The John Clare Society

Newsletter no. 152 October 2024

This page has been removed for data protection reasons.

Executive Director of the John Clare Society of North America:
Dr James McKusick, 301 Muir Street, Unit 404, Cambridge, MD 21613, USA. mckusickj@umkc.edu

The John Clare Society Facebook Group:
https://www.facebook.com/groups/2589205554624156/

The John Clare Society Instagram Site:
https://www.instagram.com/johnclaresocietyofficial/

The John Clare Society Website:
https://johnclaresociety.wordpress.com/

© The John Clare Society

Registered charity number 1124846

If you have a problem with your delivery of the John Clare Newsletter (or the John Clare Journal) you should contact the Membership Secretary in the first instance. Please also keep the Membership Secretary informed of any changes to your postal or e-mail address.

Cover artwork: Carry Akroyd

The John Clare Society

Newsletter no. 152

October 2024

HELPING TO RUN THE JOHN CLARE SOCIETY

From Sue Holgate, Chair of the John Clare Society Committee

We should like to invite members new and old to consider joining our committee,which has a number of vacancies coming up due to retirements. There are also many opportunities to help in other ways, especially with our annual Festival and other events. No specialist knowledge needed – we welcome all abilities and talents, and feel that many of our members may have something to contribute, even if it is a small role and even if the time they have available is limited.

Involvement in running a literary society and its activities can be very rewarding and of course useful experience, for young and old alike. The Society depends entirely on voluntary work by ordinary members, and has done so for the past 43 years. Please help us to continue to our second half-century of celebrating John Clare and his world. Contact me or our Secretary for more information.

Sue Holgate (Chair)
Email: smholgate@outlook.com

Karen Lakey (Hon Sec)
Email: karenatthenook@btinernet.com

MEMBERSHIP REPORT

Many thanks to all those members who have paid their subscriptions for the 2024-25 year. There are still some people who haven't renewed and I shall, with regret, have to cancel the membership of anyone who hasn't paid either by direct bank transfer, or sent me a cheque by the end of the calendar year.

We welcome the following new members, who have joined (or re-joined) the Society since the last newsletter:

Alex Lee: Peterborough
David Pidduck: Coventry
Valerie Given: Northampton
Jenny Harper: Southampton
Christopher Davis: Bristol
Susan Kupper: Newport
Meredith Freeman: Newport
Julie Lightfoot: Wirral
Gabby Tapia: Rochester, US
Lorna Richardson: Peterborough
Paul Wadey: Tonbridge
Jo Holliday: Worcester
Gillian Kerr: Lincoln
Iain Grinbergs: Gainsville, US
Richard Gill: Leicester
Eric Angus: Bushey
Paul Burgess: London
Joan Bornett: Sudbury
Ray (Badger) Walker: Ashbourne
Will Thompson Snr: Helpston
Will Thompson Jnr: Grenoble, France.

Valerie Pedlar: Membership Secretary

Note on The John Clare Society Audited accounts for 2023/24 passed at the AGM.

For anyone not at the AGM in July, I give a very brief outline of the figures below:

Total income 2023/4: £10,443.19 Total income 2022/3: £8,5712.12
Total expenditure 23/4: £10,112.80 Total expenditure 22/3: £10,184.50

Excess income over expenditure

2023/4: £330.39 2022/3: £1612.38

2023/24 Income increased due to timing of receipt of Gift Aid £650.00, and an increase by £250 from US Affiliates. Membership has been co-ordinated better and earlier in 23/24, giving an increase of £500. Also received was an increase in bank interest of £300.00

Expenditure over 2023/24 compared to 2022/23 has increased costs on Journal production and Insurance of £350 and £85. and the balancing of £800 transfer from savings account. Admin costs were up by £80.00.

Closing Balance of current and savings a/cs 2023/24: £31,579
Closing Balance of current and savings a/cs 2022/23: £31,249

The 2024 Festival weekend was scaled back a little from previous years. Current results are that we had a deficit of -£436 this year, which was much reduced on last year's final amount of -£811.

Note that 2024 is in line with 2022's -£415.

Planning will soon start for the 2025 John Clare Festival so any ideas and offers of help will be welcomed; just contact a committee member for liaison.

Thank you for supporting The John Clare Society and the Festival Weekend.

David Smith, Treasurer

The traditional 'Midsummer Cushions', arranged at John Clare's grave.

Gary Alderson

PETE SHAW

Like so many others, I was saddened to learn of Pete Shaw's death on 7 August, aged 76. I was not well known to Pete, but he had been a luminous figure for me from my first John Clare Festival in 1992, where I took the photograph included here. He had been the Society's first Hon. Secretary in 1981 but was perhaps best known to many of us as the convenor of the much-loved open music sessions in the old Blue Bell bar, which included regulars such as Vicki Clayton and Maggie and Alan Wood. Pete's own contributions continue to resonate. Our President John Goodridge's best memory of him was performing Clare's long tongue-twister, 'The Cellar Door', probably his funniest single poem. Pete set a number of Clare's poems and songs to music, most memorably for me, 'If Kitty's rosy presence', which I first heard him perform on BBC Radio 4 in 1993.

Pete was essentially a Clare countryman, spending his life in and around Peterborough. He went to The King's (The Cathedral) School, later volunteering as a Cathedral guide. His working life was spent as an Independent Financial Adviser. But all the while his great passion was music and song. He became a multi-instrumentalist and teacher. While I will always remember him as the towering fiddle and melodeon player in Helpston, his contributions to many performing groupings were legion. They ranged from caller and musician with various bands, running traditional music sessions in Haconby, Lincs, as well as being a founder member of the Peterborough Morris Men who remain ever present at John Clare Festivals. He could always be found at the Whittlesea Straw Bear Festival. But it was not all music, and Pete had a long association with Peterborough Rugby Club where a celebration of his life took place recently. He is survived by his widow Elaine, son Alex and daughter Lucy.

