



The John Clare & Society

Newsletter no. 153

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Cover artwork: Carry Akroyd

MEMBERSHIP

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

Vally Miller: Matlock
Sue Lyons: Letchworth Garden City
David Haffner: Nuneaton
James Murray-White: Fen Ditton
Sarah Zimmerman: New York, US
William Christmas: Petaluma, US
Jilly Johannsen: Barrow-in-Furness
Sarah Stewart-Smith: Oxford
Ken Luckhurst: Helston
Neville Chambers: Sheffield
Wendy Ramsell: Ely

Valerie Pedlar: Membership Secretary

JCS ACCOUNTS: KEY POINTS from July 1 to 2 December 2024.

Total income to Dec 2: £11,222.

This includes £5k legacy from Ronnie Blythe

Total expenditure to Dec 2: £ 7,106

(At the last committee meeting it was agreed that the legacy of £5k be used for planned future bursaries.)

Current account balance: £5,717.

Savings a/c: £30,203.

Total balance: £35,920

Discounting the legacy of £5k, the regular income was £6,222

Take away costs to date: £7,106.

Gives -£883.79

Income from USA affiliates has not yet been added to these figures, nor recent room hire and expenses taken out as not yet on the spreadsheet.

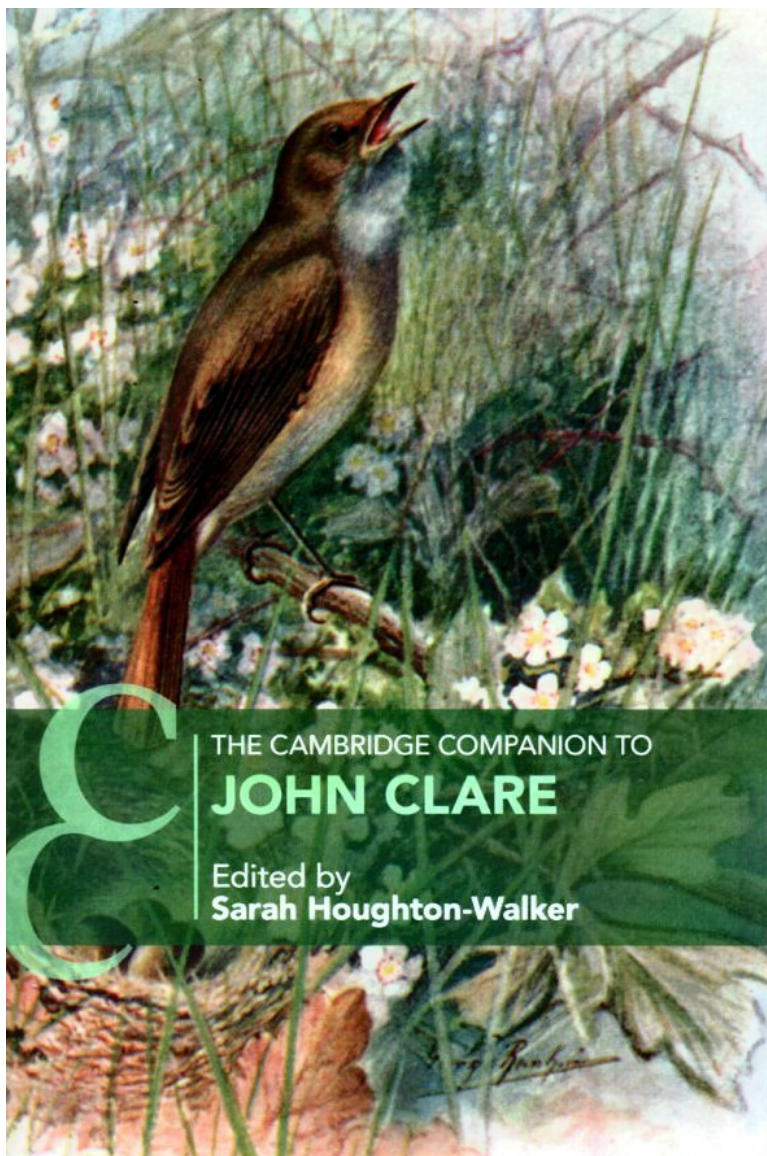
End of December figures are anticipated to be -£160.00 income over costs, rather than the -£883 above. This is good news after six months of higher costs such as insurance.

2025 FESTIVAL

The 2025 John Clare Festival will take place in Helpston with the Midsummer Cushions Ceremony on Friday 11 July and continuing on Saturday 12 July with the promise of a very full day, as usual. There will be music, dancing, poetry reading and Richard Astle from the Langdyke Trust will give our keynote talk. More information will be available nearer the time.

