

Sam Roberts of Weston, Cowper's 'faithful attendant'

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While researching family history in the 1980s, I made the interesting discovery that Samuel Roberts, often referred to merely as 'Sam', Cowper's lackey or factotum, was a direct ancestor of mine. His son John James Roberts, a carpenter, married Elizabeth Robinson, from a local Baptist family; their son William Robinson Roberts, who moved from Olney to Ampthill, was my great-great-grandfather. I traced Sam's will and saw that his date of death corresponded to that given in Thomas Wright's biography of Cowper; Wright also notes that Sam was buried near the tower and porch of Weston Underwood church¹. The stone, which once bore an inscription reading 'for many years a faithfull attendant of the poet Cowper'², has either been removed or has become illegible. Based on Sam's age at his death I found a suitable baptism in the Weston register for 1754: son of Edward Roberts, a parish clerk. Sam's mother was Susan(na), née Scrigginton, probably his father's second wife (married in Olney 1749). I also found Sam's marriage in 1781³ to Ann Wheeler, referred to by Cowper as 'Nanny'. The Wheelers were a Roman Catholic family of Weston Underwood and Ann was christened at the Throckmortons' chapel in 1758⁴.

In view of the fact that Sam appeared to have originated from Weston, I found it surprising that, according to many of Cowper's biographers, he had supposedly been brought by the poet from Dr Cotton's asylum in St Alban's, where he had already been working as a servant. Thomas Wright seems to have been the first biographer (1892) to develop this story in detail, namely that Sam Roberts had attended to Cowper at the asylum and was taken from there to Huntingdon together with the boy Dick Coleman⁵. While in Huntingdon, Cowper certainly kept a servant as well as maintaining Coleman⁶, but there is no proof from his own words that the servant in question was Sam. Wright assumes that Cowper is referring to Sam in a number of early letters and in the autobiographical memoir about his early life, but Sam is not named by the poet himself as his lackey until much later; and when he is mentioned by name, Cowper never says that Sam was the servant from St Alban's. Wright was writing

almost a century after Cowper's death and his assumption about Sam's origin has since been reiterated in a significant number of works. Curry's recent biography is no exception; he writes that when Cowper left the asylum '[h]e took with him as his personal valet one of Dr Cotton's servants, Sam Roberts, who had been attending to him'⁷.

However, nearly all nineteenth-century biographies of Cowper do not make the same assumption about Sam, who is not mentioned as having been brought from St Alban's by Corry in his 1803 *Life*, by Taylor in his 1833 biography, or by Southey in his seminal work of 1835-7. More importantly, no such indication is given by those writers who would have known Sam personally: John Johnson, neither in his 'Sketch' of Cowper's life (in *Poems*, volume 3, 1815) nor in his volumes of *Letters* (1817 etc.); William Hayley, neither in his *Life and Posthumous Writings* of Cowper (1803 etc.), nor in his own writings⁸; or Rev. S. Greatheed in *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Cowper* (1814). It is true, however, that a later edition of Hayley's *Works of William Cowper*, edited by Rev. Grimshawe and published in 1835 (after Sam's death) does give such an indication. Under the passage from Cowper's memoir of his early life (written shortly after moving in with the Unwins in Huntingdon in November 1765) reading 'the man, whom I have ever since retained in my service, expressed great joy on the occasion', referring to a servant who had witnessed his recovery at the asylum, Grimshawe inserted the footnote 'Samuel Roberts'⁹. He may have been misinformed about the servant's identity or, being known for his incompetence, perhaps merely jumped to a conclusion¹⁰. Southey does not include such a footnote in connection with the same passage¹¹. Later in that autobiographical memoir, writing about his move to Cambridge, Cowper mentions the servant again, saying that '[h]e had maintained such an affectionate watchfulness over me ... that I could not bear to leave him behind, though it was with some difficulty that the doctor was prevailed on to part with him'¹². The man had only recently entered into Dr Cotton's service 'just time enough to be appointed to attend me', and Cowper adds 'I have strong grounds to hope that God will make me of use as an instrument in His hands of bringing him to the knowledge of Jesus' (a conversion to which he later refers). The same man is mentioned once more in a letter from Huntingdon to Joseph Hill (24 June 1765): 'I am

not quite alone, having brought a Servant with me from St Albans, who is the very Mirrour of Fidelity and Affection for his Master. ... Men do not usually bestow these Encomiums upon their Lacqueys, nor do they usually deserve them, but I have had Experience of mine both in Sickness and Health and never saw his Fellow'. In a subsequent letter to Hill from Huntingdon (12 November 1766), Cowper writes about the boy Dick Coleman as follows: 'He will be about Nine Years of Age when my Man leaves me, at which time I think of taking him into my Service ... This though not so cheap a way as keeping no Servant, will yet be a considerable Saving to me, for I shall have but one to maintain instead of two'. One further reference by Cowper to the servant in question, again without naming him, can be found in a letter written shortly after his arrival in Olney: 'The Man Servant you may remember is the same that attended me at St Albans'¹³.

