celebrity by the extent of their genius and excellence of their productions, must be ranked the poet Cowper. ... uniting piety to talent, and devotion to principle, [who] employed the graces of poesy to strengthen the bands of morality, and give energy to the precepts which direct the heart to religion.' (Storer, 1803) Cowper lived for 18 years in Olney before moving to nearby Weston Underwood in 1786. In his garden at Olney was the tiny garden building "not much bigger than a sedan chair" that he called his Sulking Room and where he spent much time. Built by the previous owner as a Smoking Room, it served the same purpose when Cowper's friend Newton joined him there, and was undoubtedly the site of much of Cowper's musing and creativity.

The historic interest is increased because of the surviving references by Cowper to his gardening interest and activities at Orchard Side in his letters and to the expression of this interest in his poetry.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

The first mention of Olney is as 'Ollaneg' (Olla's Island) in 932 (*VCH*). The site of the present house at the heart of the town on the edge of the Market Place was probably first developed in the medieval period as two dwellings, with attached burgage plots stretching south to the rear. By the C18 the whole property was known as Orchard Side with gardens on the former burgage plots. It is unclear who united the frontage of the two houses in impressive style in the early C18, but it was probably George Carey.

In 1715 Thomas Aspray Senior bought the plot south of the burgage plots which became the Summer House Garden. His son, another Thomas, was an Apothecary and it became an apothecary's garden in which he grew medicinal plants. One of these two built the Summer House, later to play an important part in the life and work of the poet and letter-writer William Cowper.

In 1768 William Cowper (1731-1800) moved into the Market Place property together with his friend Mrs Unwin, recently widowed. Buildings lined the south side of the Market Place, with gardens/ burgage plots leading south from the houses (Jeffreys, 1770). The largest building was Orchard Side, with the medicinal garden belonging to the apothecary Aspray adjacent to the south. Mrs Unwin rented the property which by 1786 was owned by the Rev. George Smith of Market Street.

Cowper's arrival marked a major change in the development of the garden. He had already shown considerable interest in gardening whilst residing with his friends the Unwins in Huntingdonshire. In a letter dated 1767 to his cousin he refers to himself as a "great florist and shrub doctor". Cowper became friends with the curate of Olney, the Revd John Newton. Newton had a campaign to evangelize the people of Olney, to which Cowper contributed one third of the devotional poems in Newton's *Olney Hymns* (1779) which became famous and widely used. The Apothecary's garden abutting on the orchard leading from the vicarage allowed the two households to exchange

visits without going out into the streets. Cowper recorded his gardening activities in his letters to various friends which were later published; extracts are given in the Appendix below.

In 1773 Cowper had a breakdown and left Orchard Side for the nearby vicarage. He returned in 1774 after what was supposed to be a weekend stay with the Newtons which lasted a year. His young neighbours gave him three young hares which lived in the house, later celebrated in verse and prose as Puss, Tiney, and Bess, whose undemanding companionship supplied welcome diversion. It is unclear how and when William acquired full use of the medicinal garden of Thomas Aspray.

Thomas Aspray who lived adjacent to Orchard Side and owned the medicinal garden with the Smoking House died in 1775. Cowper was allowed a pathway across the medicinal garden at the rear of Orchard Side to the orchard. This led to the Vicarage. By now Cowper had full access to this medicinal garden and smoking house (corresp). He was in touch with the professional gardeners of the great estates within a 30 mile radius of Olney, obtaining from them advice, plants and seeds.

In the summer of 1780 the gardener Darlin was dismissed. Cowper took on instead William Kitchener (Kitch) a 'sober local lad who was very teachable'. By 1778 Cowper had the Smoking House, a Greenhouse and two Gardens. The Smoking House, in the old medicinal garden of Thomas Aspray, was used by Cowper as his retreat and Versifier. A greenhouse was felt to be a necessary addition to his garden aspirations. It was probably built soon after his arrival, and leant against the east wall, facing west. The garden had gravel paths and in it he grew a wide variety of plants, both tender and hardy. These included pineapples, melons in variety (Crimson Cantaloupe and Black Rock), apricots, peaches and plums, vines, carnations, and expensive tender introductions such as scarlet convolvulus and Browallia. He even grew cucumbers in winter. The garden included three sitting places, and a gateway to the Newtons' Vicarage on the south side of the Summer House Garden.