Ann Marshall

NEW PUBLICATION



The Cambridge Companion to John Clare, ably assembled and introduced by Sarah Houghton-Walker, offers what the publisher rightly describes as a 'scholarly but accessible' exploration of some key themes associated with Clare's life and work; all of which will, I suspect, be of potential interest to readers of this Newsletter. The volume features contributions from sixteen scholars, some of whom were instrumental in establishing Clare's modern reputation (e.g., Mark Storey and Tim Chilcott) as well as emerging voices. The collection is divided into four sections, focusing broadly on Clare the Poet; Clare the Naturalist (encompassing plants, animals, and the key but under-appreciated connections Clare made with other naturalists); Clare's Image (a section looking at Clare's self-identity, at editing and revision, and at surviving portraits of Clare); and Influences and Traditions (including religion, labouring-class writing, and Clare's impact on later poets). As this brief summary suggests, the book covers a broad range of topics, appropriately situating Clare within

historical and literary contexts as well as underlining his enduring relevance for readers today. Taken as a whole it provides valuable insights into Clare and his work and can be highly recommended to members of the Society.

(Cambridge University Press 2024), pp.xvi + 284, £22.99 paperback, £75 hardback. ISBN 978-1-009-26260-6.

Sam Ward

CURRENTLY IN COMMITTEE

Hello and welcome to our 'Currently in Committee' article, which will provide you with some insights into our activities as the John Clare Society Committee, following our October 2024 meeting. There was again a full agenda which reviewed action points and received officers' reports, as well as considering new initiatives, some of which are summarised below.

This time, we were delighted to welcome guests to our meeting. The first guest in attendance was our new President, Professor John Goodridge (see our 'Introducing....' section below). It was great to hear John's perspective on some of the initiatives we have in progress or are planning, and also on some of the challenges we face as a Society. Whilst John is not a formal member of the Committee, he is committed to joining as many meetings as possible, as a guest, in order to offer proactive support. Our other guests were Members of the John Clare Society who are considering joining the Committee.

John Clare Festival

The planning for the 2025 John Clare Festival is underway. Over the coming months, the existing Festival Planning Group will be joined by new members to enable an effective transition to a new Planning Team for future years. A new offering was piloted at the 2024 Festival, which was to serve tea, coffee and biscuits in the Church for most of the day. This initiative proved hugely popular and will be continued next year. If anyone would be interested in joining the Festival Planning Group, we'd love to hear from you – please contact either myself or our Chair, Sue Holgate.

New John Clare Society Book

Dr Mike Mecham, editor of the new poetry collection *Clare's People*, was happy to report that good progress was being made. Mike remains 'cautiously optimistic' that the book will be ready for launch at the 2025 John Clare Festival, and was particularly pleased to have received several responses to his request for your suggested items for inclusion.

Donations of John Clare books and other materials

We are often approached by our members, or by friends and families of late members, generously offering donations of, or the opportunity to purchase, books and other materials relating to John Clare. Whilst we are always very interested in hearing about these, we lack a standard process for responding, which can cause delays in getting back to people. We are therefore looking to create a simple process to enable a consistent and informative reply for use in future. Watch this space!

Building mutually beneficial relationships

We have been invited to support an event in the neighboring village of Northborough, celebrating the life of Martha 'Patty' Clare, John's wife. Northborough was the home of the family from 1832 and is just 4 miles north-east from Helpston. 'Posies for Patty – Remembering Martha Clare' is planned to take place over the Bank Holiday weekend of 3–4 May 2025 – please see the

article, which provides more information, in this Newsletter. Some of you may remember Lesley, the Landlady of The Bluebell in Helpston, who was so active in the John Clare Festival. Lesley is now running The Packhorse in Northborough; and is continuing to promote the life and work of John Clare. Hopefully our involvement in this event will lead to other opportunities for collaboration, for mutual benefit and learning.

New Committee Members (John Clare Society Committee and John Clare Festival Planning Group)

You may remember that, in our last Newsletter, we made a plea for more of our members to join the John Clare Society Committee or the Festival Planning Group. We are very pleased to say that several people have made contact, who we look forward to welcoming to our groups. However, we always need more committed and enthusiastic people to bring new ideas and to support existing initiatives and roles; so, if you have been thinking about joining us, it's not too late!! Please either contact Sue Holgate, Chair of the John Clare Society, or myself to find out more or to register your interest.

Finally, on to our 'Introducing' Section. This time, it is my privilege and pleasure to introduce you to our new President, Professor John Goodridge.

Introducing: Professor John Goodridge

What drew you to John Clare and when?

Well, forty years ago I was a mature student, researching eighteenth-century rural poetry – a bit early for Clare, but his name had come up in several contexts and I was intrigued. An exhibition of black and white photographs of Clare country by Peter Moyse was put up in the university library, and underneath it there was a pile of JCS joining leaflets. I loved the pictures, and it looked like a friendly and interesting group (which it was, and still is) so I sent off to join. I should point out that I am really not a great joiner of things – it was a purely impulsive decision. But I've been involved ever since and have greatly enjoyed it.

And not surprisingly my research then gradually evolved towards Clare.

Why did you join the John Clare Society Committee?

As the Society's new President I was invited to attend as a guest of the Chair, and was happy to do so, having served on the Committee myself in the past, when I edited the Society's Journal.

What do you enjoy about being on the Committee?

From my own experience with other, especially smaller literary groups, I know it is hard to keep these sorts of organisations ticking along, especially when people now can just click a button and join an online group instead. (Not half as much fun, but very easy.) It is important to keep the energy going. Literary

societies like ours are usually run by a small group of dedicated individuals and they absolutely rely on people coming forward to help. So to participate in any way is worthwhile, and as President of course I want to do all I can to support the Society and its work. Plus, it's good to meet up to discuss and plan things, and to hear the ideas of those who have stepped forward to help.



