

The Bowdon Sheaf

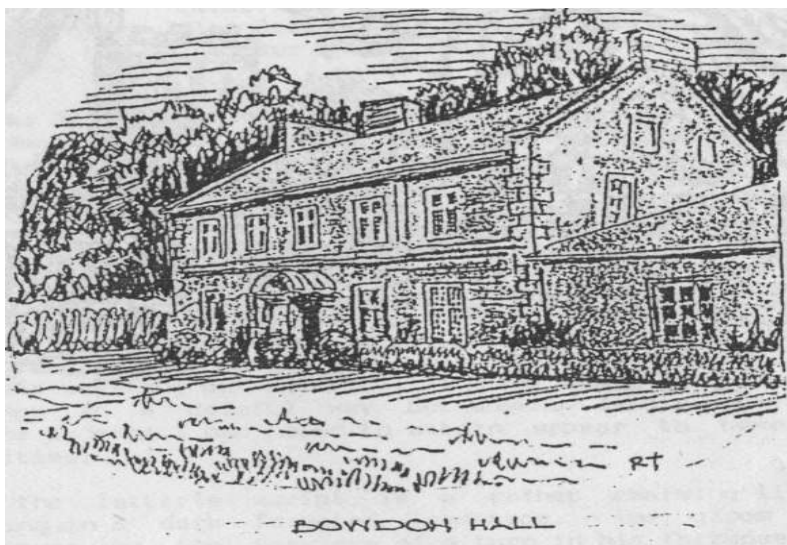
A BOWDON HISTORY SOCIETY PUBLICATION

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BYRON COOPER
by Maurice Ridgway

Byron Cooper died in 1933 at the age of 83, a colourful figure passed from Bowdon, Cheshire where he had lived at the Birches, Vicarage Lane for many years, sharing his life with his daughter Enid, also an artist, and where he had a small studio. Obituaries published at the time of his death help greatly in piecing together his long interesting life. The Manchester Guardian recalled that he had been specially selected on seven occasions to represent British Art in both oil and watercolour at International Exhibitions. These included the Paris Exhibition in 1889, where his large watercolour Grange Fell was hung in the place of honour, the St Louis (USA) Exhibition 1904, the New Zealand Exhibition (1906) the Franco-British Exhibition (1908) and the Rome Exhibition (1909). These exhibitions were organised and supported by the Art Committee of the Royal Commission appointed to assist the Board of Trade. These alone pinpoint the importance of Byron Cooper as an artist whose work should not be allowed to disappear.

It is perhaps as the father figure of the Manchester School of Painters that he is best remembered in the north west. For many years he worked in his main studio, Room 415 above the Royal Exchange, Manchester. Here he was in constant touch with persons who carried out their business in the lower Hall, and to whom passed many of his paintings, long appreciated after his death. Many may remember that the walls of the entrance to the newly established American Red Cross Officers club in Deansgate Manchester opened in February 1944, were lined with his paintings rescued from a gallery destroyed by incendiary bombs (Daily Dispatch 15.ii.1944) Byron Cooper was born in Manchester and educated first at the Revd James McDougalls School at Chadderton Hall. Later he studied at the life classes of the M.A.F.A and later with two French painters Jules Breton and Carolus Duran. As a young man he was also a keen athlete, and an amateur champion in different branches of sport, winning over a hundred medals.

In 1877 Cooper was living at 2 Raby Street, Manchester from where he wrote amusing letters to Julia Amelia Kenny whom he later married. Some of these he illustrated with sketches and cartoons. One such letter, written towards the end of 1878 reveals his passionate love of landscape and the action of light. 'Have you ever observed' he wrote to Julia, 'when looking at a landscape on a dull sort of day when everything looks black and unpromising, the wonderful effect of a momentary glint of sunlight falling across the scene, how it changes and cheers the whole aspect and banishes all gloomy thoughts from the mind? Yes? Well your welcome letters have always had the same effect on My individual landscape as the sunbeam has on Nature's prospects.

This is a rough sketch of the effect I mean. You can imagine therefore how eagerly I waited for your letter, since my prospects at the present time are anything but cheerful. I'm not aware that I am in the habit of looking at things in a doleful way but somehow Lately everything seems to have gone wrong and all the objects I had hoped to attain appear to have passed into the region of impossibilities.' Sandwiched in the latter's script is a rather charming little water colour of a beam of light shining in a dark forested landscape. The gloom reflected in his letter happened however on the very eve of a turn in his fortunes. Not only was his love returned by Julia whom he then married, but he was able to achieve a breakthrough in his artistic recognition.