William wrote to Newton (16 August 1781) that he had converted the Green house into a summer parlour where they (Mrs Unwin) could eat sleep and drink away from the noise and smells of Olney. The location is unclear but it is likely it faced west, against the eastern garden wall. By June 1785 William enjoyed the easy communication between the two gardens and the vicarage, his furnished summer house, where his writing could be pursued in peace and quiet. Drawing on his experiences including gardening at Olney, Cowper demonstrated in his renowned poem *The Task* (1784) that blank verse could render every topic from the most mundane aspects of gardening to the day of judgement—a lesson not lost on the next generation of poets.

In 1786 Cowper and Mary Unwin left Orchard Side to live in Weston Underwood near their friends the Throckmortons who owned Weston Hall with an extensive park and pleasure grounds which they enjoyed for eight years before failing health sent them to live with a relative in East Dereham, Norfolk. Having been awarded a pension by King George III in 1794 of £300 p.a., Cowper died in 1800. Soon after his death the Summer House became a shrine attracting visitors from far and wide. The earliest inscription in the plaster is of 1802. One of the more interesting was one of a gibbet depicting the hanging of John Tawell in 1842 (later removed).

The Olney property was sold by Mrs Smith in 1815 and again in 1829. In the century between the death of William and the instigation of the Cowper Memorial Museum in 1900 the interest in Cowper persisted, and various visitors referred to the garden. Hugh Miller in 1849 referred to a visit he had made in 1845, noting the Summer House and the profusion of flowering shrubs and hollyhocks, also that the gardens had been separated and a wall ran across the centre of the flower garden (evidence of which was proved when the flower garden was restored in 1994). Miss

Elizabeth Wilson in 1864 mentioned the Summer House and that its garden was let separately from the house. A key could be obtained from a Mr Anthony Morris (Wilson, 1864).

The property was sold in 1854 (Sale Particulars) to Mr W.H. Collingridge. Morris died in 1865 leaving the Summer House Garden to his Housekeeper Mrs Paybody but under trustee control. By the 1880s (OS) the Flower Garden between the house and Summer House Garden was divided into three areas leading south (as mentioned by Miller in 1849), with a yard with a pump adjacent, then a square yard extension or garden and beyond this, divided from it by a wall, fence or hedge was a slightly larger garden with shrubs in it. South of this was the Summer House Garden with a path running west to east to a further small building by the east boundary. South of this beyond the garden was the orchard leading to the Vicarage. The boundaries remained similar into the early C20 (OS).

After Mrs Paybody's death in 1895 the trustees sold the Summer House Garden to Mr Arthur James Osborn for £480 in 1896 (Sale Particulars). Thomas Wright was a schoolmaster who established the Cowper and Newton Museum in Olney in 1900 after it had been donated to the town of Olney and nation by Mr Collingridge for the purpose of setting up a museum, but only the Flower Garden was acquired, not the Summer House Garden. The editions of the poems by Cowper issued in 1904, and by John Bailey and Humphrey Milford published almost simultaneously in 1905, marked the zenith of Cowper's reputation as a poet.

The Museum Trustees purchased the Summer House Garden in 1919 after a public appeal to raise £450. By the early 1920s (OS) the three compartments behind the house had been reorganised into two, with a courtyard adjacent to the house, and a larger Flower Garden leading to the Summer House Garden. Otherwise the garden remained much as Cowper had known it. The Summer House Garden has since been let to various tenants, the current one since the 1990s being Charles John Knight, who maintains the garden in the style of a Victorian kitchen garden. The whole garden is open to the public with the Museum.

SITE DESCRIPTION

Location, Area, Boundaries, Landform, Setting

The Cowper and Newton Museum (Orchard Side) stands on the south side of the Market Place in Olney in the north-east corner of Bucks. The 0.2ha. site is level. The building is the most impressive of a terrace of mixed houses on the south side of Market Place. This line of buildings, together with their rear gardens originating as burgage plots, probably have considerably earlier origins than their present appearance suggests. The triangular open civic space to the north adds to the stature of the house and its fine frontage, allowing long views of it from the northern approach from Northampton at the bottom of the High Street. The garden is hidden behind the frontage.

The courtyard adjacent to the south of the house is enclosed on three sides (north, west and east) by the house and service buildings, and is open to the south to the Flower Garden.