Mike Mecham

SALES REPORT JUL/SEP 2024

This period has been quiet with fewer sales than usual to report.

The Festival bookstall was in St Botolph's Barn this year alongside Noel Crack's used/antiquarian bookstall and Ellis and Bridget's stand, where they were talking and selling their title: *Love's Cold Returning*. A very pleasant day for all stalls and a frequently full room of visitors. For the JCS stall it was more a matter of conversation with some laughs and small sales. Our only new items being postcards this year, but we did sell our regulars, *This Happy Spirit* and *The Wood is Sweet* as well as other items. Although we only had proceeds of £195, what we sold caused the need to replace some stocks, along with orders from Clare Cottage, a few sales via the post and from Northampton Gallery and the Oundle Bookshop. Income to 1 September was £451.00 after postage.

We had to re-order our 'Memorial' CD, also the *Clare:Words and music* CD and both Clare book titles as mentioned above. We still have a couple of copies left of *Melodys of Earth and Sky* CD (version with Toby Jones), which also sold at the Festival.

We are also producing some new postcards from the b&w artwork of local Clare scenes kindly allowed by the artist John Bangay, and perhaps other items. See illustrations below.

So, a quiet period for sales but some activity on stock replenishment. New items will likely be advertised on the John Clare Society Facebook page or directly to Society Members in addition to the next, 2025, Newsletter.

David Smith, Sales Officer.

CURRENTLY IN COMMITTEE

Hello everyone, and welcome to our 'Currently in Committee' article which will provide you with some insights into our activities as a Committee following our June meeting, and also an informal update following our annual John Clare Society Festival held 12–14 July.

As usual, our June meeting was held in Peterborough, with an online meeting option for those who were unable to attend in person.

In addition to our standard agenda items, such as a review and update on actions agreed at the previous meeting, Officers' reports etc, we again had an interesting agenda with some new activities as well as updates against 'in progress' initiatives, some of which are summarised below.

As Secretary to the Committee I occasionally need to refer to our Constitution (which was revised and adopted on 31 May 2008). In drafting this article, it struck me that whilst many legal documents are rarely referred to and, over time, can occasionally bear little connection to the original purpose of the body they are set out to govern. In the case of the John Clare Society Committee, our key initiatives are always aligned with our objectives (below), as well as providing services to our valued members:

- Promoting the collection, preservation and exchange of items of literacy and biographical interest relating to John Clare;
- continuing publication of his works to promote a wider appreciated; and
- promoting and organising public meetings and events.

I'm sure that you will recognise alignment to some of these objectives in the topics below, and in those reported in past and future articles.

John Clare Festival 2024

This year's Festival was a pared down event compared to previous years. Whilst most of the Festival events continued for members and visitors to enjoy,

unfortunately we needed to look carefully at what could be achieved by the limited number of Festival Planning Group members – see Section 'New Committee Members', below. The theme for the children of John Clare Primary School poetry competition this year was 'My Favourite Story Character', and once again the children did us proud with some really excellent poems submitted. As always, we are hugely grateful for everyone involved – both 'front of house' and 'behind the scenes' - for making this important event happen.

New John Clare Society Book

Following on from initial discussions earlier this year relating to the publication of a new book containing a selection of poems, titled *Clare's People*; the Committee agreed that members of the Society should be invited to suggest items for inclusion in this book. An e-mail was subsequently sent to all members (28 June) on behalf of Dr Mike Mecham, the editor of the book, who is, coincidentally, the subject of our 'Introducing' section below. We felt it was important for Clare's people today to have the opportunity to contribute suggestions of their favourite writings on the people who had an impact on him during his lifetime; and we are very much looking forward to hearing from you.

New John Clare Society Website

The committee has, in recent months, recognised the need for a 'new and improved' John Clare Society website and gratefully accepted the help of one of our our newer members to lead this initiative. During the meeting, the Committee members had the opportunity to take a first look at the first draft of the website, and agreed that it was a really great start. There is more work to be done; but we anticipate that the finished product will provide a much more modern way of keeping in touch with our membership and others with an interest in John Clare; and will offer an online shop for buying books, membership subscriptions etc, news and blogs, an archive of Newsletters and other materials, clips of audio and video etc. The website will be supported by existing social media communication channels, such as Facebook (The John Clare Society) and Instagram (johnclaresocietyofficial), which have proved extremely popular. Watch this space for more information about the launch of our new website!

Building mutually beneficial relationships

Members of our committee work hard to establish and maintain relationships with similar groups, such as the Alliance of Literary Societies (ALS), for the benefit of the Society and its members. We also occasionally receive requests for information and collaboration from various groups and societies for mutual benefit. Recently, the Committee received a request from the British Association for Romantic Studies to enquire whether the Society would be interested in making a donation towards their Conference. The money will be used to co-sponsor a musical performance of Burns' *The Jolly Beggars*; and the Society will be well promoted in the publicity for this event.

New Committee Members – THE SOCIETY NEEDS YOU!

Our Chair, Sue Holgate (who I introduced you to in our February Newsletter), raised a concern regarding the reducing numbers of Society Committee members currently in place. We have, unfortunately, recently lost a couple of members who have stepped down following many years of dedicated service to the Committee; and have not been replaced. Next year, we will be seeking replacements for three 'officer' roles and, in addition, need more members to bring new ideas and enthusiasm to drive initiatives forward so that we can continue to meet the Society's objectives; and of course, the needs of you, our members. You can find out more about how to get involved elsewhere in this Newsletter, and we look forward to welcoming new members to our group!

Finally, on to our 'Introducing' Section. This time, it is my privilege to introduce you to Dr Mike Mecham; mentioned above as the editor of our new book of poetry and other writings*, Clare's People.*

Introducing: Dr Mike Mecham, OBE

What drew you to John Clare and when?

The 1970 BBC television play, 'I Am', starring Freddie Jones (father of Toby) as John Clare. Apart from the vivid poetry, I discovered that Clare had been in the asylum at High Beech, a regular cycling destination from my post-war London East End home. Once known as the 'Cockney Paradise', it remains very popular today.