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

I am Emeritus Professor of English at Nottingham Trent University, which means I have retired from lecturing and administration, but I get to keep the university link, and carry on with my research. Among other things, I edit and largely write the online *Catalogue of Labouring-Class Poets*, which not long ago passed half a million words and now has well over 2,000 author entries. I love this work both for its sense of discovery, and also because I can just drop in and work on an entry whenever I have a bit of time. So it's easier than what I call joined-up writing. I am also just starting some new research on Clare now, on the longer poems of the 1820s, which I think merit more attention than they have had, especially *The Parish* and *The Village Minstrel*.

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

Date for the diary – Remembering Martha Clare

Villagers & Friends of St Andrew's Northborough invite you to a special two-day event:

'POSIES FOR PATTY'

**May Bank Holiday Weekend
Saturday 3 & Sunday 4 May 2025**

ST. ANDREW'S CHURCH NORTHBOROUGH

to celebrate the 225th anniversary of the birth of Martha 'Patty' Clare, the wife of John Clare 'The Peasant Poet'

Come and join us on Bank Holiday, May 3 & 4, in the historic village of Northborough, along with Clare scholars, devotees, historians, villagers, family and friends, for **'Posies for Patty'**, to pay tribute to this remarkable lady: devoted wife, mother and carer – Martha ('Patty') Clare, nee Turner.

There will be plenty to see and enjoy, with TALKS, POETRY READINGS, MUSIC & ART, as we learn more about her life in the village and help shed new light on the 'Northborough Years'.

Martha continued to live in the Northborough Cottage until her death in 1871. She is buried alongside her children in St. Andrew's churchyard. On Sunday May 4 a special service will be dedicated to her.

Food and refreshments will be available at

The Pack Horse (a short walk away) - music and poetry too.



If you would like information or tickets, please contact Anna Kinnaird (annakinn@btinternet.com)

HUGH UNDERHILL

I'm writing to inform readers that Hugh Underhill, Newsletter Editor of the Robert Bloomfield Society, has died at the age of 87. Hugh became Editor for the newly formed Bloomfield Society around the year 2000, when John Goodridge asked me, recently retired, if I would become its Chairman. I happily agreed, and at the same time Ronald Blythe kindly agreed to become President. Over the next eighteen years or so a great deal of information and understanding of Bloomfield's work was garnered and published in a series of well-researched articles by Hugh, which advanced Bloomfield scholarship significantly.

Although the Bloomfield Society has now sadly closed, the Newsletters are at last being published thanks to the efforts of Professors Tim Fulford and John Goodridge, and will be a lasting tribute to Hugh's scholarship. Clare greatly admired Bloomfield, and wrote a sonnet in his memory – one of the finest sonnets in the language, in my opinion.

TO THE MEMORY OF BLOOMFIELD

Sweet unassuming Minstrel! not to thee
The dazzling fashions of the day belong;
Nature's wild pictures, field, and cloud, and tree,
And quiet brooks, far distant from the throng,
In murmurs tender as the toiling bee,
Make the sweet music of thy gentle song.
Well! Nature owns thee: let the crowd pass by;
The tide of fashion is a stream too strong
For pastoral brooks, that gently flow and sing:
But Nature is their source, and earth and sky
Their annual offering to her current bring.
Thy gentle muse and memory need no sigh;
For thine shall murmur on to many a spring,
When prouder streams are summer-burnt and dry.

Rodney Lines



(l-r) Angela Underhill, Alan and Nina Grove, and Hugh, who is reading from Robert Bloomfield's poem The Banks of Wye, as we retraced his steps down the Wye valley in 2009.

Photo: Gill Goodridge

MIND'S-EYE-DAY

Morning:

The dusty kerbs flurry and fill from passing cars
Blackened grass bends to the heavy lorry wheel
as I await the endless stream of noise – to cross.

*While far beyond, the misty, wooded hills
Shimmering in heady morning light –
beckon me on, in spirit, light as I fly
– a soaring bird
To drop amid the droning bees, in honeysuckle hung
high o'er – wild sweet roses in secret sunlit glades –
amid the woods upon the distant hill*

Noonday:

The zinging heat of pavement burns my tired feet
There is no shade for miles
– before retreat
into a soft chair and cooler air.

*The eye of my mind is soared above
into an azure sky where the skylark sings its
Summer song all day long
Hovering high o'er silvered sand dunes hot and still
While butterflies winged in summer blue
Light upon sun warmed flowers*

Evening:

I walk into the supermarket hall
The myriad tins confuse my tired mind
Around my head relentless music of the moment blares

*While in my heart I hear the music of the Brook –
Slipping through the gentle meadow of deep cool grass
Where Ladysmock is starred, and King Cups in rich and splendid gold
stand bold
Whilst the magic evening light
Folds softly into summer night*

Dorothy Rose

CHARLES MOSSOP – The Good Vicar?