The rectangular Flower Garden beyond is enclosed to the east, west and south (against the Summer House Garden) by local rubble-stone walls of varying periods, c.2m high. A gateway at the south-east corner of the Flower Garden gives access to the Summer House Garden. The rectangular Summer House Garden is bounded on the north side partly by the Flower Garden stone wall, and east of this by a brick wall against the car park (partly rebuilt). The brick wall returns along the east side of a modern development. The south side against the orchard is marked by a timber boarded fence. The west side is marked by a brick wall topped with wooden trellis and a brick pier beside the pedestrian service gateway giving access to the Swan Public House car park.

Exterior views from the gardens contrast between those to west and east, and those to the south which were always considerably more important. Views west and east over the Flower Garden walls to the site of adjacent former small gardens on burgage plots have altered and are now largely of car parking and later utilitarian buildings. The key views to the south remain similar, towards the former orchard, the Vicarage hidden beyond this, and beyond this again the tall elegant spire of the medieval parish church (partly screened by trees) which forms an eye-catcher. The orchard south of the Summer House Garden survives, planted with mature trees, and still leads to the Vicarage in Church Street. The area to the east known as Silver End was an industrial area in the C18 and C19 and a public car park now occupies part of this.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES

The main entrance facade is on the south side of the Market Place. The central entrance to the house is straight off the pavement, framed by an impressive pedimented ashlar door case with a wooden gate. It is the main entrance to the rear of the property, which Cowper used as he would not open the front door for fear of the pet hares escaping. Two secondary doorways flank the central doorway. The larger of these two doorways, to the west, is similar in form to the main doorcase but slightly smaller and gives access to Orchard Side, the poet's home. The smaller, east doorway (C19) gives access to the museum today. Local drawings and photographs date this doorway to Victorian times when this half of the property was occupied by 'mantle makers'. In Cowper's day it was where his manservant and his family lived, access then being from through the central gateway. The rear access to the property is via a gateway in the Swan Public House car park, leading into the Summer House Garden. Cowper formerly had a gateway on the south side of the Summer House Garden to give him direct access to the Vicarage when Newton lived there, but this has gone.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING

The principal buildings (listed Grade II*) comprise No 29 (Gilpin House) and No 30 (Orchard Side), Market Place. They comprise the whole of the Cowper and Newton Museum. They are united visually as a single house by the impressive façade overlooking the Market Place which is early C18 (c.1700), of plum brick with light red brick round the openings and with stone dressings. It has an early C19 slate roof with very deep eaves on heavy plain brackets in groups of three. The building is of three storeys and is framed by rusticated brick pilasters each end. The core is C17 and a building has probably stood on this site for centuries. The central doorway has a wooden gate framed by a stone doorcase with a wide moulded architrave, frieze and triangular pediment. A matching doorway to the right (west), is reached via three stone steps and has a panelled door. There is a further low doorway to the left (east). The main rooms look over the Market Place to the north, rather than the garden. Some of the lesser rooms have views south over the garden and beyond to the orchard and church spire.

The rear of the building is considerably less uniform with little ornamentation. It has various projections surrounding the yard including service buildings of various dates, and the Museum Cottage. In 1970 the architect Eric Throssell FRIBA undertook work on the Museum Cottage, plans for which are held at the Museum.

GARDENS

The garden comprises two distinct areas: the Flower Garden adjacent to the house, and beyond this to the south the larger Summer House Garden at right angles to the axis of the house and Flower Garden. This is focussed on the Summer House where Cowper wrote many of his poems, enjoyed its seclusion and called it his 'verse manufactory'. He only had the use of this building for the last few years of his residence in Olney.

Attached to the rear, south side of the house is a paved courtyard. This leads south to the walled Flower Garden which is aligned south to north on the axis of the house. Roughly rectangular the courtyard and Flower Garden measure 45mx15m. c.630 sq. metres in area (0.63ha).

Running the length of the 450 sq.m. Flower Garden is a spinal concrete path with parallel paths in front of narrow flower borders to both boundary walls. The area terminates to the south in a shrubbery with a rose-covered arch through the middle. Nearby is a small pond with water plants. The garden contains several mature trees including a yew against the east wall at the south-east corner near the gateway to the Summer House Garden beyond and a pear tree.

