

[COMMUNICATION.]

THE MONUMENT TO SIR THOMAS
HESKETH, Bt., AT RUFFORD.

By *F. H. Cheetham, F.S.A.*

IN a paper read before this Society in 1907 the late rector of Rufford (Rev. W. G. Procter) drew attention to a monument in Rufford church "on which is an original verse written by the poet Cowper, who was cousin to the wife of Sir Thomas Hesketh to whose memory the monument was erected."¹ The monument in question is a marble tablet on the north wall of the north aisle of the church, measuring 5 ft. in height over all, by about 3 ft. 3 in. in width. It is a simple architectural composition with an embellished circular white marble medallion, bearing the inscription, upon a black background. This monument was placed in the old church of Rufford—built in 1734²—by Lady Hesketh in memory of her husband Sir Thomas Hesketh, first baronet, who died in 1778. When the old church was pulled down, the monument was re-erected in a corresponding position³ in the new building, completed in 1869. The inscription is as follows:—

Near this Place
are deposited the Remains of
S^r THO^s HESKETH Bar^t
who departed this Life
March the 4th 1778, Aged 51
deeply regretted by his numerous Friends
and sincerely mourn'd by his
afflicted Widow who erected this Marble
a small but gratefull Token
of her Concern for his Loss and
her affectionate Regard for his Memory.
*His frailter Part his sinfull Flesh
To Dust lyes here resign'd
Thy Mercy Lord! his Soul implores
Oh! may it Mercy find.*

¹ *The Manor of Rufford and the Ancient Family of Hesketh*, by W. G. Procter, in *Trans.*, 59, 115. ² Replacing a mediæval building then pulled down.

³ It was on the north wall of the aisleless nave of the eighteenth-century church.

Above are the arms of Sir Thomas Hesketh¹ and his wife,² not impaled, but on separate oval shields, surmounted by the Hesketh crest.³

The inscription is printed, without comment and with the lines running on, in the first edition of Baines's *History of Lancashire* (1836),⁴ but as far as I am aware nowhere else. Mr. Procter was probably not the first to state that the verse on the monument was written by Cowper,⁵ but I have been unable to find in print an earlier reference to what seems to be a local belief. From our *Transactions* the statement was apparently copied into the *Victoria History of Lancashire*,⁶ and it duly reappeared in November, 1931, in a Preston newspaper at the time of the Cowper bicentenary.

Before her marriage Lady Hesketh was Harriet Cowper, one of the three daughters of Ashley Cowper, younger brother of the Rev. John Cowper, D.D., father of William Cowper, the poet. Lady Hesketh's correspondence with her cousin is well known. Cowper was not only a poet but one of the best of English letter-writers, and some of the best of his letters are addressed to Lady Hesketh. On what authority the statement was first made that the lines on the Rufford monument are Cowper's I do not know. They do not appear in any edition of his poems, and though there is, perhaps, something Cowperesque about them, that is not sufficient to permit their being attributed to the author of *The Task*. Cowper, it is known, did occasionally write epitaphs, but such as are included in his published works are all later than

¹ Argent, an eagle with two heads displayed proper (ancient Hesketh) with badge of Ulster.

² Argent, three martlets gules, on a chief of the last as many annulets or (Cowper).

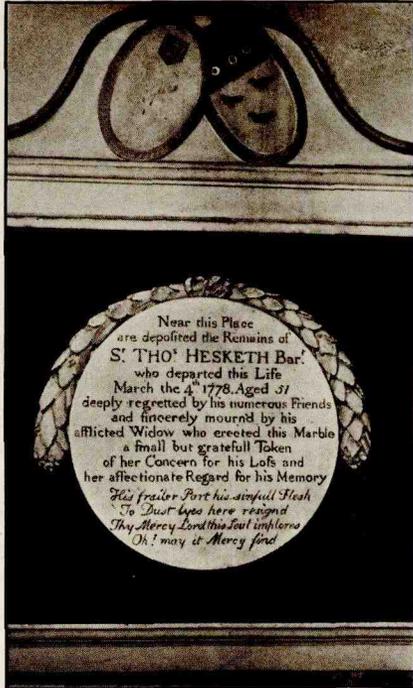
³ A garb or, banded azure.

⁴ Vol. iii, p. 430. The crest is wrongly described as "a lion rampant." In the subsequent editions of Baines all mention of the monument is omitted.