Why did you join the John Clare Society Committee?

I hoped I would be able to bring some additional perspectives as well as administrative and research experience, while also learning from others, some of whom had helped create the Society.

What do you enjoy about being on the Committee?

It allows me the privilege of being at the heart of the Society, helping to shape its direction, proposing initiatives to spread the joy of John Clare's work, while at the same time enriching my own knowledge of him from others.

What do you do outside of the John Clare Committee and Festival?

I remain an active labour and Irish historian at St Mary's University, London. I see John Clare not only as a vital narrator on English rural labouring class and its environment but also someone who speaks to an Irish sense of place and exile. He is widely admired by modern Irish poets.

Currently in Committee is written by **Karen Lakey**

Peterborough Morris at the Festival.

David Smith

CHARLES MOSSOP – The Good Vicar?
Part 1 of a talk given at the AGM, 13 July 2024

First up, a disclaimer, and credits. I'm not a historian or a literary scholar. I'm a Chemistry graduate who became an IT professional and then a priest. So I've approached this as an amateur with an interest in a couple of former inhabitants of this parish.

I'm quoting a lot from Clare's poem *The Parish*. This is from Eric Robinson's edition. As well as the inevitable Bate Biography, I've also been informed by Sarah Houghton-Walker's wonderful book, *John Clare's Religion* – a snip on Amazon at £116 – and used the online Church of England Clergy Database and also received help from the endlessly energetic Helpston History Group.

I am – along with the church wardens and Helpston Parish Council – custodian of the 'hopes and ashes' of John Clare. But I'm also the successor of his parish priests. And in particular, for the purposes of this talk, of Revd Charles Mossop, late of this parish. Whose name you can see on the board at the back of the church, described as the 'Vicars and Rectors of Helpston'. That's just a laminated sheet at the moment. The real framed one is off having my name added to it!

We were discussing the former vicars' list, and someone said to me that if Mossop was the bad vicar, who was the good one?

Which got me wondering.

Now anyone who knows anything about the Church of England will know that if you're the current incumbent, you can't compare with the previous one. The minute any clergyperson leaves the parish for another post or a well-earned retirement, they receive instant beatification compared to the next one. The previous vicar's time was always a golden age, when the church was full and the Sunday School was overflowing with well-behaved children. And the previous vicar could visit every one of the 3,000 houses in his patch every month.

And I look forward, in due time, to my own elevation to the ranks of the blessed former vicars of this parish.

And John Clare seems to have had this affliction. He does indeed have a good vicar (the old one), a bad vicar (the new one) and a spare bad vicar (the curate) in the poem, *The Parish*. *The Parish* wasn't published in his time – arguably it wasn't even publishable in his time, if he wanted to keep any of his friends. But it's well worth a read! Clare was plunging into some doubt and despair at the time he was writing *The Parish*, which may explain its bitterness. But it rattles along at a rate. Clare is very sarcastic about many people around his (semi-fictional) parish. As we nearly say these days – the names have been changed, to protect the not-so-innocent. Among the people he roasts are the Wesleyan Methodists, the Primitive Methodists (or 'Ranters'), the Farmer, and more han one priest.

Although he quotes Pope before the first line of the poem:

> 'No injury can possibly be done, as a nameless character can never be found out but by its truth and likeness',

in fact you get the impression that a lot of these nameless characters could probably have been found out.

> Miss Peevish Scornful once the Village toast
> Deemed fair by some and prettyish by most

I reckon she would have known who she was had it been published.

He's not over-impressed with the churchgoing of his fellow-parishioners either:

> Little religion in each bosom dwells
> And that sleeps sound till Sundays chiming bells
> When from each shelf is regularly took
> The weekly wanted pious dusty book
> Seeking church an hours good prayers they read
> And hear a sermon as the all they need
> Then read when home the recollected text
> And lay religion by till Sunday next.

Which would be all very well – if Clare were a regular and devout attender. But our John of course didn't even make it on Sunday most of the time. Though – to be fair – Sunday was the only day off in those days. And why would you spend half of it in church?

Because, after all, services were very long. And apparently Mr Mossop's sermons weren't very interesting. Much more fun, Clare occasionally thought, to go to the Wesleyans or the 'Ranters' (the Primitive Methodists), who were a lot more emotional and lively. St Botolph's wasn't the only place of worship in Helpston – there were three nonconformist chapels at one stage. But, John Clare being John Clare, he got fed up with them all in the end. Here's his view on the Ranters in *The Parish*:

The Ranter priests that take the streets to teach
Swears God builds churches where so ere they preach
while on the other hand Protestant people
will have no church but such as wears a steeple
Thus creeds all differ yet each different sect
from the free agents to the grand elect
who call a remnant for the promised land
that where heavens mark as sheep their owners brand
each thinks his own as right and others wrong
and thus keeps up confusions Babel song.

You know what I said about comparisons to the previous incumbent? Here's Clare's view of the current one in his time. And it's scathing (and there's a lot more of it):

And is religion grown so commonplace
To place self interest foremost in the race
And leave poor souls in Satans claws confind
Crawling like crabs a careless pace behind
Excuse the priest he's prest with weighty cares
And tho the pauper dyes without his prayers
What if such worthless sheep slip into hell
For want of prayers before the passing bell
The priest was absent was a daily song
Yet none except the vulgar thought it wrong
Perhaps when death beds might his aid desire
His horse was sick and might a drink require
Or friends for just necessitys might claim
His shooting skill to track the fields for game
And when they needed partridges or hares
The parish pauper could not look for prayers
Or if he did indulge the foolish whim
What cared the priest – dye and be damned for him.

I wonder, if he'd read it, whether Charles Mossop would have found himself in any of this?

Probably not if he'd read it just after it was written. Because I don't think Mossop was a rich chap and one of the county set to start with.