In the south-east corner of the Flower Garden is the gateway to the Summer House Garden, formerly the apothecary Aspray's medicinal garden, now known as the Summer House Garden. This walled and fenced garden crosses the south end of the Flower Garden from east to west. The irregular rectangle measures between 56m and 51m west to east and 18m north to south, c.950 sq. m. in area (0.95 ha.). This garden is maintained in the style of a Victorian kitchen garden. The central area around the Summer House is kept for floral displays, particularly in the two oval box edge beds, with fruit and vegetables beyond. Old photographs indicate this hedge is probably over 100 years old. Likewise, the yew alongside is of similar age and was once clipped into a fanciful shape. The beds are managed organically with heritage vegetables as well as modern varieties. Herbs and medicinal plants have been re-introduced to evoke the C18 apothecary's use of the garden.

The mid-C18 summer house (listed Grade II) stands 60m south of the house, towards the centre of the Summer House Garden, 1.5m from the south boundary. The diminutive structure is rendered with a pitched, tiled roof, in the north wall a copy of the original oak door, and a large sash window in the rear (south) wall. It has an oval window in the east gable and built-in benches inside. It was Cowper's retreat for writing. Here he wrote many letters and possibly poetry too. This building was made famous after Cowper's death in books about him (including Storer, editions from 1803 onwards, see extract in Appendix below) in which it was illustrated (see cover of this report). In its modest scale and vernacular style, it became an iconic symbol of his creativity.

The layout of the whole garden in Cowper's time is unclear, but is likely to have been similar in style to the present pattern.

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(see transcriptions in Appendix below)

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Wilson, E., *A Walk Through Olney* (1864), Chapter II.

Maps

OS 25" to 1 mile 1st edition, surveyed 1880

OS 25" to 1 mile 2nd edition, surveyed 1899

OS 6" to 1 mile 1st edition, published 1885

OS 6" to 1 mile 2nd edition, published 1900

OS 6" to 1 mile 3rd edition, published 1923

Archival Material

Centre For Bucks Studies

W/345

Copy of will of Thomas Aspray of Olney, hemp-dresser 19 Jan 1760

D-GA/Sc/1/2A

Poster for sale of houses, including two with shops and one formerly occupied by the poet Cowper, in Olney

8 May 1828

Sale Particulars (copies in private collection)

Thomas Revis, Auction particulars 18 September 1854

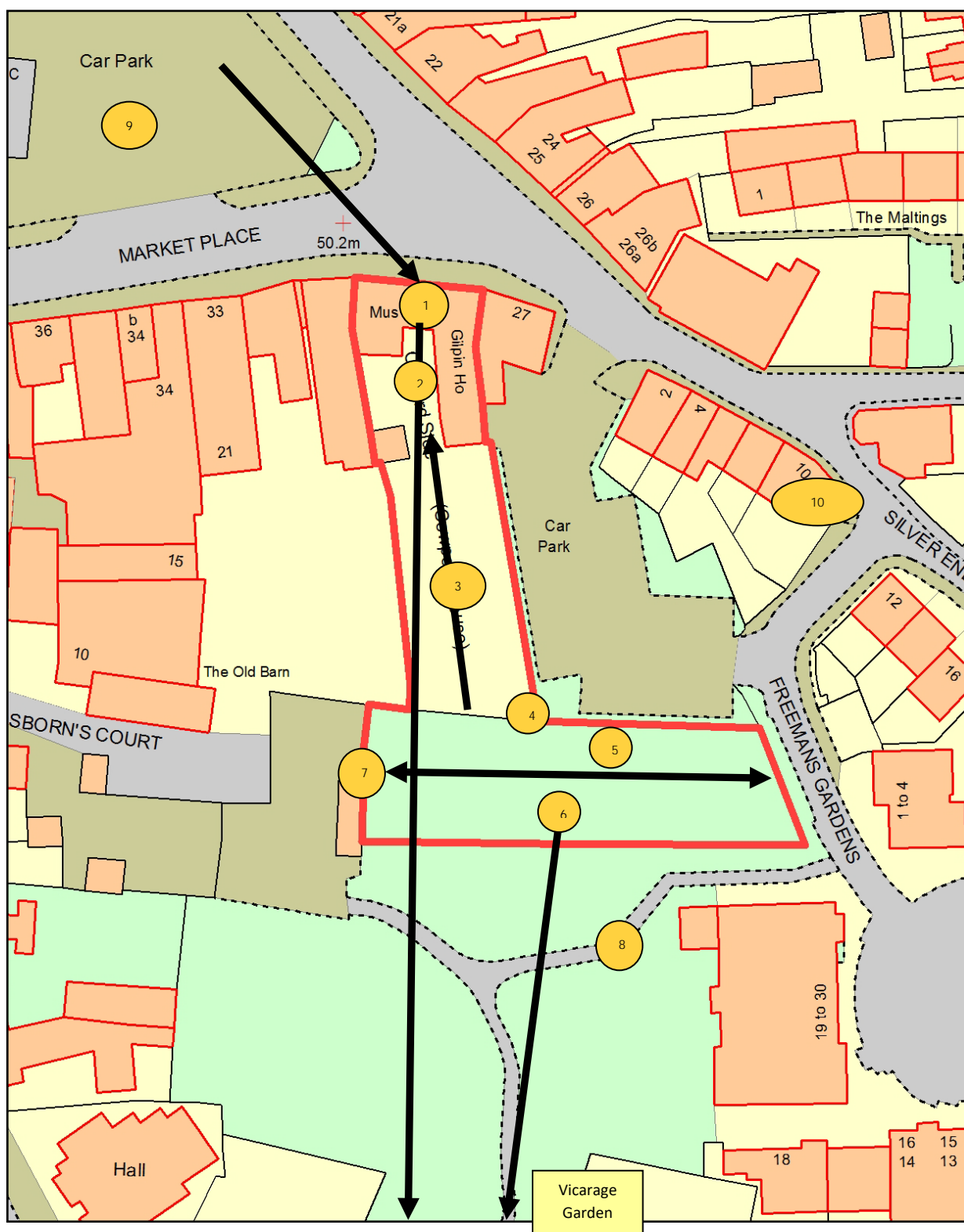
Peirce & Thorpe, Auction particulars 17 February 1896