Over fifty years later his paintings could still evoke in others what he could see in nature. The 'Manchester City News' in a review of his paintings could then say that "he captured the essential nature of a sunlit day as well as for moonlight, Impressionist rather than photographic, he feels colour values accurately and has apparently a grand passion for blue. At any rate the extraordinary range of his seas and skies give the impression that he cares less for green days in forests than for blue days at sea."

One could also add that he rarely if ever included humans in his pictures. Mr Algernon Graves in his second volume of 'Royal Academy of Arts' (H Graves and Co. pp.402.42s) a dictionary of works contributed to Academy Exhibitions between 1769 and 1904, lists no fewer than twenty four landscapes by Cooper, the largest number by Manchester based artists. The Manchester Guardian was quick to take note of this, but his popularity by then was unquestioned and unchallenged and met with the approval of Leighton, Alma Tadema and Clarence Whaite. They gave approval to the observation that he had solved the mystery of moonlight, seeing in it after many years of careful observation as much variety of colour as in sunshine.

He travelled extensively to obtain his scenes in NorthWales, Cornwall, Devon, Brittany, Switzerland, the Kyles of Bute, Scandinavia, being but a few. One of his great passions was to recapture in his pictures the emotions aroused by his devotion to the poetical works of Tennyson. To this end he visited and faithfully recorded views in the places associated with Tennyson and his characters. These grew in number and became an exhibition which was to tour the country for a great many years, and continued long after his death to be arranged by his daughter Enid who was devoted to her father's memory.

As Vice President of the Manchester Academy of Fine Arts he made withering attacks upon Nihilism in art, especially the extremists, Post-impressionism, Pauvism, Orfeism, Cubism, Futurism, all coming under fearful attack. At the same time he gave helpful and encouraging advice, based upon long experience and observation, to students. To members of the Bolton Art Club he could stress the importance of correct outline drawing as long as it was not carried too far preferring a concentration upon the study of value and light and shade. The sooner a student is faced with nature the better. 'When a student first ventures out to sketch from nature' he once said 'he would do well to select simple subjects, the simpler the better, an old gate or a tree trunk will serve well for a start. It will also be well to choose a grey day, as the presence of sunlight enormously magnifies the difficulties to be encountered. To resist also the fascination of colour, keeping for a time to monochrome. Never move about, looking for something better, paint the first thing that impresses, then sit and absorb it, become so completely saturated in it that even when the effect may have passed away one can recall it at will in a sort of mental picture...' His Tennyson Exhibition, of more than a hundred pictures in oil and watercolour, was designed to recapture the natural environment of the late poet laureate, and to illustrate by means of a series of landscapes the special localities in which Tennyson practically passed the whole of his life including the emotional landscape effects of which he derived some of his highest thoughts, similes and metaphors. Thus appeared landscapes at Somersby in Lincolnshire, Tennyson's birthplace, Hazelmere in Surrey where his home, Aldworth, is situated, Freshwater in the Isle of Wight, where he also had a home and finally Tintagel, Cornwall, the classic world of Tennyson's Idylls of the King.

Cooper claimed that the idea came to him when he was painting at Hazelmere, but was not aware at the time that Tennyson had lived there. He had spent the evenings studying Shakespeare and Tennyson. He had expressed a desire to paint the landscapes associated with Shakespeare but this was impossible so long after his death. He decided therefore to do this for Tennyson, his contemporary, whom he had once met in his studio as a young man and who had admired his work. He decided therefore to form such a collection and found in Messrs Henry Graves and Co at Pall Mall Gallery and slightly later at Messrs Wm Agnew and Son at their Liverpool gallery willing collaborators in his project. As this exhibition toured the country its popularity was enormous, over twenty two thousand persons visiting it when it came to Rochdale.

Byron Cooper continued to paint until the closing years of his long life, his last picture to be exhibited at the Royal Academy was perhaps appropriately 'the setting Sun, Cornwall' in 1929. Four years later he died in Bowdon.

Tastes and values change so that even great artists tend in turn to be forgotten. I trust there may be a revival of interest in Byron Cooper's pictures. Many years ago, soon after the turn of the century, my father and a friend were exploring the tip of Caernarvonshire, gathering material for what was to become the first Guide to Abersoch. Overlooking Porth Caeriad they found an artist at work painting the bay. They were so impressed by the quality of his work that they purchased it along with another of Porth Neigwl done in the evening, perfectly recapturing the gloom of its other name 'Hell's Mouth'. I still have them. They are signed Byron Cooper, and for many years I imagined he was related in some way to the Lakeland painter Heaton Cooper. Calling on him one day I asked if there was any connection, there was none but he had been asked the question before; he knew nothing about him. It was only when on visiting a house in Bowdon shortly after becoming Vicar that I noted a 'Byron Cooper' on the lady's wall. I asked if she could tell me in what part of the country he lived and to my surprise and joy was told 'The Birches, Vicarage Lane'. Since then the quest has been narrowed down considerably and the results are recaptured in this present account.