Worth a look, if you aren't familiar, with the difference between 'vicar', 'rector' and 'curate', whose effective meanings have changed since our John's day: I am the Rector of St Botolph's, Helpston. If you look at the pillar by the vestry, you will discover that it describes the 'Rectors and Vicars of Helpston'. But actually, until very recent times, all the clergy holding the living of Helpston – including Mossop – were vicars.

A rector was entitled to all the Great Tithes. This would generally mean 10% of all the major agricultural produce. Which is, let's face it, a lot. If you were the Rector of Barnack, you were rolling in it. But the Rector of Helpston in Clare's day hasn't got a name on the board behind you. Because you didn't have to be clergy to be the Rector. You could be a landowner, the monarch, or indeed – as in the case of Helpston – Christ's College, Cambridge.

The Small Tithes were what a vicar got. A vicar is someone doing the clergy job on the rector's behalf. In other words, vicariously. And small tithes were 10% of the

wool, milk, stuff like that. And not worth anything so much. The vicar or rector might also have his own small area of farm or Glebe land.

Clearly the vicar in *The Parish* does:

> And he had land to shepherd where the wheat
> In a sly way the churches profit beat
> Tho he kept one to manage of his kin
> Yet self was foreman when the gain dropt in

But let's look at the good old vicar of the Parish, to cheer ourselves up with what vicars are supposed to be like – because the old one was an absolute saint:

> Yes there was one whose priesthoods trade profest
> One whom the wretched and the poor knew best
> and in yon house that neighbours near the show
> of parish huts a mellancholy row
> that like to them a stubble covering wears
> decayd the same and needing like repairs
> superior only was the mansion known
> instead of mud by having walls of stone
> There lived the vicar once in days gone by
> when pride and fashion did not rank so high
> Ere poor religion threw her weeds away
> to mix in circles of the worldly gay
> Ere hunting Parsons in the chase began
> and added salaries kept their dog and gun
> to claim and trespass upon ground not theirs
> the game for shooting well as tythe for prayers
> Ere sheep was driven from the shepherds door
> and pleasure swallowed what might feed the poor
> in that same time whose loss was keenly felt
> the good old vicar in this mansion dwelt

I think Clare is associating the decline in clergy quality with the Enclosures here. Basically, Clare's 'fings ain't wot they used ter be'. And the sheep are driven from the shepherd's door – literally the carving up of common land like Westings Meadows. And spiritually the pastor refusing to spend the time of day with his human flock. Whereas the good old guy was a good shepherd like the One he followed:

> Plain as the flock dependent on his cares
> their weekday comforts and their Sunday prayers
> Had no spare wealth to follow fashions whim
> And if he had she'd little joys for him
> He kept no horse that hunting sports to share
> He fed no dogs to run the harmless hare
> Had nought to waste while hunger sought his shed
> and while he had it they ne'er wanted bread
> His chiefest pleasure charity possessed
> in having means to make another blessed
> Little was his and little was required
> Could he do that it was all the wealth desired

Though small the gift was gave with greatest will
And blessings o'er it made it greater still

So not only was he not a hunting and shooting parson – the old one was a kind parson. And he was one who lived on the same level as his parishioners:

the vicars greensward pathways once his pride
his woodbine bowers that used his doors to hide
and he himself well often in his chair
smoking his pipe and conning sermons there

You can just see him, can't you? – Waving from his window, letting anyone come in to see him.

But the thing about this wonderous vicar – if Clare was thinking of Helpston – is that he never even remotely existed. Clare was writing most of *The Parish,* up to about 1824. And whichever village it was that Clare was thinking about in that passage, it wasn't Helpston.

Because Helpston was a poor village.
And the living was a poor living.
It didn't even have a vicarage.

Gary Alderson

STONEHENGE (Haiku)

Stonehenge celebrates
Longest day of the whole year
This Summer Solstice.

Rising sun heralds
Another brilliant June day
In the Calendar.

Celtic warm sky dawns
Sun's stone alignment marred
By protestors' spray.

Vandals stain spraying
Alienates believers
Counter productive.

Read war paints poison
Twentieth century hates
Oil and gas abuse.

Rare lichens damaged
Ancient stones porosity
New Science projects.

Surrounding landscape
Revered, sacred monument
Lives for future LIVES.

Re: 20/21 June 2024
Jean Pearce

STUDYING TUNES WITH JOHN CLARE:
The Black Smock Band at the 2024 John Clare Society Festival

Despite being folk musicians, we were far more aware of Clare's poetry than his significant contribution to song and dance tune collecting. That changed when, a while back, the band collaborated with a theatre company to create a piece about the history of protest in England. This included some words from John Clare about the Enclosures Act, which we accompanied with a tune from his collection. Researching that, with a copy of George Deacon's *John Clare and the Folk Tradition* to hand, brought home to us the astounding extent of his work in this field. This eventually led to an invitation from the Centre for John Clare Studies at Cambridge University to play some of the songs and tunes that Clare had collected as part of a study day. We did this alongside musicologist Derek B. Scott as a kind of hybrid talk/concert. We've incorporated music collected by Clare in our repertoire ever since.

It was, therefore, a huge honour to play at the John Clare Festival and bring our research and love of his music to Helpston. Of the pieces we played, the instrumental tunes were the most straightforward since Clare notates them, and Deacon reproduces them all. In fact, many of the tunes are still in the repertoire of folk gigs and pub sessions today, albeit in a range of variants. The challenge here is remembering to stick to Clare's version despite many years of playing another.

A particularly surprising and enjoyable aspect of the tune collection, however, is how much sits outside what we now think of as the English folk tune tradition. Pieces of classical music are one example – we played snippets from Mozart and Handel — and tunes in foreign, albeit anglicised, styles. An example is 'Turks March', which we played in Cambridge but not in Helpston. One that we did do in Helpston was 'The Nightingale', an oddly structured piece mimicking birdsong. With no evidence whatsoever, I like to imagine that this was Clare trying to notate what he heard from the local wildlife rather than from other musicians.