Ken Edwards August 2018, edited S Rutherford January 2019

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Buckinghamshire Gardens Trust is indebted to local historian Elizabeth Knight M.B.E. for so generously sharing her detailed research material on Cowper's garden and the Museum, much of which has informed this report and for scrutinising the text.

KEY HISTORIC VIEWS AND FEATURES



Key to Features

1. House/ museum with central passage	2. Rear courtyard
3. Flower Garden	4. Gateway to Summer House Garden
5. Summer House Garden	6. Summer House
7. Back gateway	8. Former Orchard
9. Market Place	10. Silver End

HISTORIC IMAGES



The Summerhouse and Church Spire, 1907, William Wright (Cowper and Newton Museum)



Summer House (Cowper and Newton Museum, left); (Historic England Archive, right).

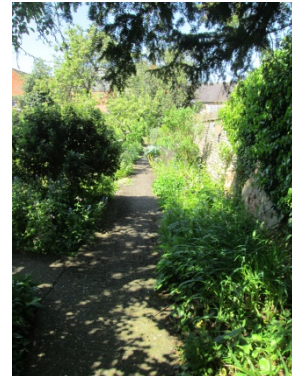
CURRENT PHOTOGRAPHS



Front and rear of the house



The Flower Garden, views north to the house, with central path, and west to the garden wall.



The Flower Garden, views west, east, and north along the east path from near the gateway to the Summer House Garden



The Flower Garden, the yew by the gateway and the gateway to the Summerhouse Garden



The Summer House Garden, views east and west



Summer House, views of the north and east elevations. Church spire from the garden.



Summer House, views of the west, south and east elevations and interior.



Summer House interior.

Appendix

Cowper's Letters, Garden References

The following is a selection of extracts of the letters in which Cowper refers to his gardening activities. They are partly obtained from a search of the digital versions on various relevant words including oranges, melon, myrtle, garden, pine, gravel, walk, frame, hothouse, bandbox, and also from material supplied by Elizabeth Knight, M.B.E. from the Cowper letters.

See also <https://ia800209.us.archive.org/19/items/lettersofwilliam00cowp/lettersofwilliam00cowp.pdf>

TO MRS. COWPER. Huntingdon, October 20, 1766

from twelve to three we separate, and amuse ourselves as we please. During that interval I either read in my own apartment, or walk, or ride, or work in the garden.