Part 2 of a talk given at the AGM, 13 July 2024

(Part 1 appeared in the October 2024 Newsletter)

Now, there was a level of clergy below even vicar: curate. These days a curate is either a trainee clergy person, in their first three years after ordination as a deacon, or sometimes a long-term assistant to a big church. But in Clare's time roughly half of all the clergy in the Church of England were curates. Those heading to a better job would often be a curate for a few months first as training. Mossop is a great example – having been curate of Leake in Lincs, then West Deeping, then Greatford with Wilsthorp, before becoming Vicar of Helpston.

Another example is the Revd White Bates, who has the distinction of having baptised John Clare. And why did Revd Bates do this when Helpston's vicar could presumably have done it?

Because the vicar of Helpston at the time – William Paley, the father of a very esteemed theologian of the same name – was also headmaster of Giggleswick School. In Yorkshire. So Paley raked in the vicar's income (which wasn't much, as it happened), and used some of it to pay White Bates.

Bates himself was also at the time rector of Creeton with Couthorpe in Lincolnshire. And Rector of Swayfield, next door. All 20 miles from here.

So why all this complexity and people doing each other's jobs?
I suspect because they had to make ends meet.

In the mid-nineteenth Century, the living of Helpston was worth about £100. The living of Etton (which was a rectory) was worth about £400. So in the amount he was earning at this stage, Mossop was more like the good old vicar than the bad current one of *The Parish*.

For comparison, for those who know their Trollope: Mr Quiverful, the perpetual curate of Puddingdale in *Barchester Towers*, written in 1857, was on £400 per annum and his very large family were constantly on the brink of starvation. So even Etton wasn't exactly a paradise. A lot of vicars and curates were doing multiple jobs – some making a fortune, many just to survive.

The clergy could also make some money with 'surplice fees'. These were charged for baptisms, weddings, and funerals. In London, where the Great Tithes were effectively nothing, the surplice fees were what could keep a vicar in his living. So Clare tells us all about the priest's eagerness to get what is due to him: in this case, Clare has invented not just a vicar, but a curate the vicar has brought in to do the work for him.

But now growing old in reading Sundays prayers
and keeping village morals in repairs
Till e'en his very spectacles refuse
to see the largest print that age can choose
he seeks a curate to supply his place
A kinsman of his worships sacred race
Who ages back sought priesthoods place to teach
the only sport where bankrupts cannot reach
and meeting riches in prosperity
still chuse a scion from the family
to graft upon religions fruitful stock
where blights near come ambitions hopes to mock

that bends with fruit whenever they like to pull
and bears all seasons and is ever full
And the curate is making sure he gets his own pound of flesh from the surplice
fees.

So this young kinsman of his worships troop
that like to Levi keeps the charter up
Now fills with mighty lungs the plenteous place
Whose love of gain makes up for want of grace
And wears his priesthood with a traders skill
And makes religion learn to make her bill
Who ere he cures his sheep of their disease
Like lawyers studys oer the churches fees
Who ekes new claims on customs ancient price
When reason ruled and priests were not so 'nice'
And sets on registers his raising mark
That used to fetch their sixpence to the clerk
And from the age enquiring staring clown
Extorts the monstrous charge of half a crown
And if a wanderer leaves his wants to roam
And dies on other ills he meets from home
His charge yard common for a bed is lost
And forfeits must be paid by double cost
And his jack all the clerk in double sense
Who sings his Sunday task and counts his pence
Hies to his post instructed in his trade
To claim the fees before the grave is made
And marriage pays its earnest for a bride
Offering her fees before the knott is tyd
And new made mothers that with thanks repairs
Seek god's kind love but pays the priest for prayers
With him self interest has a face of brass
A shameless tyrant that no claims surpass
Who shrinks at nothing and would not disdain
To take a farthing in the way of gain
Or less what ere his claims and fees enjoin
If such a fraction was a current coin
Such is the substitute put on to keep
The close shorn remnant of his worships sheep
And bye and bye hopes at his friends decay
To be sole shepherd and receive full pay

Incidentally, the bit about getting the fees in before you do the rite reminds me
of a quote attributed to one of the Crowson tribe of Helpston, that in the Fens
you used to have to pay the undertaker before they'd make a coffin.

Meanwhile back in the real Helpston, Lord Milton, heir to the Earl
Fitzwilliam, wrote to Christ's College suggesting that the Fitzwilliams should take
over the right to present the rector, and the rectorial tithes. Because according to
Lord Milton, it wasn't that the vicar was doing a bad job — there hadn't been a
vicar living in Helpston in living memory. According to Lord Milton, this was 'the
cause of the immorality and lawlessness of the population.' I do my best these
days....

Christ's weren't a terribly good rector in terms of splashing out on the place – in the 18th century the chancel was in a ruinous state, with water pouring in through the roof.

Charles Mossop was vicar of Helpston from 1817 to 1853. According to Eric Robinson, he probably lived at Etton up to about 1826. For those not clear on our local geography, Etton is a small village just across the railway line from Helpston, and very much on the fen edge. Today it's a lot smaller than Helpston. But in Clare's Day the two villages were really quite similar in size.