The bigger challenge with Clare's collection is putting tunes to lyrics. Clare assumes his reader shares the same knowledge of contemporary songs as he does, so he often just names the tune. A fair assumption at the time, it creates some problems now: even if those tunes are still current, which is by no means certain, their names are likely to have changed. It took a long session at the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library at Cecil Sharp House to try and piece together sufficient material for the event at Cambridge.

That said, Deacon does provide notation where he can. 'The Faithless Shepherd' is an example of that. Two of the songs we did are also still part of the repertoire. 'The White Cockade' has remained almost unchanged. 'Ocean's Glories' was a little more challenging, despite obviously being a version of 'Bold Benbow', as there are many variants, not all of which matched the versions of the lyrics Clare had written down.

One of the standout tunes, however, took rather more work. There's a long ballad known only as 'Taken From My Mother's Singing,' which appears to be part of the 'daemon ballad' family of folk songs, a large and nebulous group which share not just themes but particular images and phrases. Of course, with such a range of words, it is inevitable that there are also a great many potential tunes, but the one we found to be, in our view, a perfect fit came from *The Child Ballads*, although we cannot be sure it was the same tune Clare knew.

This is an ongoing journey for us; a vast amount remains to be explored. But the chance to share some of the music we've been so close to for so long, along

with the warm welcome we received, made our performance at the John Clare Festival feel like a summit after a long climb. It also offered a particularly meaningful connection with centuries of music-making. One of the things that's magical about folk music is the sense of continuity. Working out how to phrase a song, when to breathe, what key to sing it in, or working out the fingering and bowing on the violin in order to make a tune flow… these are the same decisions being made across the centuries. And where could such a connection feel more resonant than in Helpston?

Paul Burgess, with input from fellow band members **Dan Cox** and **Andy Bannister**

INTERROGATING SILENCE

For urgent family reasons, I was unable to attend this year's John Clare Festival – the first missed since 1991. I especially missed the readings in the church but was grateful to our new President, Professor John Goodridge, for ably standing in at the last minute. For me, the readings embody the essence of what John Clare means to each of us. They always provide opportunities for discovery and engagement. The discovery of another gem in John Clare's vast body of work; and engagement with friends old and new. I had prepared some notes to draw the readings to a conclusion and these I am happy to share with you:

'I occasionally take advantage as host of these readings to finish with a poem by someone other than John Clare, though someone who resonates with him.

In the new *Clare's People* selection, which we will be publishing next year, I intend to include his poem about himself, 'The Peasant Poet', with its final evocative four lines:

A silent man in life's affairs
A thinker from a boy
A peasant in his daily cares
A poet in his joy.

I was thinking of those lines at the beginning of June when I spent a wonderful week on the northerly Orkney Islands. And rain-free at that! One of the main reasons drawing me there was George Mackay Brown, considered to be one of the great Scottish poets of the 20th century.

I stayed in the small town of Stromness on the west coast of the main island. It looks out towards Scapa Flow, the Pentland Firth and the island of Hoy. George lived in Stromness for virtually the whole of his life. One of his biographers reflected that it was there that: '.. he remained, a poet rooted in his landscape as Barnes or Clare'.

So, I would like to finish with a short poem by George Mackay Brown, appropriately called 'The Poet':

Therefore he no more troubled the pool of silence
But put on mask and cloak,
Strung a guitar
And moved among the folk.
Dancing they cried
'Ah, how our sober islands
Are gay again, since this blind lyrical tramp
Invaded the fair!'

Under the last dead lamp
When all the dancers and masks had gone inside
His cold stare
Returned to its true task, interrogation of silence.

I like to think that this church in John Clare's Helpston, this place of prayer and reflection, is that 'pool of silence' that George Mackay Brown refers to in his poem. And that your readings, in all their breadth and diversity, are in fact also interrogating that silence.

So, thank you all once again.'

Mike Mecham

JOHN CLARE IN PRESTEIGNE
22 August 2024

I doubt if John Clare had heard of Presteigne, situated on the south bank of the river Lugg, in Powys; a small Welsh Marches border town, which has occasionally been English like many Marcher places. I live further south in the English Marches, the Golden Valley (which should be plural as they lie between at least three rivers, the Dore, Monnow and Wye). The landscape is so removed from anything Clare saw, in Northamptonshire, Cambridgeshire or on his trips to London that he might indeed consider it a faraway and mystical country, where you could believe there are giants for Jack to kill. Offa's Dyke, Hay Bluff and the Black Mountains in the newly-named Bannau Brycheiniog (Brecon Beacons) loom over the valleys, brooding in the rain, snow-capped like a Christmas cake, gleaming multicoloured in summer sun. I mention this because it is always easy to associate the poet with the place, no matter what, and therefore in some sense to reduce poetry's power by confining it to a specific area. Clare was a 'local' poet because he didn't have that much opportunity to travel; that doesn't mean he didn't want to. It hadn't occurred to me before, but having heard Clare's poems read in such a different landscape I have wondered how he would have written about the oak woods, high ridges and endless streams, and in particular, a very different farming system.

These thoughts have occupied me because one of the major things to take from the music and poetry event at Presteigne's annual Music Festival was just how universal Clare's poetry is, how unconfined his poetic gift is, and how skilfully he could apply his verse to the communal desire for 'festival' in village life. The poems, read sympathetically and expressively by Anton Lesser, were enclosed in composer Julian Philips' music, *Melodys of Earth and Sky*; a 'suite for actor and chamber ensemble'. Originally, this piece was 'conceived as an instrumental songbook of selected Clare tunes'. For its 2021 recording, the nine movements 'were interspersed with Clare readings by actor Toby Jones', familiar to Clare scholars and friends for his embodiment of Clare's journey out of Essex (*By Our Selves*, dir. Andrew Kötting, 2015). For the Presteigne audience, this was version number three, and the composition 'seeks to bring these chosen Clare texts into closer alignment with the music'.