TO MRS. COWPER. Huntingdon, 14 March, 1767

I am become a great Florist and Shrub Doctor [asks for a packet of seeds to join jasmine and honeysuckle in the garden]

TO JOSEPH HILL, ESQ. May 14, 1767. from **Huntingdon**

[initial interest in gardening just before moving to Olney by 10 Oct 67]

Having commenced gardener, I study the arts of pruning, sowing, planting, and enterprise everything in that way, from melons down to cabbages. I have a large garden to display my abilities in; and were we twenty miles nearer London, I might turn higgler, and serve your honour with cauliflowers and broccoli at the best hand.

I shall possibly now and then desire you to call at the seed shop, in your way to Westminster, though sparingly.

TO JOSEPH HILL May 1776.

William's enthusiasm for gardening is in two letters dated an old friend, On 18th William thanks Joseph for the gift of fish and states that he is mortified his gardener is not as advanced as Joseph's and that he cannot send Joseph melons yet as he is "backward in some of his nicer productions."

TO JOSEPH HILL 30 March 1777

William sent two brace of cucumbers, showing he was by now a competent flower and vegetable gardener.

TO JOSEPH HILL May 1777

Cowper would send him a Crimson [Cantaloupe] Melon. Melons became an important product of the garden. He is not only able to produce flowers and vegetables but exotic produce. William's expertise may have come from contact with gardeners such as the Duke of Bedford's gardener at Woburn and Lord Sussex.

11 December 1777 To JOSEPH HILL

Refers to a Browallia a newly imported tender plant of which he has been given seed; remarks that the London seedsmen Gordon and Dermer sell the seeds at 2 Guineas an ounce. He finds this 'the most Elegant Flower we have seen', and Lord Dartmouth was of the same opinion.

TO JOSEPH HILL May 1778

Regrets that his pea crop has failed possible due to the frost and could Mrs Hill favour him with a dozen seeds of Scarlet Convolvulus. The garden had lettuce, cucumber, melons, peas, beans, greens, broccoli and asparagus, and an Apricot tree.

TO MRS HILL June 1778

Confident enough in his gardening expertise to offer advice on the care of some carnations, which he will send her "at the proper Season".

TO REV. W. UNWIN. December 1778 [Rev. William Unwin, the son of the widow Mrs Unwin.]

The first reference to pineapples for Olney, an exchange arrangement between Cowper and a Mr Wright of Gayhurst House, with 50 Stove plants to Mr Wright and six fruiting pines in return. In the same letter Cowper referred to the cost of plants that Mrs Hill sent him of perhaps 3 guineas. (£270 equivalent today). He is very pleased with himself now stating "Thus we Great Gardeners etc." (tongue in cheek?). A storm had damaged some wall which fell upon two old hot beds. He must have been cultivating plants needing a heat source well before now.

TO THE SAME. May 26, 1779.

My dear Friend— I must beg your assistance in a design I have formed to cheat the glazier. Government has laid a tax upon glass, and he has trebled it. I want as much as will serve for a **large frame**, but am unwilling to pay an exorbitant price for it. I shall be obliged to you, therefore, if you will inquire at a glass-manufacturer's how he sells his Newcastle glass, such as is used for frames and hothouses. If you will be so good as to send me this information ...

TO REV. W. UNWIN. September 21, 1779.

Amico Mio — Be pleased to buy me a glazier's diamond pencil. I have glazed the **two frames designed to receive my pine plants**I have eight pair of tame pigeons. When I first enter the garden in the morning, I find them perched upon the wall, waiting for their breakfast; for I feed them always upon the **gravel walk**. ...

[visits Gayhurst and gdns] Your mother and I last week made a trip in a post-chaise to Gayhurst, the seat of Mr. Wright, about four miles off. He understood that I did not much affect strange faces, and sent over his servant on purpose to inform me that he was going into Leicestershire, and that, if I chose to see the gardens, I might gratify myself without danger of seeing the proprietor. I accepted the invitation, and was delighted with all I found there. The situation is happy, the gardens elegantly disposed, the hothouse in the most flourishing state, and the orange-trees the most captivating creatures of the kind I ever saw. A man, in short, had need have the talents of Cox or Langford, the auctioneers, to do the whole scene justice.

TO THE SAME. July 17, 1779. My dear Friend —We envy you your sea breezes. In the **garden** we feel nothing but the reflection of the heat from the **walls**, and in the parlour from the opposite houses.