It can be presumed that the servant from the asylum subsequently left Cowper's service – as foreseen in the letter to Hill – and that Dick Coleman, who lived at Orchard Side, was one of those who served the poet in Olney. In his 1803 biography Corry wrote that at Olney Cowper and Mrs Unwin 'kept only one maid servant, a gardener, and a footman'¹⁴, perhaps in addition to Coleman. Cowper mentioned a number of successive servants in his letters, not all by name: for example, in 1782, he referred to a former servant who was then living at Northampton¹⁵. Whilst he clearly appreciated some of those who worked for him, he could be rather demanding. He dismissed a maid shortly after arriving in Olney and had difficulty finding a suitable one locally; her replacement sent by Mrs Madan was not satisfactory either¹⁶. In 1771 he complained to Hill about a 'blundering Servant' who had packaged the wrong piece of venison¹⁷. Cowper also dismissed, 'for manifold good Causes', a gardener called Darlin, who was replaced by William Kitchener ('Kitch'), described as an Olney pauper who would cost one fourth of Darlin's wage¹⁸. Writing to Newton in that connection, Cowper laments '... for Man Servant in future we are resolved to have none, having found those Gentry in Every Instance Expensive, and for the most part, worse than Useless'. Kitchener, although berated by Cowper for his lack of intelligence¹⁹, worked for the poet until at least 1792, performing various tasks such as carrying messages to Weston from Olney, where he

apparently continued to live²⁰. While at Weston, Cowper was unhappy with an unnamed incompetent labourer – presumably not ‘Kitch’ – who had been employed to transplant some laurels²¹.

It is thus submitted that Sam Roberts did not enter Cowper’s service until after the move to The Lodge at Weston Underwood in November 1786. This would mean that Grimshawe – in his footnote – then Wright, and many subsequent twentieth-century biographers, have been wrong about Sam’s background. It is not until a letter of 4 September 1787 to Lady Hesketh, from Weston, that we find the first mention of Sam by Cowper himself. It reads: ‘Sam our lacquey, and Molly [Peers] our Cook are never heard but when they answer a question. Sam’s Wife, by the way, has long been engaged to officiate in the Scullery while you shall be with us, and she is the very counterpart of her husband for quietness and sobriety’. A subsequent letter of 7 February 1788 records that ‘our lacquey’ is the ‘clerk of the parish’ (of Weston Underwood), while an earlier letter of 11 December 1786, also to Lady Hesketh, had stated ‘the clerk of the parish has made a new pair of straps to my buckles’. Wright, and later King and Ryskamp, in their corresponding footnotes, assume that this earlier ‘clerk’ already refers to Sam; by describing him merely as ‘clerk’, shortly after his arrival at Weston, Cowper implies that he had only recently begun to employ the man who was to become his new servant. If Sam had been in Cowper’s service since St Alban’s it would also be rather strange for him to be described in this manner to Lady Hesketh.

There is little doubt that Sam Roberts was a local man and St Alban’s was far enough away from Weston to make his service there, at a very early age, rather implausible. In 1764/5 Sam would have been aged only about 10 or 11, so hardly a ‘man’ at that time. Moreover, it would have been a coincidence for Cowper to have taken him back to his place of origin (without even a mention in the letters). In fact Sam had already married in Weston and his first three children had been christened there while Cowper was still in Olney. Sam had witnessed a number of marriages in the Weston register, presumably as parish clerk, going back to 1776. It is possible that Cowper came into contact with Sam through the Throckmortons, his wife’s family being Roman Catholic. Samuel Teedon indicates that Sam’s mother also served the Cowper-

Unwin household in Weston; in his diary for 8 April 1792 he writes: ‘Mrs Roberts came with an invitation for me to dine with Madam tomorrow. She drank tea with us. Sam’s mother not his wife’²². Lady Hesketh also refers in 1799 to some money she owes to Sam’s ‘mother and aunt’²³, who would have been elderly by that time. While still in Olney Cowper refers to a Susan Roberts, who could be Sam’s mother, as being very ill but recovering²⁴.

There are various references to Sam Roberts in Cowper’s letters during the Weston years, portraying him as a man of some intelligence and a true factotum, rendering diverse services to his master. The Roberts family apparently continued to live in their own house rather than moving into The Lodge. Cowper writes on 4 September 1787: ‘Our Servant sleeps always at his own house’. Teedon mentions that his cousins visited Sam’s house in Weston and informed him who was preaching that evening in Olney²⁵. The maid Molly Peers and her daughter also lived in Sam’s house at one point²⁶. Cowper’s letters tell us much about his day-to-day life and a number of anecdotal accounts concern Sam, sometimes just incidentally, such as when he ushered in visitors, for example, a parish clerk from Northampton²⁷. On one occasion Sam tried to prevent a Quaker preacher from seeing Cowper, having instructions not to admit anybody²⁸. Teedon seems to have appreciated Sam, who would visit him in Olney and take his letters to Cowper; however, on one occasion the schoolmaster was upset to find that his letter had not been delivered²⁹. Sam also delivered some of the poet’s letters to Teedon.