> Clare's words are no longer separate, they are embedded within the fabric of the music, thereby releasing their musicality. With a richer colour palette, *Melodys*' sequence of Clare pictures is intensified, ranging from melancholy to sorrow, from wonder to inebriation and comedy, from intrigue to exuberant joy.
>
> (Julian Philips, programme notes, Presteigne Festival of Music and the Arts Ltd, 2024: 51).

'Intensified' is the right word, brought home in the first poem, 'Song's Eternity', which became a powerful declaration of the 'musicality' Clare found in the natural world: cities fade, books decay, yet 'Ballads of six thousand years / Thrive, thrive' (ll. 17–18). Julian Philips' music for this section is titled 'The garden gate' and it must be the Paradise garden Philips is thinking of here, where the 'blue cap' sang to Adam and Eve. The slightly discordant phrases, resolving, musing and loosening again were woven into the poem every two lines, so it was that 'song' became the dominant focus. And this was a fine move, as every other text that followed was in some way attached to the first, so that 'First Love', a much later, ('asylum') poem

became an evocation of all first love, even in Eden: 'My heart has left its dwelling place / And can return no more' (ll. 23–4). Appropriately in terms of Clare's dislocation, Anton Lesser read Clare's account of wandering away as a little lad 'till I got out of my knowledge' (*By Himself*, p. 40), a confusion only to be compounded as an adult by the amount of alcohol available to young men. 'The Toper's Rant', a middle period poem, and not one that's particularly well known, showed up not only Clare's sense of humour, but his understanding that if life's hard, then drinking around the clock as these characters do might be the only way to bear it – but they are plainly having fun in Philips' music. This was a 'polka', a wonderfully drunken melody, part country dance, and full of intricate fiddle playing that would have been beyond the drinkers, possibly beyond Clare after a night hiding with his friends and the beer in an old barn – only to find the gable end crashed down when he saw it the next day, as Lesser told the tale. 'The Mother's advice', another lesser known middle period comic tale, was similarly entwined in light-hearted (if calculating) lyricism. I think Philips was acknowledging Benjamin Britten's *Friday Afternoons*' song, 'I mun be married on Sunday' (1936), in which Roister Doister courts a widow. He has given the piece a title, 'I'll be married on Sunday' which certainly points that way, and the theme agrees.

Philips emphasises Clare's own knowledge of folk melodies and fiddle tunes, commenting on his skill as a musician, and also as a 'collector of folk melodies' (51). Philips wanted both sides of Clare to shine in his suite, the poet and musician, and this was especially obvious in the last two texts; Clare's prose account of 'gipseys' (*By Himself,* p. 83), and the harvest celebrations in 'August' from *The Shepherd's Calendar* (1827), both pieces replete with tunes probably familiar to Clare*.* The poet's relationship with traveller communities near his home was famously complex, and developed differently over the years as can be traced in his prose and his many poetic references to them. In the snippet read by Anton Lesser, young Clare learns 'to play the fiddle in their manner by the ear' and joins 'their pastimes of jumping dancing and other amusements' (*By Himself, p.* 83). The music painted the account in bright tones, fitting Philips' 'richer colour palette', and supporting Clare's wistful desire to join them, so lively did they seem – and so free, although he knew too well the other side to a gypsy's precarious and impoverished life. There was discord as well as light in the music; there was the hint of danger.

None of that in the production of 'August': 'Harvest approaches with its bustling day' (*Shepherd's Calendar*, 1993: l. 1) , and the country tunes that accompany the reapers, gleaners and all the families gathering to support bringing in the wheat and oats were played out by the chamber musicians as though they were present in the hot and dusty fields. Philips' music had a strong rhythmic beat in this piece, insistent for the work, and then dancing towards harvest home. We didn't hear too much about the little lad who wished he could get out of the sun, or keep his feet away from the sharp stubble (William Barnes has a poem from just a few years later in which a similar child dies from heatstroke). We did hear about the poor mice chased to their deaths by the 'rude boy or churlish hearted swain' (l. 86), and we heard (of course) how the labourers seek some shade at noon to 'catch their breath awhile' (l. 105) and share out the cakes and ale. Clare's skill at showing how the village empties of life during harvest was also brought out in the musical nuances between dance

song and more reflective tunes. And this was augmented by Anton Lesser at the end of his reading, where Clare brings the harvest to a Sabbath pause: 'The fields them selves seem happy to be free' (l. 171) in this moment of church bells and brief rest; the cropped ground 'appears to muse and listen to…' and here Lesser paused as well '…the SONG!' (l. 174) then rang out like the bells, bringing the suite full circle to Eden and 'song's eternity'.

One thing was made obvious: John Clare can't be pigeon-holed or claimed by one ideology or another. In this collection of moods, which seems a more appropriate word for the combined effects of music and speech, Clare appears as a rounded man, a villager who grew up in rural life that was not expected to extend much beyond the few square miles around a cottager's home. But in that small space was contained a world of love and loss, carousing and hard work in the fields, dancing, singing, drinking and solitary watching the fields and woods, their birds and creatures. In other words, we were entertained and informed: the selection of Clare's work, read with great feeling by Anton Lesser, (although I was uncomfortable with a Mummerset accent for the comedy) avoided the usual suspects. The suite altogether refused the 'wandering lonely' poet persona, embraced the comedian, the lovelorn lad, the record keeper of customs and songs, and the 'silly, shanny boy' *(By Himself,* p. 8) whose fields knew him better than he knew himself.

Dr Sue Edney

A TALE OF TWO PUBS – Part 2

THE BLUEBELL INN - update

Society members can breathe a sigh of relief to learn that in June 'The Bluebell' was taken off the market. Pub owner Paul reconsidered the situation and decided not to sell the property and business after all. Needless to say, all us locals are delighted with the outcome and wish Paul and his new team every success for the future.