TO JOSEPH HILL. October 2, 1779. The newspaper informs me of the arrival of the Jamaica fleet. I hope it imports some **pine-apple plants** for me. I have a **good frame and a good** bed prepared to receive them. I send you annexed a fable, in which the pine-apple makes a figure, and shall be glad if you like the taste of it.

TO THE REV. JOHN NEWTON. May 3, 1780.

I am pleased with a **frame of four lights, doubtful whether the few pines it contains** will ever be worth a farthing ; amuse myself with a greenhouse which Lord Bute's gardener could take upon his back and walk away with ; and when I have paid it the accustomed visit, and watered it, and given it air, I say to myself — "This is not mine, 'tis a plaything lent me for the present ; I must leave it soon." W. C.

TO THE SAME. August 16, 1781.

My dear Friend — I might date my letter from the **greenhouse, which we have converted into a summer parlour**. The walls hung with garden mats, and the floor covered with a carpet, it affords us by far the pleasantest retreat in Olney. We eat, drink, and sleep where we always did; but here we spend all the rest of our time, and find that the sound of the wind in the trees and

the singing of birds are much more agreeable to our ears than the incessant barking of dogs and screaming of children. Not to mention the exchange of a sweet- smelling garden for the putrid exhalations of Silver End.

TO THE SAME.

September 9, 1781.

My dear Friend — I am not willing to let the post set off without me, though I have nothing material to put into his bag. I am writing in the greenhouse, where my **myrtles**, ranged before the windows, make the most agreeable blind imaginable, where I am undisturbed by noise, and where I see none but pleasing objects. The situation is as favourable to my purpose as I could wish, but the state of my mind is not so, and the deficiencies I feel there are not to be remedied by the stillness of my retirement, or the beauty of the scene before me.

TO REV. WILLIAM UNWIN.

July 3rd, 1782

Cowper is bitterly cold walking the garden in his surtout, the damage to his garden is substantial, the shoots on the peach tree have been pinched off, cucumber and melons have suffered. His wheat crops in poor condition.

TO REV. WILLIAM UNWIN.

August 3, 1782

Passing from the **green-house** to the barn, I saw three kittens (for we have so many in our retinue) looking with fixed attention on something which lay on the threshold of a door nailed up. I took but little notice of them at first, but a loud hiss engaged me to attend more closely, when behold — a viper ! the largest that I remember to have seen, rearing itself, darting its forked tongue, and ejaculating the aforesaid hiss at the nose of a kitten, almost in contact with his lips.

TO THE REV. WILLIAM UNWIN.

June 8, 1783.

My dear William — Our severest winter, commonly called the spring, is now over, and I find myself seated in my favourite recess, the greenhouse. In such a situation, so silent, so shady, where no human foot is heard, and where only my **myrtles** presume to peep in at the window, you may suppose I have no interruption to complain of, and that my thoughts are perfectly at my command. But the beauties of the spot are themselves an interruption, my attention being called upon by those very **myrtles**, by a double row of **grass pinks** just beginning to blossom, and by a bed of **beans** already in bloom.

TO THE REV. WM. UNWIN.

July 3, 1784.

A neighbour of mine, in Silver End, keeps an ass; the ass lives on the other side of the **garden wall**, and I am writing in the greenhouse; it happens that he is this morning most musically disposed, either cheered by the fine weather, or by some new tune which he has just acquired, or by finding his voice more harmonious than usual. It would be cruel to mortify so fine a singer; therefore I do not tell him that he interrupts and hinders me, but I venture to tell you so, and to plead his performance in excuse of my abrupt conclusion. [this suggests that the greenhouse was against the east garden wall]

TO THE REV. JOHN NEWTON.

September 18, 1784.

My **greenhouse** is never so pleasant as when we are just upon the point of being turned out of it. The gentleness of the autumnal suns, and the calmness of this latter season, make it a much more agreeable retreat than we ever find it in summer; when, the winds being generally brisk, we cannot cool it by admitting a sufficient quantity of air without being at the same time incommoded by it. But now I sit with all the windows and the door wide open, and am regaled with the **scent of every flower in a garden as full of flowers as I have known how to make it**. We keep no bees, but if I lived in a hive I should hardly hear more of their music. All the bees in the neighbourhood resort to a bed of **mignonette** opposite to the window, and pay me for the honey they get out of it by a hum, which, though rather monotonous, is as agreeable to my ear as the whistling of my linnets.

TO LADY HESKETH.

