

Weston Underwood - July 2015

Nothing says more about your status and power than a grand gateway set within a high stone wall; especially if it narrows the road to a 17th century girth with sturdy square-based towering piers surmounted by carved pinecones. All would instantly know the esoteric meaning of such symbolism with which the Throckmorton family wished to be associated, and of course, very soon everyone did, for even to this day' this grand entranceway into the village of Weston Underwood is known by locals as: 'The Knobs'.

Having being suitably impressed by the gateway, now lacking its gates that once were shut at night' The Shamblers gathered at the nearby inn.

Our first problem, we were informed, was of a pathway recently obstructed with barbed wire; and that the possible alternative routes involved walking past cows still rather possessive of their young, or through a field guarded by a bull. With neither option being thought wise, our leader Jean, with Chrissy's help, took our Odyssey along a much safer route, where the only danger was a slight frisson of uncertainty.



Through the wheat fields beyond, in single file we watched our steps as the earth beneath was dry and deeply cracked. Whenever we dared to look up, we had views over fields and the curving valley of the hidden River Ouse.

Descending the hill, where wheat had shorter stalks than ever it did in our childhood memories, we glimpsed the stumpy Norman tower of Ravenstone's church tucked within its trees.



In the village itself, passing six re-modelled cottages, once former alms-houses built by the gloriously named, 'Heanage Finch', the 1st Earl of Nottingham, to house six men and six women... separately. These poor (unloved) parishioners as well as being single, also had to be members of the Church of England to qualify for their small pension, firewood and a new cloak every Christmas. Leaving the church behind, many of The Shamblers wondered if they too should have been similarly garbed, for it seemed colder here, and briefly the clouds threatened rain.



The tracks we next followed led us gently uphill to reach ...