THE PACK HORSE NORTHBOROUGH

It's hard to believe that 10 years have passed since Lesley Newitt moved into our village and became the new landlady of 'The Bluebell'. Over that time, she has helped promote John Clare by supporting the Society and Festival in so many generous ways. But, last year she decided it was time for change and began a search for a new challenge. Luckily for us there was no need to look far – as three miles down the road from Helpston, standing empty, neglected and unloved for over two years, was a small country pub.

This was The Pack Horse, situated in the delightful village of Northborough. Lesley's new venture had begun.

More news next time…

Bessy Bains

THE JOHN CLARE SCHOOL POETRY COMPETITION 2024

We have described the opportunity to print the prize-winning poems from the John Clare School as 'our pleasure and privilege'. But we must emphasise that all we can include here are the words of the poems; the originals, displayed around St Botolph's Church, are bright and colourful. The theme of the Competition this year was "My Hero". There were so many commended and runners-up that it has only been possible to print the winning poems in each category in full.

MICKEY MOUSE

Mickey Mouse has a house
The house is magical and fun.
He likes to play with the magical doors.
His favourite is Number 1.
Mickey Mouse and Minnie Mouse like to play together.
They play at magic door 2. They have a picnic and play in the water.
Behind door number 4 is Antarctica. It's sunny and very cold.
They like to go exploring and being very bold.

Felix, Percy, Elliot, Florence & Brodie.
Winners, Buttercross Home Group 2.

RUNNERS-UP, YEAR 1:

Kester
Elsie Simpson

HELLO KITTY

Hello Kitty lives in a city.
She is a cat and she takes a nap.
She has friends and visits hens.
She is fast
But she can come last.
She has a yellow nose and says hello.

Jessica Naylor (Winner) Year 1

RUNNERS-UP, YEAR 2:

Reuben
Ella Hair

BLUEY

Bluey is funny;
She had a big tummy
She likes to sit
And relax a bit.
She likes to play with toys
And to make lots of noise.

Freya Beesley. Year 2 Winner

RUNNERS-UP, Years 3 & 4 BROADWHEEL:

Leo Cross
Laila Smith

MANDALORIAN

Mandalorian is super brave
He even entered a Sarlac cave
He defeated the Spider of Doom with his little friend Grogu
He travelled across the desert of Gaile
and of course there was no snow or hail.
His armour felt very thin,
with burns and bruises all over his skin.
He finally reached his destination
and carried out an investigation.

Elliot Johnston
(Age 8) Broadwheel (Winner)

RUNNERS-UP: YEARS 4 & 5 SWADDYWELL:

John Weston
Charlotte Peat
Evan

RUNNERS-UP: YEAR 6 TORPEL:

Kian
Isaac Donaldson
Amelie S
Poppy Cook

OUR HERO: BETTY WIDDERSHINS

Our hero Betty Widdershins, ready for adventures.
Our hero Betty Widdershins never surrenders.
She has a pinch of magic it comes in handy
Her gran likes to drink beer and brandy.
A curse cast from the prison tower;
Her nesting dolls give her Power.
Witches, warders, marsh-mist too,
Our hero Betty has seen quite a few.
She helps in a pub where people meet,
Scrubbing and dusting, keeping everything neat.
Betty Widdershins so resilient
Betty Widdershins always brilliant.
Our hero Betty Widdershins and her curious mind,
Our hero Betty Widdershins she's one of a kind.

Margot Smith (Yr 4) Swaddywell (Winner)

GARFIELD

In a world of naps and endless dreams
Where lasagne flows in savoury streams
There dwells a cat with stripes of gold —
Garfield: lazy, wise and bold.
With eyes half-closed he views the day
With insolence he finds his way.
No hurry, rush or frantic pace
Just peaceful moments time to grace.
Mondays cast a gloomy spell
A day he knows way too well,
But Fridays bring a hopeful cheer
With weekends long and comforts near.
John his friend, a loyal soul,
Brings food and laughter makes him whole,
While Odeay with his wagging tail
Adds mischief to their homey tale.
In Garfield's world the simple joys
Are found in food and playful ploys;
A cat of humour, sharp and dry
With every quip he makes us sigh.
For in his lazy easy way
He teaches us how to seize the day,
To find delight in every bite
And be contact through every night.
Garfield, icon of the ease,
In your realm your heart finds peace.
From your lazy, charming guise
You show us life through safe, warm eyes.

Amelie Angel Torpel (Winner)

THE JOHN CLARE SOCIETY

SALES ORDER FORM October 2024

The John Clare Society, founded in 1981, publishes books, CDs, DVDs, pamphlets and postcards, a free annual Journal and a members' newsletter every four months.

Please support our activities via this listing which includes a small selection of books and items on Clare. You can email or post an order or question to me.

We are able to accept bank transfer payment, also PayPal and debit/credit cards (via Paypal email.) Orders by post and cheque still welcome.

To order by email and bank transfer, email purchase list and value (add postage) details to email address on order-form below. Please use as ref 'Sales' and include your last name. Transfer to our account: The John Clare Society. Code 20-07-82. a/c 50275239

Please include full address and ordering information on the order-form or email.