But when the Fitzwilliams took over as Helpston's rector, they provided a nice new vicarage – still there, across the road from the Bluebell. But importantly – this vicarage was only provided after Clare wrote *The Parish!* So Clare can't have been thinking about it when he wrote it. This was at a time when – as a result of Queen Anne's Bounty – many vicarages and rectories were being built and incomes improved. Of course, most of those big old parsonages have now been sold off. You can't get the staff these days.

And I don't see that Mossop was a bad vicar. We know that he and his sister looked after Clare when he fell on hard times. We also know that although – according to Clare – Mossop didn't think much of Clare's poetry before he was famous, he was a good supporter of him after he was published. And we know that even when Clare was in exile in Northborough, Mossop visited him. And, in fact, recommended they got him into an asylum when things went downhill.

Though one handy feature of the vicarage's location was that Mossop could chase our John up and get him to church on a Sunday morning. Not sure how handy that would have been in Clare's mind, though.

Mossop was from a reasonably respectable family. He was one of eight children of a local clergyman – of whom more later – and his grandfather was a Cumbrian hill farmer. Charles went to St John's Cambridge, as did his Dad. Notably he didn't marry until he was 43 – and then when he did, he married Lucy Burrough Booth, the widow of another priest.

Mossop and Clare were roughly the same age. But I guess their respective approaches to marriage and children was dependent on the desire to bring your children up in the manner to which they're accustomed. On 100 quid a year, Mossop couldn't afford to bring up children as little middle-class kids with the lads expecting to go off to Cambridge.

But Clare could afford to bring his quiverful of kids up dirt poor, same as he had been! Even though he did his best to do better.

After Clare's departure for Northborough, Mossop went off to Etton to be Rector (a promotion, as he had been curate of Etton for a while when he was vicar of Helpston). A bump up in salary, and maybe he was benefiting from whatever his wife had brought from her first marriage. And then maybe he inherited from his father and grandfather. As we shall see, he was a lot richer by the end than at the beginning.

When John Clare was buried in Helpston churchyard in 1864, Lucy and Charles were present at the funeral. Not such a bad vicar, then.

But like the vicar in the poem, Mossop stayed in harness as long as he could. He was still rector of Etton when he died in 1883, aged 90. He is buried in Etton churchyard by the west gate – I assume next to his first wife.

I say first wife, because he married again. After Lucy died – after 38 years of marriage – Mossop married his 25 year old great-niece, Mary Harvey.

A very odd marriage, you might think. And I'd agree. Was it even legal, you ask?

Oddly, it was. The Book of Common Prayer has a Table of Kindred and Affinities, which tells you whom you may or may not marry. And there's no mention of not being able to marry your great-niece. I strongly suspect that it never occurred to Cranmer that it was even a possibility. But then he didn't live as long as Charles Mossop.

We suspect that Mossop did this to ensure that his favourite great-niece got to inherit. He certainly didn't just do it to get a free carer. As the brochure from the auction of his belongings after he died indicates he had a housekeeper, a manservant, and a female servant. He also had 4 horses, 4 carriages, 3 cattle, hens, and 102 dozen bottles of fine wine – he had some particularly large amounts of port laid up! He left 1,000 books – though it is not mentioned if any of them were by John Clare. He also had 750 acres of land in Lincolnshire, Cambridgeshire, and Northamptonshire.

So by the end of his career, he'd become richer than as the vicar of Clare's poem!

But he had donated to Helpston's clergy and churchwardens, and our counterparts in Etton, four and a half acres of land for the benefit of the poor of our villages. Which we still have. And on his thirtieth anniversary of being vicar of Helpston he presented the church with some lovely communion plate.

Mary didn't waste time mourning. Within two years she was married to a Spalding solicitor, with whom she had three children and, presumably, a very well-off life.

But I'd just like to go back to the 'bad vicar' for a moment before we finish.

There is another mention of a hypocritical vicar, which Dr Sarah Houghton-Walker quotes in her book, *John Clare's Religion*. A boozy member of a debating society gets going on the subject of Sabbath-keeping:

Well you see as I sed says I this is pretty work this ove our viker baiting me about working my donkey on a Sunday now you see our viker does duty at three churches and rides one hoss to all three now you see as I sed says I whose beest is the most woked the vikers hoss what goes three jurneys of severel miles in a day or my donkey that oney goes one

In which, as Sarah Houghton-Walker remarks, Clare manages to skewer plurality of livings, and absentee ministers, all in one.

I've mentioned clergy who've been working several parishes. But there's one in particular who lived near Helpston, who did duty at three parishes, and who also fits the bill as a curate who was able to fill 'with mighty lungs the plenteous place' as quoted in *The Parish*. He was Perpetual Curate of Deeping St James – a very plenteous former priory church, which needed mighty lungs to fill it. He was also vicar of Langtoft, and of Baston in Lincolnshire. And he would have needed to go four journeys of several miles on horseback on a Sunday to take a service in all three of them – it's a 13 mile round trip.

This mighty-lunged clergyman was John Mossop. Father of Charles. By the time *The Parish* had been written he had been doing all three jobs for nearly a quarter of a century, though he was just in the process of getting a curate in Baston.

Was Charles Mossop's dad the inspiration for Clare's 'bad vicar', the representative of all the bad things in the Church of England? Well, I guess there's no way of telling for sure now.

But I kind of like the idea.