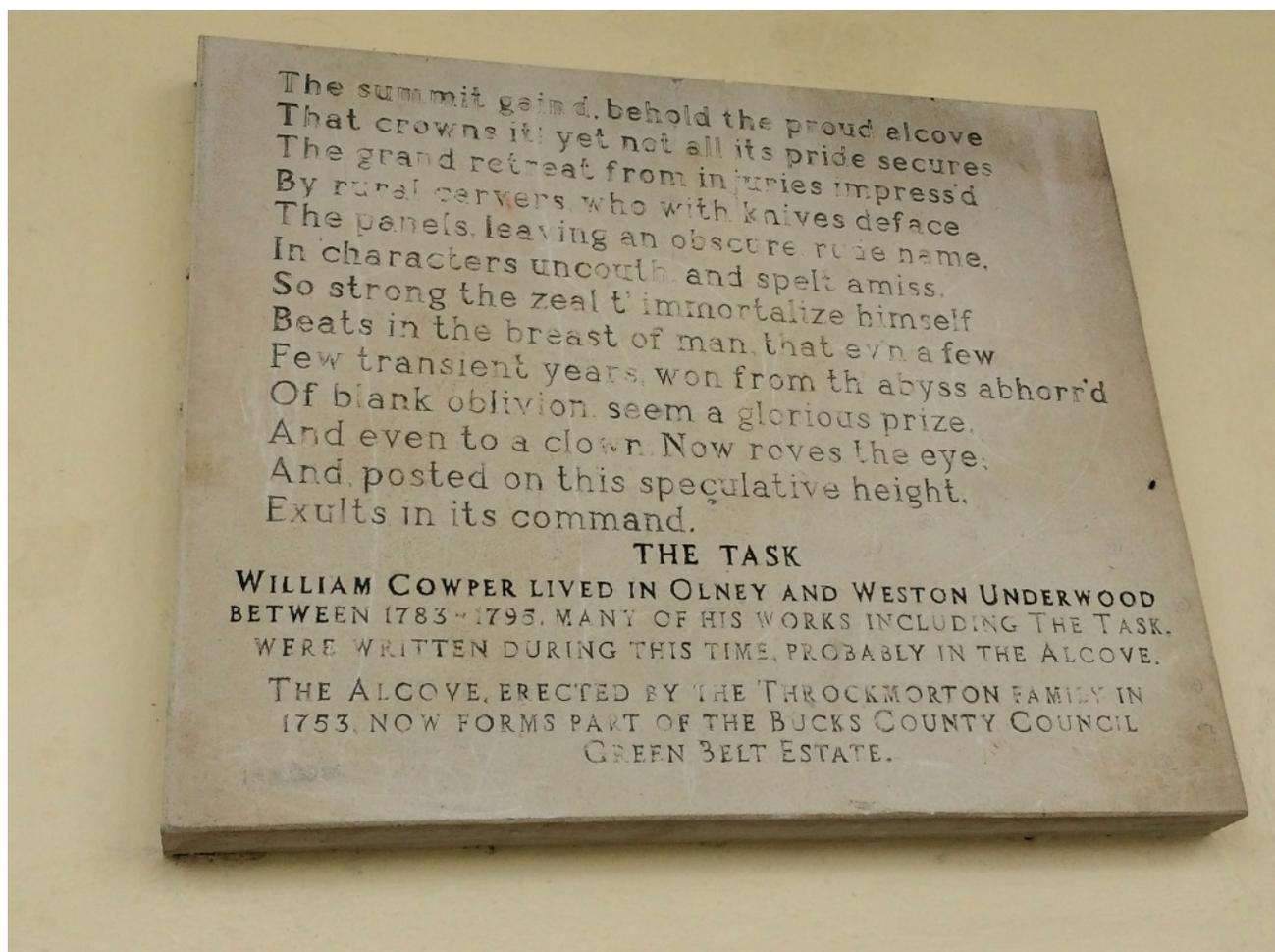




... a folly built by the Throckmorton family in 1753 known as 'The Alcove'.

William Cowper (pronounced Cooper) lived in Olney and Weston Underwood between the years 1768 and 1795 and whenever free of insanity, he would occasionally write poetry and hymns here. The plaque on the wall had an inscription from one of his poems:

*'The summit gained. Behold the proud alcove
That crowns it! Yet not all pride secures
The grand retreat from injuries impress'd
By rural carvers, who with knives deface
The panels, leaving an obscure rude name,
In characters uncouth, and spelt amiss,
So strong the zeal t'immortalize himself
Beats in the breast of man, that ev'n a few
Few transient years, won from the abyss
abhorr'd
And even to a clown. Now roves the eye;
And posted on this speculative height,
Exults in its command.'*





(Taking a short break)

Cowper was not a 'rural carver', his weakness instead being a tendency to deface window shutters. He inscribed the name '*John Gilpin*' on one of our own Shambler's grandmother's farmhouse shutters. '*John Gilpin*' being the name of an hilarious poem written by Cowper, likely based on the antics of one 'Mr Beyer' who owned land in Olney. He was also a linen draper based in London, who once dramatically lost control of his horse

If The Shamblers had been here in July, 220 years ago, they could have witnessed Cowper busily scraping a poem on to the window shutters of Weston Lodge (now Cowper's Lodge) the house he had rented from his friends the Throckmortons.

*'FAREWELL, dear scenes, for ever closed to me,
Oh, for what sorrows must I now exchange ye!'*

It seems he was about to head off to Norfolk!



Our view from The Alcove overlooked the grounds where the Throckmorton's family home once stood. Even in Cowper time, parts of it had not been inhabited for over two hundred years and was in a sorry condition.

After its demolition, 'The Flamingo Gardens' existed in its place. Behind high limestone walls a collection of flamingos, storks, pelicans and wallabies could be seen. Since the closure of this zoo an occasional ghostly sighting of a diminutive woman dressed in white has been glimpsed: likely one of the escaped albino wallabies.

Instead of scratching our names and poems on The Alcove's walls, we instead photographed a record of our presence, before retracing our steps to the village. Many of us looking forward to enjoying a well-earned feast at 'Cowpers Oak'.

With many thanks to Jean for such a poetical walk, which just as the stone pinecones promised gave us the highest degree of spiritual illumination. More importantly, despite the ominous warning of the tightly shut pinecones, we once again cheated rain.

Many thanks also to our impromptu back markers Ruth and Alan.



Exhausted feet? No, just taking a wee rest!