David
David Smith, Sales Officer

BOOKS 2024

CODE	ITEM	PRICE	WEIGHT
B20129	**Journeys to Helpston: Ronald Blythe and the John Clare Society.** By Alan Cudmore Illus & photos rrp £6.	£5.00	160g
B20023	*a JCS book:* **John Clare: New Approaches** rrp £7.95 ed. J Goodridge & S Kövesi ppr (essays on Clare)	£6.00	400g
B20030 *New*	**A Meeting of Two Spirits** Contemporary art by John Lincoln: Clare's landscape and poetry rrp £30.00	£27.00	1020g
B20128	**Love's Cold Returning:** Hall & Somekh ppr rrp £20.00 Detailed research into Clare's traipsing home from High Beech asylum	£18.00	900g
B20033	*a JCS book:* **The Wood is Sweet** Poems selected by David Powell, illustrated by Carry Akroyd ppr rrp £7.99	£6.50	200g
B20115	*a JCS book:* **This Happy Spirit** poems selected by RKR Thornton & Carry Akroyd. Ilusts. by Carry Akroyd Ppr rrp £8.99	£7.50	200g
B20113	**John Clare, the Trespasser** rrp £6.99 by John Goodridge & RKR Thornton ppr	£6.00	75g
B20114	**John Clare, A Poet for all Seasons** rrp £15.99 By **Peter Moyse** hdbk, many colour photographs	£5.50	500g
B20124	**OUP: John Clare Selected Poems** Ox. Std Txts. rrp £12.99	£12.00	300g
B20116	**John Clare: A Collection of Songs, Airs and Dances for Violin (1818)** ed. Tony Urbainczyk **, vols 1 & 2:**	**Vol 1**: £10 **Vol 2**: £14 **Out of stock, enquire**	
B20112	**By Ourselves** ed. Andrew Kotting **Highly illustrated,** Book of the film of Clare from Epping to Helpston...hbk.	£16.00	650g
B20118	**The Descending Spiral** (**John Clare**) ppr. rrp £3.50 Both edited by. R. Rowe (Arbour Editions)	£3.50	65g
B20033	**Birds Nesting, John Clare** ppr. rrp £4.00	£4.00	75g
B20030	**The Ballad of John Clare** by Hugh Lupton rrp £9.99	£9.00	312g
B20126	**THE MEETING:** Reading and Writing Through John Clare *a JCS book* ed. Simon Kövesi. ppr £4.00	Out of stock	160g
B20122	**Torpel Manor: The Biography of a Landscape** by F Gosling, SP Ashby & A McClain. ppr	£12.50	Post £2.50
B20032	**A John Clare Flora (**M M Mahood) rrp £15.00. ppr ****Back in Stock! With colour-section**	£15.00	368g

JOHN CLARE SOCIETY JOURNALS

1982-2019 Journal	**As available (some no-stock years). Please enquire for years wanted**	£2.00 each UK Post £2.50
B20125:	**John Clare Society Journals, 2020, 21, 22 & 23** State which dates required	£2.50 each UK:Post £2.50
	Journal Index (1982-2011)	£2.25 post free in UK

MISCELLANEOUS/BOOKS/CDs/DVDs 2024

M20071	**In Clare's Footsteps** map of Helpston with notes laminated, folded to A5 laminated, flat A4	 £1.00 £1.00	 25g 25g
M20092	**John Clare leather bookmark**, gold on dark green.	£2.25	10g
M20031	JCS gummed labels 100 labels in pack.	£0.65	150g
M20028	**Tea-Towel - Scenes from Helpston**: High Quality Cotton	£4.50	150g
C2001	**The John Clare Rose, Blank Greetings card & envelope:** 126x180mm. (a JCS card) rrp £1.75	£1.65	22g
M20061	**DVD: John Clare,** A 65min photographic journey with poetry readings. By Peter Moyse	£5.50	140g

M20060	**CD: 8 Clare songs** set by Terence Deadman. & Clare poems read by Peter Moyse, Rodney Lines & Norma Weller.	£5.00	140g
M20062	**CD: Clare's Journey**. A musical journey through his life. Sung by Maida Vale Singers. Composer: Terence Deadman. Lyrics by Trevor Harvey.	£3.00	140g
M20065 *NEW*	**CD: John Clare, Words and Music.** (re-issue from cassette) Tunes from his collection, words from his poems and writings	£6.00	140g
M20063	**CD: Toby Jones** reading + music arranged by Julian Philips **Melodys of Earth and Sky** rrp£12.99	£12.00	140g
M20064	**CD**: **1989 Memorial Service of the unveiling of John Clare Plaque in Westminster Abbey** (re-issue from cassette)	£6.00	140g

POSTCARDS (Each card is 5g in weight)

P20020	Helpston, birthplace of John Clare	£0.35
P20021	Clare's cottage, Helpston	£0.35
P20022	John Clare (Hilton portrait, 1820)	£0.35
P20023	John Clare (Behnes bust)	£0.35
P20024	John Clare (Grimshawe portrait, 1844)	£0.35
P20025	Orchid flower, card with prose extract	£0.35
P20026	Wood Anemone flower, card with poem extract	£0.35
P20027	Cowslip flower, card with poem extract	£0.35
P20028	Pasque flower, card with poem extract	£0.35
P20029	The Hedge Rose, flower card with poem extract	£0.35
P20030	The Primrose flower, card with poem extract	£0.35
P20031		
P20032	The John Clare Rose	£0.25
P20103	The Midsummer Cushions around Clare's grave	£0.25
P20104	John Clare's grave (illustration)	£0.25
P20105	John Clare's Memorial, Westminster Abbey	£0.25

SALES ORDER FORM (add Postage & Packing) **2024**

	UK	Europe	Elsewhere*
0-100g	£1.45	£3.70	£6
101-250g	£3.00	£5.95	£7
251-500g	£3.90	£6.75	£10.50*
501-750g	£4.70	£7.25	£12.50*
751–1000g	£5.80	£9.55	£15*
1001–1250g	£6.50	£10*	£18*
Greater than 1251g	£9.00	£13*	£22*

To work out cost of p&p for your order, note the weight given in grams for each item in the weight column on the ORDER FORM below. Total up and find price for this weight in above table. **(note: some items listed as Incl.post/post free)** * enquire as postage may vary

CODE	ITEM	PRICE	WEIGHT
Total purchase price and total weight			
Add p&p from table for the total weight			
TOTAL PAYMENT **Bank Transfer or Paypal available, enquire via email**			
I enclose a cheque (sterling)payable to The John Clare Society for £			
NAME: **Date**			
ADDRESS: **POST CODE**			
In case of problem or query, please add **mobile/ phone number** and/or **e-mail address**:			

Return to: Sales Officer, The John Clare Society, 3 Astwick Road, Stotfold, Hitchin, SG5 4AP Tel: 07910 222125 e: djsapt@gmail.com