December 13, 1784.

We do not often see, or rather feel, so severe a frost before Christmas. Unexpected, at least by me, it had like to have been too much for my greenhouse, my **myrtles** having found themselves yesterday morning in an atmosphere so cold that the mercury was fallen eight degrees below the freezing point.

TO JOSEPH HILL, ESQ. Olney, June 25, 1785.

My dear Friend,—I write in a nook that I call my *boudoir*. It is a summer-house not much bigger than a sedan-chair, the door of which opens into the garden, that is now crowded with pinks, roses, and honeysuckles, and the window into my neighbour's orchard. It formerly served an apothecary, now dead, as a smoking-room; and under my feet is a trapdoor which once covered a hole in the ground, where he kept his bottles; at present, however, it is dedicated to sublimer uses. Having lined it with garden-mats, and furnished it with a table and two chairs, here I write all that I write in summer time, whether to my friends or to the public. It is secure from all noise, and a refuge from all intrusion; for intruders sometimes trouble me in the winter evenings at Olney: but (thanks to my *boudoir*!) I can now hide myself from them. A poet's retreat is sacred: they acknowledge the truth of that proposition, and never presume to violate it.

TO LADY HESKETH. Olney, February 9, 1786. 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, and 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 jasmine** ; and I will make you a bouquet of **myrtle** every day. ... It is the box in which have been lodged all my hares, and in which lodges Puss at present.

TO LADY HESKETH. Olney, May 25, 1786.

I have at length, my cousin, found my way into my summer abode. I believe that I described it to you some time since, and will therefore now leave it undescribed. I will only say that I am writing in **a bandbox, situated, at least in my account, delightfully, because it has a window in one side that opens into that orchard** through which, as I am sitting here, I shall see you often pass, and which therefore I already prefer to all the orchards in the world.

TO LADY HESKETH. Olney, May 29, 1786 The **grass** under my windows is all bespangled with dewdrops, and the birds are singing in the **apple trees**, among the **blossoms**. Never poet had a more commodious oratory in which to invoke his muse.

... [understanding of shrubberies!]

We took our customary walk yesterday in the Wilderness at **Weston**, and saw with regret the laburnums, syringas, and guelder-roses, some of them blown, and others just upon the point of blowing, and could not help observing—all these will be gone before Lady Hesketh comes. Still, however, there will be roses, and jasmine, and honeysuckle, and shady walks, and cool alcoves

I long to show you my workshop [i.e. summer house], and to see you sitting on the opposite side of my table. We shall be as close packed as two wax figures in an old-fashioned picture frame. I am writing in it now. It is the place in which I fabricate all my verse in summer time.

TO LADY HESKETH. June 12, 1786.

I have an honest fellow that works in my garden : his name is Kitchener, and we called him Kitch for brevity. He is sober and trusty as the day. He has a smart blue coat, that, when I had worn it some years, I gave him, and now he has worn it some years himself. When she has walked about forty yards she will spy a **green gate and rails** on her left hand ; and when she has opened the gate and reached the house-door, she will find herself at home.

15 Nov 1786 Cowper and Mrs Unwin moved from Olney to Weston Underwood near their friends the Throckmortons.

J. Storer's *Cowper, Illustrated by a Series of Views, In, or near, The Park of Weston Underwood, Bucks*; a slim volume illustrated with many elegant engravings of sights associated with the poet. (1803)

1804 edn Footnote pp.9-10

Storer's Descriptions of the Olney garden (1803):

The vignette, on the title-page, represents the Summer-house of Cowper: through the window is seen part of the parsonage house, and the wall which surrounds the garden belonging to it. In this wall a door was opened, which being separated from his garden by an orchard, he rented a passage across the latter, for which he paid one guinea per annum: from this circumstance the place was called Guinea Field. This little summer-house, which measures on the floor six feet nine inches by five feet five, he humorously describes in various letters, published in Hayley's *Life of Cowper*. It was formerly occupied, he says in one of those letters, by an apothecary as a smoking room, and it appears he had contrived a hole in the ground (covered by a trap door) in which he kept his bottles. And in another to his cousin Lady Hesketh, who was about to visit Olney, he calls it a "Band-box" and his "Work-shop" in which he fabricates all his verse in summertime, and amuses her with the idea that when she pays him a visit there, they shall "be as close pack'd as two wax figures in an old-fashioned picture frame".