An insight into Sam’s role is provided by the writings of John Johnson, whose first meeting with Cowper in 1790 was described in a poem written 40 years later entitled ‘Recollections of Cowper’³⁰. The day after Johnson arrived in Olney, Cowper sent Sam to conduct him to the Lodge³¹. Sam is portrayed in the account as the poet’s valet, engaged in menial tasks such as bringing his master’s walking shoes and closing the shutters as dinner was served, Cowper being ‘careful not to tantalise the eye of his necessitous neighbours’. Johnson also describes the Sunday evening service at Weston church, where Sam, as parish clerk, ‘pitched the psalm’.

In some of Cowper’s anecdotes Sam plays a prominent and sometimes amusing role: in 1789 he was sent to Gayhurst to bring back Cowper’s

spaniel Beau³², and in 1791 to Woburn to enquire about the shortcomings of one of Lady Hesketh's servants³³. When the innkeeper there found out that he was Cowper's servant, Sam was given a free breakfast! In several letters of 1792-3 Cowper mentions that Sam has been helping to carry or support Mrs Unwin after her second stroke³⁴. In a letter to Hayley of 20 January 1793 Cowper relates how 'Samuel with his cheerful countenance appear'd at the study-door, and with a voice as cheerful as his looks, exclaim'd – Mr. Hayley is come, Madam!'. It was a disappointment, to Mrs Unwin in particular, to discover that he was announcing the delivery of Hayley's portrait, not the arrival of the man himself. In 1793³⁵ Sam and a carpenter, putting their 'foolish noddle[s]' together, built Cowper a 'shed' (or arbour) in the 'shrubbery' at Weston and it turned out to be more elaborate than the basic structure Cowper had foreseen, 'a thing fit for Stow-gardens', thus prompting Cowper's proposed inscription (in the place of another verse he had 'designed for a hermitage'³⁶):

Beware of building. I intended
Rough logs and thatch, and thus it ended.

Mrs Unwin persuaded Cowper not to 'break Sam's heart' by his reproach, however poetical. Shortly afterwards, during an after-dinner walk with Mrs Unwin³⁷, Cowper discovered a sundial 'mounted on a smart stone pedestal'. Cowper had suspected Sam 'this Fac Totum of mine' of being responsible for placing it there, having often heard his master deplore the absence of one, but Sam was then forced to tell him that it was a surprise gift from John Johnson.

Nanny (Ann) Roberts is described in 1792³⁸ as 'Cook and House-keeper', replacing Molly Peers due to ill-health³⁹. 'Sam's wife shall be paid' writes Cowper on 21 July 1792. Cowper refers to a visit by Sam and his wife to an 'uncle from whom they have expectations' in Stowe⁴⁰. Nanny is complimented by the poet for bringing Mrs Unwin her shoes but reproached for breaking a bottle of 'good liquor'⁴¹! The Roberts children are also mentioned a couple of times in Cowper's letters: he reports that Sam's 'eldest boy' died of the smallpox in 1787⁴², with two other children suffering from the disease; and some time later that one of Sam's sons 'bow'd' in front of Abbott's portrait of the poet⁴³.

Sam's sister-in-law, Susan(na) Wheeler (b. 1776), also known as 'Sukey', was another servant of Cowper. A piece of lace made by her is on display in the Cowper and Newton Museum, and the handwritten inscription states that she ('Cowper's servant who lived with him at Weston') was 'Susan' the 'chambermaid' who inadvertently shut up Cowper's cat in a drawer, as related in the poem 'The Retired Cat'⁴⁴.

In 1792 Cowper and Mrs Unwin, accompanied by John Johnson, visited Hayley in Eartham, Sussex, and decided to take Sam and Nanny with them. When planning the trip, Cowper reassured Hayley that only one bed would be necessary for the couple, 'being one flesh', and justified Sam's presence by his usefulness⁴⁵. Nanny was supposed to 'jog thither in the stage' with Johnson, rather than travelling with Cowper, Mrs Unwin and Sam, who would be 'more useful by the way'⁴⁶ than Johnny. However, a subsequent letter from Johnson⁴⁷ reported that all five of them (plus Beau, the dog) had, in the end, ridden to Eartham in the same coach, with Sam on the 'Box'. According to Johnson, Cowper was later to regret taking the servants to Eartham. In a letter to his sister⁴⁸ describing the journey home, Johnson complained that they had doubled the cost of the trip for Cowper, adding: 'He is however resolved to take them no more, as he found them only an incumbrance – and I am glad his eyes are open on that subject'. Johnson also remarked that the couple had felt 'starved' in Eartham in comparison with Weston where they were 'used to stuff their guts with every thing that they could wish'⁴⁹! Johnson was beginning to express a concern that Sam and Nanny were too expensive for Cowper and were perhaps taking advantage of his generosity; the poet, however, never complained in his letters that they had not served him well.