Today there are still Mossops living around Stamford and the Fen Edge. With the exception of Charles, they were a very prolific bunch. So I give you my views on Charles Mossop, late of this parish. And probably a pretty good vicar.

Gary Alderson



Charles Mossop's grave at Etton.

Gary Alderson

THE CROW

John Clare was right: the nightingale's P.R.
Gives him a clear advantage on the crow,
Whose singing's not the tunefullest I know.
He's not the bird to suit the la-di-da.
Raucous, unruly, polished, fireback black,
Brushed from the heavens by the besom trees,
Riding the rippling tide of unseen seas,
He dances like some Dionysiac,
Swarthy, dapper, bright-eyed, immaculate,
Like coal carved fresh from a mysterious mine,
He struts the field, dress-suited, a malign
Diplomat from an ancient consulate.
Though he can't sing, there's no bird you can show
To match the sheer charisma of the crow.

Kelsey Thornton

BOOK REVIEW: Ian Collins, *Blythe Spirit: The Remarkable Life of Ronald Blythe* (London: John Murray, 2024). pp. xii + 404. £26 (hardback).



This well-crafted and structured, finely-written biography of the Clare Society's beloved first President is the product of a 35-year friendship, one in which the biographer shows himself to have been as careful a listener as his subject always was. But the author does not permit friendship to blunt his critical perceptions in any way, and gives a shrewd and insightful – as well as affectionate – portrait of a very remarkable man: the sub-title is no idle claim. The opening chapters in a chronologically structured biography can be dull, as the author dutifully trails through family history and genealogy. But not here, where the family history is dramatic and deeply absorbing as Collins, who shares with Ronald Blythe (always 'Ronnie', as he preferred) deep local roots, brings to life the worlds of rural Suffolk and teeming London from which Ronnie's grandparents emerged.

He describes through pin-sharp writing and careful research the rural poverty and World War, the strategies of survival, self-improvements and setbacks, that shaped Ronnie's grandparents and parents. It was a family history in whose knowledge Ronnie was steeped, and through which he was shaped, both as a writer and as a man.

The similarities with John Clare seem to me strong: in an intense sense of place, in an ancestry of shepherds and labourers, in a limited formal education defiantly offset by a love of reading and a powerful instinct for self-education, as the escape route from the prison of drudgery and rural poverty. Ronnie left school at 14, not much later than Clare, and thereafter educated himself to a high level through a lifelong habit of reading – people as well as books – with unflinching curiosity and engagement.

Working as a reference librarian in Colchester (having gained much already from libraries), he was gradually drawn into friendship with the bohemian writers, artists and composers who then inhabited that part of the Suffolk coast. Natural fellow spirits to Ronnie, they recognised in him a restless, burgeoning talent, and encouraged him to become a writer.

I was struck by the degree to which Ronnie 'invented' himself, throwing off rural poverty and lack of formal education, using his love of books to educate

himself. His sexuality as a gay man had to be carefully masked (he was 45 at the time of partial legalisation in 1967), and a habit of reticence and self-disguising developed in him. (One thinks of Clare's struggles with identity here.) With the help of his friends and mentors he would of course find his role, as a beloved writer in many genres, but it took a lot of time. One striking aspect of his life is just how much he achieved in the second half of his remarkable 100-year span. Reflecting this, well over half of the 52 concise and well-shaped chapters in this biography see him essentially 'becoming' Ronald Blythe. The familiar figure we knew as founding President of the John Clare Society was almost sixty when he took the role, and well into his nineties when he left it.

This is, in short, a magnificent and richly rewarding biography of one of the most interesting figures of his time, a writer and a champion of other writers and artists, especially Clare, and one who – once he had, so to speak, found himself – inspired many through sharing a consistently positive and intense engagement with rural and common life, the miracle of the everyday, as a source of sustenance, pleasure and spiritual and psychological purpose.

John Goodridge

BLACKBIRD SINGING

At dusk in this leafless tree
a Blackbird sings, a last assertive flourish
before darkness comes.
I've often heard his tuneless, repetitive alarm
but there's a difference tonight.
With such full-throated confidence,
there's no before or after, no self-searching,
but only song outpoured to occupy
this place, this now.

Your song is not for me.
I'll take it even so, as clear and faultless
as light itself, as though you sang for both of us.

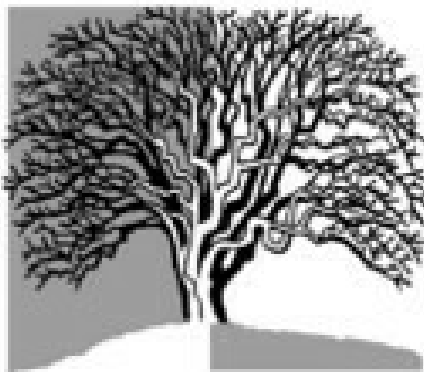
Mike Sharpe

NEWS FROM THE LANGDYKE TRUST

The second John Clare Countryside conference, 'Clare in the City', was held on 10 December at Peterborough University.