For most of the information I am deeply grateful to surviving members of the family who still live in the neighbourhood. I hope that this brief record will help to preserve the memory of an artist so well acclaimed in his day, for many of his pictures were bought by private individuals as well as by well known Galleries. His picture 'Grange Fell, Lancashire' exhibited and offered for sale (£35.15) at the Manchester Athenaeum Graphic Club in January 1888 was again shown at the Paris Exhibition (Catalogue No. 199) the following year. Godrevy Light went to St. Louis (Catalogue No. 47) and was later purchased by the Manchester City Art Gallery for their permanent collection. This was an oil done in Cornwall. The Chairman of the selection committee was Sir E J Poynter PRA. The Rising Moon (Catalogue No. 438) was bought by one S Kempton at the Dublin International Exhibition in 1907 and was later shown at the Franco-British Exhibition (London) the following year.

Editorial Note: Canon Ridgway supplied a list of exhibitions which have been excluded from this issue of the Bowdon Sheaf, but a copy if available for readers to see, on request.

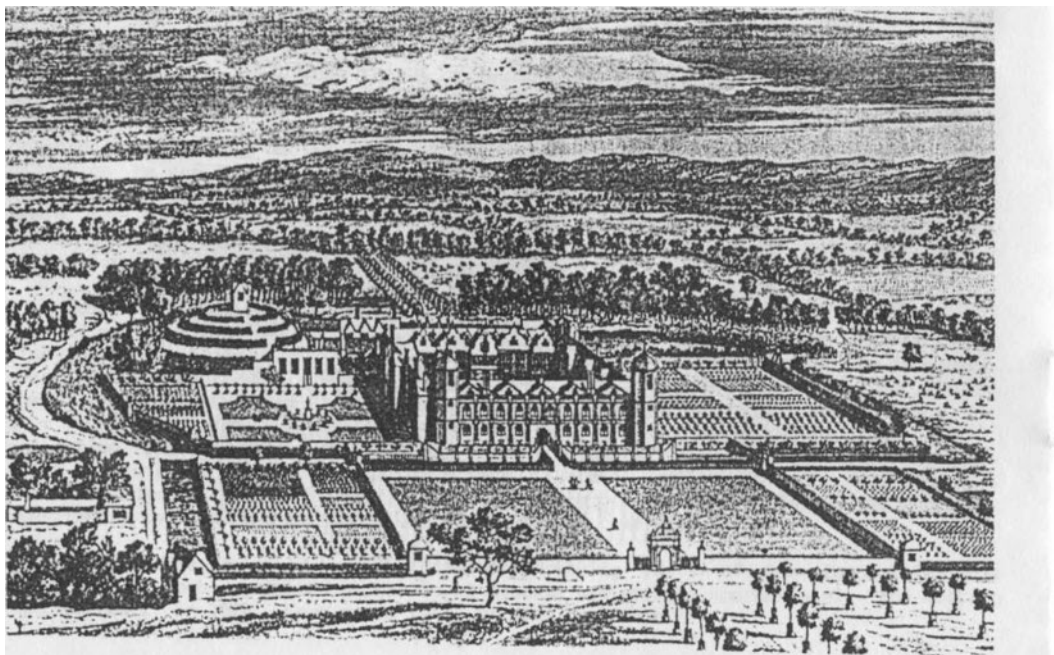


HUNTING TOWERS by Ronald Trenbath

Drawings and paintings of the Tudor house at Dunham Massey, which preceded the present building, indicate that towers existed at each end of the elevation facing on to the park. These towers were not for the purpose of defence, as might be expected, for indeed they would have been a defensive liability in the age of cannon fire, but more probably they were hunting towers from which women and the elderly could witness hunting, coursing and hawking from a safe and secluded distance.

Such towers were common to great Tudor houses, such as Charlecote, Blickling Hall and Brereton Hall, to provide height, excitement and change of scene for the nobility and gentry. They contained viewing rooms, often with adjoining flat roofs, such as parapets, staircases and garbages, with rooms on lower floors for more polite entertainment and meals. The tower was often built away from the main house in woodland as, for example, Bess of Hardwick's four storey hunting tower at Chatsworth, or the one at Whitcliff Park, and were oftentimes designated as mere follies by those ignorant of their true functional purpose, and they were also sometimes described, incorrectly, as banqueting houses due, no doubt, to the fact that meals were often served at sporting events.