A few years later neither Cowper nor Johnson appeared to question the idea of taking Sam and Nanny on the next trip, this time to Norfolk, and Nanny's sister Sukey joined them. According to his 'Memoir of Cowper'⁵⁰, Johnson himself had the sudden idea of taking Cowper and Mrs Unwin to a 'Summer's residence by the sea-side' and when he mentioned it to Lady Hesketh she was of the same opinion⁵¹. There is little doubt, however, that Lady Hesketh was the driving force behind the move and saw it as a more permanent solution for Cowper⁵², although it was not presented as such to the poet⁵³. John Johnson speaks as follows

about the arrangements foreseen for the servants in Norfolk, in a letter to his sister of 10 July 1795⁵⁴:

In your room will sleep the old Lady [Mrs Unwin], because of the fire place – and upon a bed in one corner of it, our Sally and Sukey Wheeler must sleep ... In the ligh Closet will be Nanny Roberts. Our dear Cousin will be in my room, and upon a small bed in the same room will be Samuel Roberts, who is quite a treasure for his excellent behaviour to our dear Cousin.

Ultimately they all left Weston (Sukey travelled separately⁵⁵) on 28 July 1795, stopping the first night at Eaton and the second at Barton Mills. In Norfolk they stayed first at the Vicarage at North Tuddenham.

Sam Roberts thus continued to serve Cowper in Norfolk⁵⁶ and his presence was clearly appreciated by John Johnson, at least initially. Johnson records in his diary that he spent part of the journey from Weston talking ‘incessantly’ to Sam, who was in the same Post Chaise with Cowper and himself, in order to ‘divert [Cowper’s] thoughts as much as possible’⁵⁷. It must also have been comforting for the poet to maintain the connection with Weston through the presence of Sam, Nanny and Sukey, who remained with him during his stay in Mundesley from 19 August until early October 1795. Sam reassured Cowper that he would visit his ‘beloved’ Weston again⁵⁸, but of course he never did. Sam notably accompanied his master and Johnson on a visit to Happisburgh (31 August), going up the lighthouse with Johnson and reporting back to Cowper what he had seen. In September, when Johnson had found a house for Cowper and Mrs Unwin, Dunham Lodge, he discussed the subject of the servants with Lady Hesketh, who felt it was best to send ‘all the Wheeler crew away’⁵⁹, for financial reasons (she had been concerned for some time about the expense of ‘ye swarms who lived in [Cowper’s] kitchen’⁶⁰) but also because in her view they had too much influence in the household. Lady Hesketh’s harshest criticism can be found in a letter of 13 September 1795 to John Johnson⁶¹; she describes the Weston servants, and ‘the female ones particularly’, as ‘non-descripts’, but with the ‘Reins of Government’ in their hands. She did not categorically reject Sam, however, remarking:

He is certainly capable of being an excellent Servant and this one cannot say of every body – he is also doubtless a very usefull one on many ocasions

– and daily gains ground in the favour and opinion of his poor Master, but whether he will be brought to be just the servant he ought to be after all the Indulgence he has receiv'd is impossible for me to say at this distance.

Lady Hesketh told Johnson that he was right not to suffer the ‘young Suckers to be transplanted to Dunham Lodge’, as they were ‘idle weeds’ who would ‘certainly take Root’ there! She agreed to let Sam have five guineas, in addition to his wages, so that one of his sons could be apprenticed, and also granted him some furniture from Weston Lodge. This was clearly intended to appease Sam. While Sam had ‘behaved so well in many respects and in some Instances with such attention to his dear Master that one would wish to reward him and to give him no real ground of Complaint’, she foresaw that Sam and his family, having had ‘such lucrative places’ would be ‘extremely shock’d to lose such Loaves and such Fishes as they have for many years rejoic’d in’. Lady Hesketh concluded by instructing Johnson: ‘Pray take great care of this letter, which if found wou’d let the cat out of the bag at once!’ She did not want to give the servants the chance to ‘counter-act’ and Johnson seems to have followed her advice by taking prompt action, even though he undoubtedly had a certain respect for Sam himself⁶², in spite of the difference in their social background.

On 15 September 1795 Sam travelled with Cowper and Johnson to see Dunham Lodge and all three men spent the night at Dereham. Miss Barham Johnson speculates that Sam and his wife might have been reluctant to move to such a big house as Dunham Lodge anyway, thus saving Johnny the task of ‘dismissing’ them, but it is unlikely that they would have left Cowper spontaneously for such a reason. After receiving Lady Hesketh’s letter of 13 September, Johnson clearly put the dismissal plan into action. In Miss Johnson’s words: ‘One wonders whether Cowper and Mrs Unwin realised that they would never see Sam and Nanny Roberts again, and whether there was a sad leave-taking’⁶³. Certainly none of them would have been aware of the extent of Lady Hesketh’s hostile attitude towards the servants, without which they might perhaps have remained in Norfolk. Nanny returned to Weston first, because Cowper writes to Lady Hesketh from Mundesley on 26 September 1795: ‘Samuel desires me to present his duty to you. His wife is gone to Weston ...’. In the same letter the poet laments ‘I shall

never see Weston more', having probably realised by that time that the move had become permanent. Johnson had also gone to Weston without telling Cowper, who writes: 'Whither he is gone I know not; at least I know not by information from himself. Samuel tells me that he thinks his destination is to Weston. But why to Weston is unimaginable to me'⁶⁴. Cowper could not understand why Johnson would have returned there, but it was clearly a necessary visit to deal with the 'break up' (Lady Hesketh's words) at the Lodge and sort out the furniture, some of which was intended for Sam's family. Johnson did not record his visit to Weston in his diary. His whereabouts were perhaps to be kept a secret from Cowper and Mrs Unwin, so as not to upset them, but Sam felt obliged to disclose it; the words 'Samuel tells me that he thinks ...' reveal a reluctance on Sam's part to say what he knew. Sam was perhaps still considering his own position, but Lady Hesketh was no doubt correct in her letter of 13 September when she suggested that he would not have wanted to remain in Norfolk without his wife.