The conference focused on the opportunities that the JCC offers to address health and wellbeing, community cohesion and to develop our visitor economy. Nearly 100 attendees joined us to hear writer and naturalist Mark Cocker talk about Clare's legacy as our finest poet/observer of nature and the relevance of his work today, not least as we, like Clare, face up to the threats of a changing environment. Mark's address is full of wisdom and insight, but perhaps one paragraph particularly resonates, stressing the vital importance of nature, to our very existence:

'One kind of renewal that could steer us to a fundamental understanding of our obligations, would be to see life as Clare captured it in his poetry. It would be to recognise that our species is deeply embedded in the fabric of life. We exist literally in a plasma of relatedness. Every molecule of oxygen that sustains your life has been photosynthesised by plants. And not just by trees, but by monocellular phytoplankton in the sea. Every mouthful you have ever eaten in your entire life was once alive. You can only digest it because you are inhabited by an ecosystem of microbacteria. You are a collaboration, party to a living heritage that is 3.8 billion years old.'



Langdyke
Countryside Trust

Mark was followed by Iain Nott of Fitzwilliam Milton Estate, who emphasised the importance of maintaining a sustainable farmed landscape full of nature, and the objective of returning the land to some of the natural vibrancy that Clare would have known. Keira Harvey then talked about the ambitions of the John Clare Trust to extend the opportunity to all children to visit and appreciate the countryside, while Pamela Abbott from Natural Cambridgeshire talked about the importance of the JCC ambition to the county's Doubling Nature ambition and the ongoing work on the Local Nature Recovery Strategy.

The conference finished with Tony Juniper, chair of Natural England, reminding us of just how vital it is to act now to restore nature and our natural environment. If we fail to act, we don't just lose the beauty of the natural world, but we also lose the building blocks for life – an existential threat, that we have to address, now.

Comments on the conference have described it as 'epic' and 'truly inspirational' and there was general agreement of the exciting opportunity it presents not only to help tackle the biodiversity crisis, but also to support key initiatives around social cohesion, education and health and wellbeing. The breakout groups that followed the main speakers looked at each of these opportunities in detail. We will be collating these ideas in the New Year and considering how we bring these activities together and bid for funding to take them forward. One idea that stood out from the event was to repeat an earlier project which saw Clare's poems sent to every school student in the city! We also want to take forward ideas for enhanced public access to the countryside and for educational activity linked to nature, the environment and Clare.

We will keep you in touch with these plans as they develop and look forward to working with you on this exciting and important opportunity for local people. If you'd like to get involved in the project in any way, please contact Richard Astle, chair@langdyke.org.uk

MY FAMILIAR LIMES

I love the way that my familiar limes
Reach, branch, and stretch at the November sky,
As they have done in patience silently
Since they were planted there in earlier times
To grace the garden of the rectory.
The rectory's vanished, all except the name.
Nothing except the notion's left behind,
Although the limes are very much the same,
Though bigger, taller, gathering the wind,
Which rocks and waves them on their slender stems.
I wait to see the red boxing-glove gems
That tip the twigs when they will greet the spring
With painfully bright green; the modest flower
And pale-tongued ribbons later in the year.
Horse chestnuts growing in the churchyard near
Have dropped their conkers, and the leaves have turned
From green to ochre and to rust before
The swooping branches claim their own once more
As bitter, leaf-stripping winds refurbish them
Back to their fishbone winter selves again.
I love the trees, their secrets, and their hues
But cannot tell which season I would choose.
Every familiar phase is new, and strange;
I love their permanence. I love their change.

Kelsey Thornton



JOHN CLARE AND CHRISTIANITY

John Clare's relationship with Christianity is a complex and multifaceted one, shaped largely by his upbringing in the rural landscapes of Northamptonshire, his deep connection to nature, and the social and religious contexts of early nineteenth-century England. Although Clare was brought up in an Anglican, the Church that dominated country life, his poetry suggests a spirituality more rooted in the natural world than in the doctrines of institutional Christianity. Throughout his work, Clare expresses a profound reverence for nature, which he often imbues with a sense of the divine, yet his views on the Church were ambivalent, even sceptical at times.

As Clare was born into a working-class rural family, religion and nature were inseparably intertwined with everyday life. The Church of England played a central role in rural communities, marking time through Church services, religious festivals, and the rhythms of the liturgical calendar. Clare certainly participated in these rituals and traditions, but his poetry suggests that his connection to the Church was ambivalent at best. While he understood and respected the cultural role of the Church in village life, his own spiritual insights were more often drawn from his close communion with nature. In this way, Clare's views echoed a broader Romantic trend in which nature served as an alternative source of spiritual meaning and moral guidance, supplanting traditional Christian orthodoxy.

Perhaps the most defining characteristic of Clare's poetry is his deep reverence for the natural world, which he often depicts as imbued with a sacred quality. For Clare, nature is not merely a backdrop for human experience but a living, breathing entity that holds spiritual significance. His detailed observations of plants, animals, and landscapes reflect a profound sense of awe and wonder, encountering the divine through the natural world. In this sense, Clare can be seen as engaging in a form of pantheism, the belief that the divine permeates all of nature.