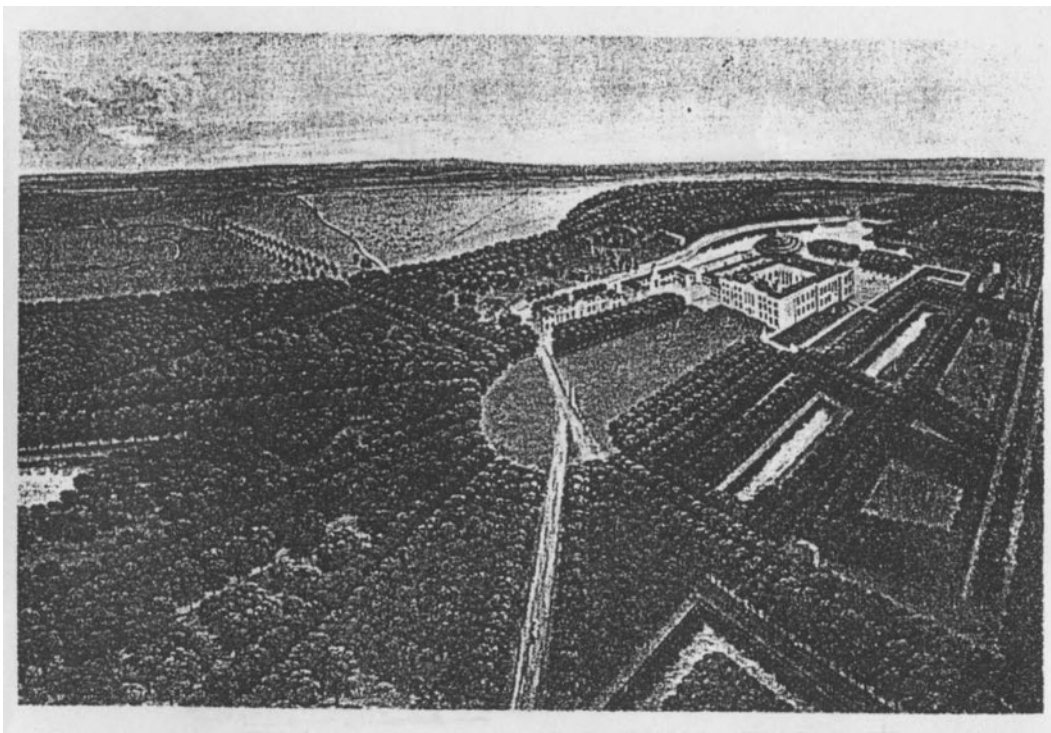
Because of the betting element, coursing was very popular and mile long grass tracks, or rides, were cut through woodland, often radiating from the hunting tower, along which hounds could chase deer, or hares, and bets laid on which ones would make kills. Six tracks radiate from the front of Dunham Massey Hall, of which the Second Earl of Warrington created four avenues in the late 17th Century, and it would be interesting to know if the remaining two tracks were rides and also if he based his avenues on original rides.



Queen Elizabeth's Hunting Lodge at Epping Forest is a three storey wooden structure which was originally a hunting tower with mural paintings which excited William Morris when he visited the building as a small boy, in the company of his father, and influenced his work in later life.

As recently as 1835 Francis Goodwin, in his "Pattern Book of Rural Architecture" advocated the tradition of mediaeval hunting towers for the bourgeoisie, which could be used more for spying on approaching and unwelcome visitors than for witnessing country sports.

It is a paradox that advocates of field sports have always claimed that their activities are commensurate with the aims of conservationists and that wild boar and wolves, to mention only two species, only became extinct in the British Isles after they were no longer required for hunting and so no longer protected. Ironically Dunham Massey Park is now a reserve for protecting endangered species and it is interesting to note that a modern version of the Elizabethan hunting tower has been erected at Risley nature reserve in order to provide facilities for observing the wild life.



BOWDON'S REBELLIOUS BELL RINGERS

Supporters of the Corn Law Reform were overjoyed at their success in 1846 and celebrations took place in many parts of the Country. The bellringers at Bowdon Parish Church were among those who considered that they had good cause to celebrate and planned to ring the church bells, to demonstrate their pleasure, one Saturday evening. Permission for them to carry out this act was refused but they were told that they would be well paid instead. Dissatisfied with the outcome of their request the men forced an entry into the Church and commenced peeling the bells to the great annoyance of the Curate who pleaded, in vain, with them to desist.

Eventually the miscreants were enticed away from the tower with the promise of ale, in which they were liberally indulged, but next day they were brought before the Wardens, after the Church service, and discharged from their posts.

Information supplied by Joan Leach.