According to John Johnson's diary, it was on 7 October 1795 (when Cowper and his party left Mundesley) that 'the Weston Servants, by Lady Hesketh's Recommendation, [were] left behind, to return to Weston Underwood'⁶⁵. The word 'Recommendation' is certainly a euphemism! Without their servants, Cowper and Mrs Unwin then went to Dereham, where they stayed temporarily before settling at Dunham Lodge, as planned, later that month. Wright erroneously implies that Sam remained with Cowper until around October 1796. A couple (coincidentally) by the name of Johnson were then engaged as servants⁶⁶, joining the Johnsons' maid Sally and a young man, Sam Dent. On 17 August 1798 Lady Hesketh enquired of John Johnson as to how Dent was getting on⁶⁷. He was from Weston⁶⁸ and had previously attended to Mrs Unwin before being taken to Norfolk by Johnson as his own servant⁶⁹. In the last years of his life, Cowper was nursed by Margaret Perowne, a friend of John Johnson's sister, and she received a significant sum of money (£200) from the poet's estate⁷⁰. In April 1798 Lady Hesketh expressed veiled criticism of the fact that Johnson had sent Sam the poet's 'old wardrobe' when the clothes could have been given to someone in need locally⁷¹. She appears nevertheless to have continued to pay an annuity to Sam and his family even after Cowper's death⁷².

Sam Roberts was a resident of Weston in March 1798 as he is listed on the Buckinghamshire *Posse Comitatus* roll for the village, under the occupation ‘laceman’⁷³. Later that year a daughter of Sam and Nanny was christened at Weston. Sam was to live for 32 years after Cowper’s death and is known to have been a source of information and artefacts. For example, he helped to retrieve a silhouette of Cowper from a shade⁷⁴ and verse fragments from a shutter⁷⁵ at The Lodge. The Cowper and Newton Museum has some hairs from Cowper’s wig received from Sam Roberts on 1 April 1831⁷⁶, the year before his death.

The most interesting item relating to Sam Roberts from that later period is a letter written by Sam himself to John Johnson dated 5 December 1806⁷⁷. He was replying to a letter from Johnson enquiring about the ‘Yardley Oak’ tree, subject of Cowper’s poem first published by Hayley in 1804, and begins by conveying the relevant information that Sam had waited for George Courtenay to confirm. Sam had been given Johnson’s letter by a Mr Wolseley, whom he had taken to visit Weston Lodge. Even though Sam was the parish clerk, his letter contains numerous spelling and grammatical mistakes. Reflecting the fact that Johnson had remained a personal friend, Sam additionally provides information about his two sons, emphasising how it has caused him financial hardship to help his eldest son set up in business in London. Johnson was to keep Hayley informed about his correspondence with Sam, which apparently continued for a while thereafter. William Hayley, who had described Sam in his work on Cowper as a ‘very affectionate, worthy domestic, who attended his master into Sussex’⁷⁸, wrote in April 1810 to John Johnson: ‘Now let me rejoice with you on the discovery of the manuscripts found by the good Samuel Roberts!’ adding ‘I have always intended to send to the said good Samuel a copy of his master’s life, which he perfectly deserves’; and ‘I hope you may visit Weston, and exhort the good Samuel Roberts to make yet more discoveries. Remember me kindly to him.’⁷⁹ One of the papers found by Sam – inside an account-book which had belonged to Cowper – was the fragment of a hymn ‘To Jesus the Crown of my Hope’, apparently given by Sam to Rev. John Sutcliff and first published in the *Baptist Magazine and Literary Review* a few months later (April 1810)⁸⁰.

After Nanny’s death in 1809, the *Northampton Mercury* announced Sam’s second marriage to Elizabeth Filby of Croydon in 1812,

describing him as a ‘lace dealer’. In 1815 a Moravian minister (Rev. Samuel Connor) visited Weston and met Sam’s new wife: ‘... I made enquiry for Sam Roberts, who had been [Cowper’s] Gardener [*sic*] & soon found his place of residence, but only his Wife was at Home, who was well acquainted with the [Moravian] Brethren, & with the greatest pleasure showed me her Garden, into which had been transplanted from Cowper’s garden at Weston a favourite Woodbine’⁸¹. Then in 1824 Charles Knight visited Weston and met a few individuals who had been ‘intimately acquainted’ with the poet, one of whom was ‘a favourite and faithful domestic [who] lived [*sic*] with Cowper during the whole of his residence at Weston’. The unnamed servant, most probably Sam, was then living ‘in a beautiful cottage’ and had built in his garden a summer-house, ‘in honour of his lamented master’, on which was inscribed the verse *Inscription for a Moss-House in the Shrubbery at Weston*⁸². Sam’s second wife pre-deceased him. By the end of his life he was a man of property and in his will left a ‘freehold messuage and outbuildings with the garden etc. together with the two cottages adjoining’ in Weston, and also a ‘freehold cottage etc.’ in the parish of Emberton. The *Mercury* reported his death in 1832 as follows: ‘At his son’s house, in London, ... in the 78th year of his age, much esteemed and regretted by a numerous circle of friends, Mr. Samuel Roberts, of Weston Underwood, Bucks, for many years faithful attendant on the Poet Cowper.’ Whether or not he or his wife deserved Lady Hesketh’s ire, Sam certainly fulfilled his role as an efficient valet or factotum and appears to have remained indispensable to Cowper during the Weston years.

