

John Higgins of Turvey Abbey

John Higgins was born in 1768, a native of Weston Underwood, a small village about a mile from Olney. When Cowper moved there in 1786 he had a limited social circle. In a letter to Lady Hesketh dated 16 December 1786 he writes, 'I do not know Mr. John Higgins even by sight...But he should recollect it does not rest with me to commence an acquaintance. The resident inhabitants of a place must always make the first advances to a newcomer...and I daresay he is well aware of it.' According to J.W. Burgon's *Lives of Twelve Good Men* (New York 1888, ii.348),

On learning that a neighbour of his was able to repeat his poems by heart, Cowper invited his youthful admirer to 'a dish of tea'; which was the beginning of a friendship to which Mr. Higgins ever after reverted with affectionate delight and excusable pride.

The young man was soon trusted by Cowper to act as a go-between to his banker Joseph Hill. He is mentioned in three letters to Joseph Hill:

27 January 1788. 'the draft payable on sight to John Higgins, Esqr. or Order.'

6 July 1788. '... the Sum of twenty pounds payable to John Higgins Esqr. or Order.'

16 December 1788. 'I write yet once more to give you notice of a draft payable to John Higgins Esqr, or Order for Thirty Pounds, and dated yesterday.'

An earlier mention of young Mr Higgins was in a letter to Lady Hesketh dated 8 September 1787, when Cowper sent her two brace of partridges, one brace from the Throckmortons, 'and one brace a present from Mr. John Higgins.'

Cowper refers to Higgins in a letter to Lady Hesketh (27 March 1791) as 'our Weston Artist':

By the next Hall-cart I shall send you two very neat Landshapes [sic] by our Weston artist, which I beg you to get framed and glazed for me. We both agree that you can send him nothing better than a waistcoat.

Some time before May 1791 Higgins made a profile drawing of Cowper from a shadow picture. According to Norma Russell (*Bibliography of Cowper to 1837*, Oxford 1963), this was 'The earliest known likeness of Cowper, apart from the lost portraits of him as a boy' and it is described as

...not a true silhouette but an outline drawing blacked in and touched with white and grey, shows him in a powdered tie-wig and a white cravat which is lying flat, only a small portion being visible over the coat collar.



However, in the Cowper and Newton Museum we have an engraving by John Chapman based on a pastel drawing by John Russell of Cowper, aged about 32, which would therefore have a much earlier date of about 1764.

The drawing on the left is another version of the silhouette, also in the museum, drawn from life by James Andrews of Olney.

In another letter to Lady Hesketh (26 June 1791) Cowper writes,

Johnny Higgins shall have his waistcoat to-morrow together with a note in which I will tell him all that you say concerning his performances in the Drawing way. Your gift will not be less acceptable because, being in mourning, he cannot wear it at present. It is perfectly elegant and he will always be, and will always have cause to be, proud of it. He mourns for his mother who died about three weeks since.

Mary Higgins's memorial tablet is to be found in Weston Underwood Church, and Cowper wrote the following eight-line poem, first published in Hayley's *Life*, commemorating her (James King and Charles Ryskamp (eds.), *Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, Oxford 1984, vol iii, 534).

EPITAPH

On Mrs. M. Higgins, of Weston

Laurels may flourish round the Conqueror's tomb,
But happiest they, who win the world to come.
Believers have a silent field to fight,
And their exploits are veil'd from human sight.
They in some nook, where little known they dwell,
Kneel, pray in faith, and rout the hosts of Hell;
Eternal triumphs crown their toils divine,
And all those triumphs, Mary, are thine.

Mrs Unwin would sometimes send Higgins some of Cowper's lesser poems. In an undated note to Higgins, enclosing 'two spic and span new pieces' she adds, 'Mrs Unwin would endeavour to make some little return to Mr. Higgins for the ornament he lately gave the study. His drawing is framed and glazed, and the execution of it is much admired by all who have seen it.' Since in August 1791 Cowper writes to Lady Hesketh that 'My picture hangs in the study', the Mrs Unwin note must date from around that time.

The following year Higgins inherited the Turvey Abbey Estate in Bedfordshire from an uncle and left Weston. Although their regular contacts seem to have stopped at this time, he remained devoted to the memory of Cowper and cherished a collection of relics of the poet; for example he constantly wore Cowper's shoe-buckles after acquiring them from the Rev. John Buchanan in 1826. He was a talented amateur watercolourist and some of his originals are in the Bedfordshire County Record Office.

John Higgins married Theresa Longuet and in 1806 their son Charles Longuet Higgins was born. A letter from Charles dated 1867, now on display in the Museum, deals with the vexed question of how to pronounce 'Cowper':

I can with certainty inform you that the Poet himself, and all his immediate relatives and friends, used to pronounce his name as if it were spelt Cooper - that is without the 'w'. My dear father and grandfather, who were among his most intimate friends, the whole time of his living at Weston Underwood and Olney, knew well this to have been the case.

Today the Museum has other artefacts which have come to us through the generosity of the Higgins family. Two of these are letters, and the others are Cowper's coffee pot, bought by Mrs Helen Higgins in 1879, and the Rev. John Newton's wing chair, purchased by a member of the Higgins family in a sale of William Wilson's belongings. William Wilson was Cowper's barber/hairdresser, and it was at his request that James Andrews made a copy of Higgins's profile drawing; it is this copy that the Museum has on display in the Parlour.

The Higgins's of Turvey Abbey and the Higgins's of Castle Brewery, Bedford (and Cecil Higgins Art Gallery fame) are the descendants of the two sons of Hugh Higgins (1660-1751) of Weston Underwood.

Joan McKillop