

P399 Christian Cowper's Midwife Book – 1786-1843

RECORDS' IDENTITY STATEMENT

Reference number: P399

Alternative reference number:

Title: Christian Cowper's Midwife Book

Dates of creation: 1786-1843

Level of description: Fonds

Extent: 2 volumes

Format: Paper

RECORDS' CONTEXT

Name of creators: Christian Cowper, midwife based in Thurso but serving all of Caithness

Administrative history: Christian Couper
By Hetty Munro

Christian Couper in 1786 in starched gown and mutch moved up and down the narrow sea blown streets of old time Thurso and in its high dark houses could little have imagined she would be the one whom history would pick on for survival. A hard working woman was Kirsty but then so were most of her neighbours - important folk like the Provost and the minister but Kirsty did what they did not think of doing - so Kirsty comes down over the years very clearly.

Methodical turn of mind and educated for her day and an unusually good hand of write she would return to her attic so near to that kirk that the bell sounded as if it was in the room - she looked down on the river where the ferry would cross - and Kirsty sat down and wrote. Business like entries e.g. ALEXANDER MCGRORY IN GUISE A GIRL ONE. And this was no triviality because in 1786 there were no registers of birth in Scotland and if it were not for Kirsty and her very few people of like ilk you would find it hard if not impossible to trace your ancestry beyond a mere hundred years. Most valuable of all records the social history of the nation her book was nothing so trivial as a novel - not even a diary but a memorandum of her day's work. Off she would go to great folk as well as simple for Kirsty had never heard we were all supposed to be equal - The Rt. Hon. The Earl of Caithness in all his finery may well find himself in the next line to the tinker - the

Caithness baby is named by Kirsty while the others say 'a son' or 'a daughter' or even 'a girl' or 'a boy'.

To begin with the entries are rare - Kirsty was young and for all her training in Edinburgh Royal Infirmary people did not altogether trust her - we know she was trained there as in the first pages of the book we see 'A woman in the Infirmary Edinburgh a son' one of the earliest entries. And no doubt she had rivals - older 'howdies' or midwives who had been trained only in the school of life. So it was in the surrounding countryside that Kirsty first found her custom -you could get Kirsty to come of a wild night to Scarmclett, Sordale or Brims by the sea - all well away from the town and over rough roads where probably her rivals would not come at all. Kirsty was friendly and not stand offish - no longer do we find the formal 'son' of the Edinburgh entries but the more familiar 'boy one' or 'girl one' or sometimes both.

Soon she got work in the town - would you know what the population of an 18th century country town were mostly engaged in - weaving mostly. Caithness in the 18th century was a very prosperous place and there was plenty of wool and you needed wool against the snell winds of the county and of course fishermen were also one of the many trades. But weaving or shoemaking - in every page there appears shoemakers - what did they want all these shoes for? It was the roads of course - not what we would call a street or even a road - holes and bumps mostly only varied with bigger holes and bigger bumps - at the end of a long walk you were lucky if you had a pair of shoes left at all.

Kirsty went to Canisbay (to the Castle of Mey): to the Rev. Morison (authority of the familiar paraphrase 'Twas on that night...') for his first born son's birth: to Reay and to the West and to every farm in that radius. The names are interesting - Swanson, Gunn and Calder were as well known in 1786 as they are today but some others have completely died out - McRory in Guise (Geise?) Ballantine? Were they incomers who failed to adapt - birds of passage who flew away or older stock who had exhausted the line. No one knows - nor why there were so many boy babies - well over 1300 when Kirsty laid down her pen in 1825 and only about 1200 girls. And no one knows why she kept the book at all - there is no mention of fees at all - maybe it was a burst of pride when she came home with a profession of her own - how did she travel from Edinburgh? Steamer from Leith most likely - and she would be on a par with the school master and the doctor instead of being thirled to domestic work as most of her generation. So Kirsty kept the book and left us the knowledge and her wide range of clients.

The above article has been taken from Caithness.org and can be found at the following link –

<http://www.caithness.org/history/articles/christiancouper.htm>

Custodial history: Original copy of record is held by the GRO in Edinburgh

RECORDS' CONTENT

Description: Midwife book recording details of infants delivered by Christian Cowper, mainly records name of father, date, location, sex of infant and profession of father. If child is illegitimate it has been recorded under the mother's name. Locations are given however if there is no location we assume that the birth took place in Thurso.

Appraisal:

Accruals:

RECORDS' CONDITION OF ACCESS AND USE

Access: Open

Closed until:

Access conditions: Available within the Archive searchroom

Copying: Copying permitted within standard Copyright Act parameters

Finding aids: Available in Archive searchroom

ALLIED MATERIALS

Related material:

Publication:

Notes:

Date of catalogue: August 2012

Ref.	Description	Dates
P399	Christian Cowper's Midwife book	1786-1843
P399/1	Hard bound copy of original midwife book recording details of infants delivered by Christian Cowper [1 volume]	1786-1843
P399/2	Typed transcription of P399/1, arranged alphabetically by surname [1 volume]	1786-1843, 2008