Notes

- ¹ T. Wright, *The Correspondence of William Cowper*, 1904, vol. 4: Sam was buried (p. 259 footnote) ‘near the porch of Weston church’ or (p. 495 footnote) ‘close to the church tower’. A 1919 churchyard map in Weston church shows a number of graves on the north side of the tower that no longer exist.
- ² Manuscript in the Cowper and Newton Museum collection (I am grateful to Elizabeth Knight for this information). Sam’s wives were buried in the same grave.
- ³ Married by Thomas Scott, curate, at Weston.

- ⁴ I wish to thank my cousin Noreen Walker of Ontario, Canada, for tracing this record (kept in Latin).
- ⁵ T. Wright, *The Life of William Cowper*, 1892, pp. 116, 122 ('Roberts, a rather prominent figure in this history'), 130 and 140.
- ⁶ Letters to Hill, 10 March 1766, and to Lady Hesketh, 2 January 1786. In this article all references to Cowper's letters can be found in James King and Charles Ryskamp (eds.), *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper* (5 volumes), Clarendon Press, 1979-1986.
- ⁷ N. Curry, *William Cowper*, 2015, p. 55. See also, for example, C. Ryskamp, *William Cowper of the Inner Temple, Esq.: A Study of His Life and Works to the year 1768*, 1959; S. Malpas, *Centenary Letters*, 2000; and biographies by H. l'Anson Fausset 1928, D. Cecil 1929, G. Thomas 1935, L. Hartley 1938, M. Quinlan 1953, J. King 1986, and G. Ella 1993.
- ⁸ J. Johnson (ed.), *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of William Hayley*, 1823.
- ⁹ Rev. T. Grimshawe (ed.), *The Life and Works of William Cowper*, 1835, vol. 5, p. 293 (*Memoir*); and later editions, e.g. the single volume published by Nimmo in 1876, p. 457. A similar footnote for this quotation in the 'restored' *Adelphi* is given by King and Ryskamp (*op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 38).
- ¹⁰ Grimshawe has been described as 'a hopelessly incompetent editor' (N. Russell, *A Bibliography of Cowper to 1837*, 1963, p. 232); cf. 'Grimshawe's fault was general incompetence' (L. Hartley, *William Cowper, the Continuing Reevaluation*, 1960, p. 48). R. Spiller is also critical: 'Grimshawe ... so mangled his sources as to make his revision of Hayley's work almost worthless' ('A New Biographical Source for William Cowper', *PMLA*, XLII (1927), pp. 946-62).
- ¹¹ R. Southey, *Life of William Cowper*, 1836, vol. 1, p. 154, and 1843, vol. 1, p. 107.
- ¹² King and Ryskamp (*op. cit.*, vol. 1, p.42 (*Adelphi*)).
- ¹³ Letter to Mrs Madan, 1 March 1768.
- ¹⁴ J. Corry, *The Life of William Cowper, Esquire*, 1803, p. 20. M. Quinlan (*William Cowper: A Critical Life*, 1953, p. 66) refers to two servants at Olney, identifying one as Sam Roberts, but without referring to any evidence for this assumption.
- ¹⁵ Letter to Unwin, 3 July 1782. Cowper also had a servant living with him in Olney called William Peace (or Pearce), who left when he got married, i.e. before December 1784 (criticised in a letter to Newton, 18 March 1792; see also the letter to Newton of 24 December 1784). Around that time, Cowper describes a servant called Tom in *Truth* (1782); and 'footman Tom' is mentioned in *Tirocinium* (1782-84).
- ¹⁶ Letters to Mrs Madan, 11 June 1768, 18 June 1768 and 9 July 1768.
- ¹⁷ Letter to Hill, 1 January 1771.

