

William Cowper of the Inner Temple

[The following is a shortened version of an article by Dr C.M.Rider, Archivist to the Honourable Society of the Inner Temple, which first appeared in *The Inner Temple Yearbook 2003/4*, pp30-32. It is reprinted by kind permission of the author.]

When William Cowper's first volume of poems was published by Joseph Johnson of St. Paul's Churchyard in 1782 it was entitled *Poems by William Cowper of the Inner Temple*. However, this description has caused confusion amongst biographers of the poet who in some cases have assumed that William Cowper was called to the bar at the Inner Temple. Others have noted correctly that he was called to the bar at the Middle Temple, but give varying dates for his admission and call. This article seeks to clarify the situation.

William Cowper was born on 15 November 1731 in Great Berkhamsted (also spelt Berkhamstead or Berkhamptstead), Hertfordshire, the eldest son of the Reverend John Cowper and his wife, Anne, daughter of Roger Donne of Ludham Hall, Norfolk. William came from a family of Middle Temple lawyers, the most distinguished of whom were his grandfather, Spencer Cowper, Attorney General to the Prince of Wales and Judge of the Court of Common Pleas, and his great uncle, William, 1st Earl Cowper, appointed Lord Chancellor of Great Britain in 1707. Several of his close relatives, including his uncle, Ashley Cowper and cousin, William Cowper of Hertingfordbury, also trained as barristers at the Middle Temple. It is therefore not surprising that William, after studying at Westminster College, as many of his forebears had done, should join the Middle Temple on 29 April 1748. He made a number of friends during this time, including William Hayley, writer, poet and fellow Middle Templar,¹ and Edward Thurlow of the Inner Temple, who was to become Lord Chancellor in 1778.² He also kept up with his Westminster College school-fellows, including Joseph Hill, with whom he co-founded a weekly literary dining group named the Nonsense Club. In addition to writing poems, he seems to have found some time for his legal studies since he was called to bar at the Middle Temple on 14 June 1754. In the minutes of the Middle Temple Parliament relating to his call he was described incorrectly as C. Cowper, but the contemporary students ledger proves this to be a clerical error³.

The Inner Temple archives record that William Cowper, barrister, was admitted to the Inner Temple on 15 April 1757 and was confirmed as an *ad eundem gradum* member by the Inner Temple Parliament held on 17 June 1757.⁴ *Ad eundem* membership may be granted to barristers who wish to join the Inn from another Inn of Court on the same terms as they enjoyed in their original Inn. At this period it was common for barristers to transfer membership to another Inn in order to secure a tenancy of chambers in that Inn, generally available to members only. This seems to have been true in William Cowper's case, since on the same day his *ad eundem* status was confirmed, he was admitted to chambers in Inner Temple Lane for life, paying a £10 entry fine and forty shillings admittance fee.⁵ These chambers were on the first floor north of number 3 Inner Temple Lane (then known as the second staircase on the right) in a building which was demolished in the nineteenth century. The annual rent of four guineas (£4 4s 0d) was paid quarterly up to Hilary Term 1800, when the chambers reverted to 'the House', Cowper having died on 25 April.⁶

Whilst in the Inner Temple, William Cowper served as a Commissioner of Bankrupts, from 1759 to 1765, but despite family pressure he lacked the confidence to secure a more lucrative appointment. An attempt to apply for the post of Clerk to the Journals of the House of Lords prompted a mental breakdown and led him to leave London for the country. Cowper had long suffered from depression, probably since the death of his mother when he was only six, and this had been exacerbated by a blighted love affair with his cousin, Theodora. Theodora's father, Ashley Cowper, a barrister of the Middle Temple, forbade the relationship and William appears to have lapsed into periods of utter despair. His failure to face the rigours of examination for the House of Lords clerkship drove him to several suicide attempts. He resigned as Commissioner of Bankrupts in 1765. Since William Cowper was apparently not resident in the Inner Temple after 1763, he must have sub-let his chambers in return for a regular, if modest, income until his death in 1800.

Notes

- 1 See J M Gover *Literary Associations with the Middle Temple* (Lent Reading 1935). I am grateful to Lesley Whitelaw, Archivist to the Middle Temple, for this reference. William Hayley went on to write *The Life and Posthumous Writings of William Cowper Esqr.* which was published in 3 volumes by J Johnson of St Paul's Churchyard (London 1803-4).
- 2 Cowper introduced Thurlow to his uncle, Ashley Cowper. According to Southey, William and Thurlow spent their time 'giggling and making giggle' with Ashley's three daughters instead of studying the law: *Dictionary of National Biography* entry for William Cowper.
- 3 *Register of Admissions to the Honourable Society of the Middle Temple* vol. I 1501-1781 ed. H A C Sturgess (London 1949) p339 footnote
- 4 Inner Temple Archives ADM/5/4; *A Calendar of the Inner Temple Records* vol. V 1750-1800 ed. R A Roberts (London 1937) pp85,88
- 5 *CITR* vol. V p85
- 6 Inner Temple Archives CHA/5/4;CHA/2/2-3