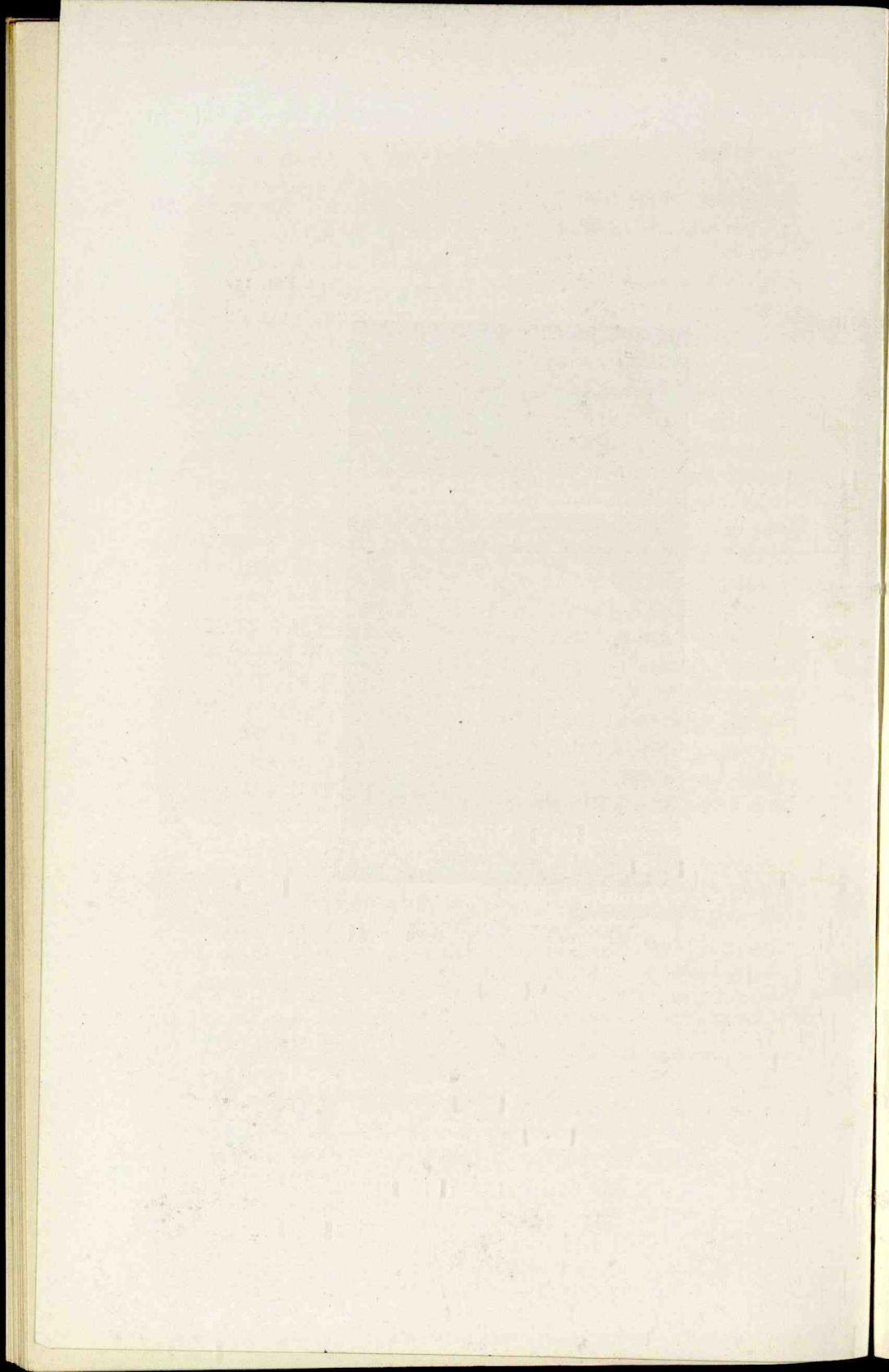
⁵ I had heard it orally some time before from another source.

⁶ *V.C.H. Lancs.* (1911), vi, 127.

FIG. 15.



SIR THOMAS HESKETH'S MONUMENT,
RUFFORD CHURCH.



1778, and the well-known Mortuary Verses written for the Clerk of All Saints' Church, Northampton, do not begin till 1787. In a letter to Lady Hesketh, describing how the Clerk came to see him to solicit his writing these verses, Cowper facetiously says, "A fig for poets who writë epitaphs upon individuals. I have written one that serves two hundred persons."

When Sir Thomas Hesketh died Cowper had been living at Olney for over ten years. His first volume of poetry had not been published, though he had written his Olney Hymns. At this period he had dropped all correspondence with Lady Hesketh, and did not resume it until some years after her husband's death. On the face of it, therefore, it would not seem very probable that Lady Hesketh should apply to him for a set of verses for her husband's monument. Still, it is possible that she may have done so, or that Cowper himself offered the lines to her. Our inquiry, however, is not furthered by pursuing the path of conjecture. That the poet was not latterly on particularly friendly terms with his cousin's husband is neither here nor there, especially when the nature of the lines in question is considered. Cowper, however, could shed a tear for his relative, judging from a letter to his friend Joseph Hill written April 11, 1778. "Poor Sir Thomas!" he says, "I knew that I had a place in his affections, and from his own information many years ago, a place in his will, but little thought that after the lapse of so many years I should still retain it. His remembrance of me, after so long a season of separation, has done me much honour and leaves me the more reason to regret his decease."

Lady Hesketh's married life was comparatively short, and she lived little at Rufford, staying when a widow mostly at Bath and Clifton. She survived Cowper seven years, dying in 1807.

The absence of any real evidence for the lines on the

monument being Cowper's induced me, at the time of the bicentenary of the poet's birth, to put the matter before Mr. Thomas Wright, the biographer of the poet, and Secretary of the Cowper Museum at Olney. Mr. Wright, who apparently had not before known of the Rufford monument, wrote to me on November 18, 1931, "The lines on Sir Thomas Hesketh's memorial are in all probability *not* Cowper's," and left it at that. Coming from such a quarter this opinion is deserving of very great respect, and though in no sense final, is, I think, the most that can be said on the subject at the present time. At a slightly later date Sir Thomas Fermor-Hesketh, the present baronet, having been asked if he knew anything about the reputed authorship of the lines, replied (December 28, 1931), "I very much regret that I cannot throw any further light on the matter at present, and I cannot call to mind any documents or papers in my possession relating to the poet Cowper."

The authorship of the lines, therefore, remains an open question, and if any one cares to attribute it to Cowper, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to state categorically that he was wrong. Under the circumstances it would seem that the only possible verdict is one of "Not proven."

A photograph of the Rufford monument and a copy of the inscription were sent to Mr. Wright in December, 1931, and are now in the Lady Hesketh Room in the Cowper Museum at Olney.