- ¹⁸ Letters to Newton, 24 September and 11 November 1780.
- ¹⁹ Described as a ‘lump of dough’ etc. in a letter to Lady Hesketh, 11 December 1786.
- ²⁰ Letter to Teedon, 20 October 1792: ‘William Kitchener is here and will attend you home’; Kitch is mentioned several times by Teedon as his messenger, see T. Wright (ed.), *Diary of Samuel Teedon*, 1902. Kitchener appears on the 1798 Buckinghamshire *Posse Comitatus* for Olney (listed as ‘gardener’).
- ²¹ Letter to Lady Hesketh, 26 September 1793 (with more general reflections on servants).
- ²² Teedon’s *Diary*, *op. cit.*, pp. 19-20.
- ²³ C. Bodham Johnson (ed.), *Letters of Lady Hesketh to the Rev. John Johnson, Concerning Their Kinsman William Cowper the Poet*, 1901, p. 82; letter to Johnson of 28 March 1799: ‘... I could not find any thing in your Accounts my good Johnny, relative to the Cash which I owe to Saml. Roberts Mother and Aunt – perhaps indeed they may be both in Heaven by this time ...’.
- ²⁴ Letter to Newton, 25 August 1781: ‘Susan Roberts has been supposed dying for some time, was speechless for a Week, then grew better, was seized with violent Convulsions, and is again grown better’.
- ²⁵ Teedon’s *Diary*, *op. cit.*, 18 March 1792.
- ²⁶ Letter to Lady Hesketh, 11 August 1793 (also *Letters of Lady Hesketh*, *op. cit.* p. 25, 27 September 1793).
- ²⁷ Letters to Lady Hesketh, 27 November 1787, and (about a later clerk) to Hayley, 25 November 1792.
- ²⁸ Anecdote dated 1795, cited by J. King, *William Cowper*, 1986, p. 264.
- ²⁹ Teedon’s *Diary*, *op. cit.*, 2 February 1794.
- ³⁰ The poem, interspersed with prose notes, is cited by King (*op. cit.*, p. 185) and by Rev. Grimshawe (*op. cit.*, vol. 4, p. 147); extensive quotations from it can be found in an unpublished typescript by Miss Catherine Mary Barham Johnson (John Johnson’s great-granddaughter, 1895-1996) entitled ‘Cowper’s Norfolk Connections’ (Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies, Aylesbury, file 37, copy in Cowper and Newton Museum).
- ³¹ Johnson’s message had been carried from Olney by ‘Kitch’.
- ³² Letter to Rose, 5 November 1789 (Cowper was unhappy with Sam for letting the dog escape).
- ³³ Letter to Lady Hesketh, 13 February 1791.
- ³⁴ Lady Hesketh writes later, in May 1794, that ‘even Samuel can scarce support’ Mrs Unwin, after a further attack (Southey, *op. cit.*, vol. 3, p. 175).
- ³⁵ Letters to Hayley, 24 July and 15 August 1793. See also T. Wright, *The Town of Cowper*, 1893, pp. 183-4.

- ³⁶ *Inscription for the Hermitage*, May 1793 (see John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp (eds.), *The Poems of William Cowper*, vol. 3, pp. 193, 342).
- ³⁷ Letter to John Johnson, 6 September 1793.
- ³⁸ Letter to Lady Hesketh, 5 April 1792.
- ³⁹ Teedon's *Diary*, *op. cit.*, 17 March 1792: 'Mrs U. told me that this day she had hired Nanny Roberts instead of Mrs Peers'; the fact that Nanny ultimately 'succeeded' Molly was not confirmed by Cowper to Lady Hesketh until 11 August 1793.
- ⁴⁰ Letter to Lady Hesketh, 6 June 1792. It is not known whether it was Sam's own uncle or his wife's.
- ⁴¹ Letters to Hayley, 14 June 1792, and to John Johnson, 29 September 1793.
- ⁴² Letters to Lady Hesketh of 10 December 1787 and 1 January 1788; the burial of Sam's son George Michael is recorded in the Weston register for 1 December 1787.
- ⁴³ Letter to Hayley, 29 July 1792.
- ⁴⁴ Poem dated 1788 according to Baird and Ryskamp, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 309; see also Wright's *Life of Cowper*, *op. cit.*, p. 545.
- ⁴⁵ Letter to Hayley, 22 July 1792.
- ⁴⁶ Letter to Lady Hesketh, 21 July 1792.
- ⁴⁷ *Letters of Lady Hesketh*, *op. cit.*, p. 20.
- ⁴⁸ Letter of John Johnson to his sister Kate, 23 September 1792, Barham Johnson Collection (OLNCN:2649/30/3).
- ⁴⁹ Quoted in 'Cowper's Norfolk Connections', *op. cit.*, p. 84.
- ⁵⁰ J. Johnson, *Poems by William Cowper*, 1815, vol. 3, p. 51.
- ⁵¹ See also Southey, *op. cit.*, vol. 3, p. 176.
- ⁵² See King's biography of Cowper, pp. 264-65.
- ⁵³ Johnson suggests that it would have proved fatal to Cowper 'had the measure been suggested under the idea of a final separation from that endeared residence', insisting that this was not the intention (*Poems*, *op. cit.*, vol. 3, p. 52).
- ⁵⁴ *Letters of Lady Hesketh*, *op. cit.*, p. 43 (Johnson's plan was then to reside at Dereham, but Cowper begged him to stay in a village instead).
- ⁵⁵ Lady Hesketh in a letter to John Johnson of 1 August 1795 (Southey, *op. cit.*, vol. 3, p. 182) says that 'Susie' would bring to Norfolk the key to the box of Cowper's papers from Weston.
- ⁵⁶ Letters to Lady Hesketh, 27 August, 5 September and 26 September 1795.
- ⁵⁷ For John Johnson's diary from the relevant period, see R. Spiller, *op. cit.* Johnson writes that Mrs Unwin travelled with Nanny and Hannah Wilson in the other chaise; see also 'Cowper's Norfolk Connections', *op. cit.*, p. 123.

- ⁵⁸ Letter to Lady Hesketh, 27 August 1795.
- ⁵⁹ Letter from John Johnson to his sister, 6 September 1795 (*Letters of Lady Hesketh*, *op. cit.*, p. 46). The ‘Wheeler crew’ presumably just consisted of Sam, Nanny and Sukey (there is no evidence that another Wheeler sister was present).
- ⁶⁰ *Letters of Lady Hesketh*, *op. cit.*, p. 26 (27 September 1793). She particularly disliked Hannah Wilson, who did not actually return to Weston but was apprenticed in Norwich.
- ⁶¹ Quoted in ‘Cowper’s Norfolk Connections’, *op. cit.*, p. 133. Original letter in Barham Johnson Collection (OLNCN:2649/32/11).
- ⁶² Johnson once wrote for Cowper a ‘poetical Dialogue ... between Homer’s head and the head of Samuel’, the latter presumably being Roberts (see Cowper’s letter to John Johnson, 20 November 1792), implying that he was making fun of Sam for his lack of education. Cowper felt obliged to say that the poetry was ‘kindly intended, I know well, for my amusement’.
- ⁶³ ‘Cowper’s Norfolk Connections’, *op. cit.*, p.135.
- ⁶⁴ Southey, *op. cit.* (vol. 3, p. 191) writes: ‘Mr Johnson was probably absent in preparing for their removal to Dunham Lodge, when Cowper ... supposed him to be gone, whither he himself would fain have returned, to Weston’.
- ⁶⁵ See R. Spiller, *op. cit.* Nanny Roberts had in fact already left some 10 days earlier.
- ⁶⁶ See J. King, *op. cit.*, p. 271, and ‘Cowper’s Norfolk Connections’, *op. cit.*, p. 135.
- ⁶⁷ *Letters of Lady Hesketh*, *op. cit.*, p. 61 (‘I ... doubt not that he is now an excellent Servant’), and p. 62 footnote (‘Sam Roberts was succeeded by Sam Dent’).
- ⁶⁸ Christened in 1781 at Weston, Sam Dent is referred to by Johnson as a ‘boy’ and as ‘little Sam’.
- ⁶⁹ See ‘Cowper’s Norfolk Connections’, *op. cit.* p. 116; Dent had been replaced at Weston by Sam’s eldest son (Samuel junior) and Johnson commented in a letter to his sister that ‘the old Lady is quite guided by [Sam]’, who had efficiently arranged for his son to take over.
- ⁷⁰ T. Wright, *Unpublished and Uncollected Letters of William Cowper*, 1925, p. 85; Sam Roberts is not mentioned here as a beneficiary.
- ⁷¹ *Letters of Lady Hesketh*, *op. cit.*, p. 61.
- ⁷² Note by C. Bodham Johnson in *Letters of Lady Hesketh*, *op. cit.*, p. 62; see also p. 84 (reiterating the error that Sam had served Cowper since 1765).
- ⁷³ See I. Beckett, ‘The Buckinghamshire Posse Comitatus 1798’, Buckinghamshire Record Society, 1985.
- ⁷⁴ Described by Lady Hesketh, in a letter to Johnson of 28 May 1800, as a ‘horrid likeness’ (*Letters of Lady Hesketh*, *op. cit.*, p. 106), this was the profile

drawing by John Higgins first mentioned by Cowper on 18 May 1791 (see N. Russell, *op. cit.*, p. 286).

- ⁷⁵ *Lines Written on a Window-Shutter at Weston* (on the poet's departure from The Lodge). See Baird and Ryskamp, *op. cit.*, vol. 3, pp. 208, 352-53 (Sam found and copied both fragments and gave them to William Wilson, Cowper's barber). The original shutter can be seen in the Museum with only the first fragment.
- ⁷⁶ Item 78B, presented by Mr J. Taylor of Northampton. The Museum also has Cowper's coffeepot, which was passed on to Sam and ultimately purchased by Helen Higgins. (I am grateful to Kate Bostock for this and other information about the Museum's collection.)
- ⁷⁷ Barham Johnson Collection (OLNCN:2649/21 (e)).
- ⁷⁸ Hayley's *Life of Cowper*, 1803 edition, vol. 2, p. 113 (footnote to above-cited letter of 24 July 1793); the same footnote is reproduced in Southey, *op. cit.*, vol. 3, p. 218.
- ⁷⁹ See *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of William Hayley*, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, pp. 168 and 170.
- ⁸⁰ See Baird and Ryskamp, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, pp. 137-38 and 479; also N. Russell, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-28.
- ⁸¹ *Cowper and Newton Bulletin*, vol. 7, no. 3, Winter 2008, p. 15.
- ⁸² *Knight's Quarterly Magazine*, vol. 3, Aug-Nov 1824 ('Visit to Cowper's favourite village'), p. 47.