This view of the world is most evident in poems like 'The Mores', where Clare laments the enclosure of common land, viewing it not simply as an economic or social loss but as a spiritual desecration. The enclosure movement, which transformed the English countryside by privatising common lands, symbolised for Clare the violation of a sacred relationship between humans and nature. His detailed accounts of rural life in poems such as 'The Shepherd's Calendar' and 'To a Fallen Elm' reveal a spirituality that is grounded in the everyday experience of working the land, observing its seasons, and honouring its cycles. Nature, for Clare, is a kind of church in itself – an ever-present source of spiritual sustenance, far more reliable than the transient structures of human society.

While Clare's poetry reflects a deep spiritual connection to the natural world, his relationship with organized Christianity was certainly ambivalent. Although he was familiar with Christian teachings and rituals, Clare often expressed a critical attitude toward the Church as an institution. However he certainly revered Christ, obvious in his stunning poem 'The Stranger', which incidentally is the epitome of orthodoxy::

It was for sin he suffered all
to set the world-imprisoned free

to cheer the weary when they call
and who could such a stranger be
The God who hears each human cry
& came a Saviour from on high

However, his scepticism is rooted partly in his social class; as a poor labourer, Clare would have experienced the Church as an authority that, while preaching charity and humility, often aligned itself with the wealthy landowners responsible for the enclosures that devastated his community. For Clare, the Church's complicity in these social injustices might well have fostered a certain disillusionment with the Church of England.

Yet, his Christian faith was certainly very real, albeit often divorced from the structures of the institutional Church. After meeting the African beggar on his second visit to London, I do feel that Clare was moved to write – in the mouth of the local vicar – expressing his own thoughts. In my opinion it says rather a lot about Clare. Remember that slavery was not abolished until 1833, but even then it was partial, to say the least:

is color & complexion any insult to our feelings no the blood of
that poor emaciated black creature which I have in my minds eye is
as crimson as that which flowed down the temples of our divine
master when like the affrican he was injured & scourged & crowned
with thorns & what for bretheren why he suffered him self to be
bound that that poor bleeding affrican might be free he suffered
his own blood to flow that that poor affricans blood might be
spared he suffered himself to die that the affrican might live & be
happy in escaping the sufferings that he himself underwent for the
very purpose that they might be free

(The Memoirs of Uncle Barnaby, Arbour Editions 2017)

Without doubt, Clare's poems often reveal a tension between his appreciation for Christian moral teachings and his distrust of the formalized structures of the Church. In some cases, he critiques the way religion is practiced, particularly its tendency to overlook the simple beauty and spirituality found in nature. He seems to resist the idea that moral wisdom could only be found through the Church, instead suggesting that this could be found in the natural world. This perspective places Clare closer to the Romantic poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge, who also found spiritual meaning in nature, outside the confines of organized religion.

Clare's later years, marked by increasing mental illness and his confinement in asylums, deepened his contemplation of spiritual matters. His poetry from this period is often more introspective and melancholic, reflecting on themes of existential despair, suffering, and the search for meaning. In these later poems, Clare wrestles with religious questions about the afterlife, sin, and redemption, though he often does so without the certainty offered by traditional Christian belief. His reflections on death and the human condition are poignant, but they rarely provide clear answers, reflecting his ambivalence toward the religious structures of his time.

In his poem 'I Am', written during his time in the Northampton asylum, Clare expresses a longing for peace and oblivion, possibly hinting

at a desire for spiritual release. The poem's tone is one of resignation, and its religious imagery, while present, is understated. The absence of clear Christian consolation in this poem suggests that Clare, while grappling with profound spiritual questions, ultimately remained distant from the traditional comforts of institutional Christianity.

John Clare's relationship with Christianity is best understood through his deep connection to the natural world, which he often saw as a manifestation of the divine. His ambivalence toward organized religion, particularly the Church of England, reflects both his working-class background and his belief in the sacredness of nature.

While Clare grappled with religious questions throughout his life, his spirituality was ultimately more personal and rooted in the rhythms of rural life. His poetry and prose offer a unique perspective on the intersection of nature, religion, and the human experience, blending Romantic pantheism with a deep awareness of social injustice and the fragility of the natural world.

Roger Rowe

JOHN CLARE COTTAGE

Winter Closure

Clare Cottage museum and cafe closed for the winter on 31 October. We look forward to welcoming you to the 2025 season in the spring.

The winter closure is inline with other historic properties both locally and nationally. The temporary closure provides the opportunity to carry out essential maintenance work and to further develop our provision for younger visitors, families and schools, securing Clare Cottage for the future.

We are available for private hire, group tours and school visits all year round. In addition, some exciting and festive events are taking place in the cottage through the winter months.

Supporting Us

We are actively seeking volunteers to support us in our work as we further develop and secure Clare Cottage for the future. Please email info@clarecottage.org, we'd love to hear from you.

Do keep an eye on our website and social media channels for news and updates of our work over the upcoming months.

We look forward to welcoming you back in spring 2025.

The John Clare Trust

THE JOHN CLARE SOCIETY

SALES ORDER FORM February 2025



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. To 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.

With thanks

*David
David Smith, Sales Officer*

BOOKS 2025

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	<i>a JCS book:</i> 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	£26.00	1020g
B20128	Love's Cold Returning: Hall & Somekh ppr rrp £22.00 Detailed research into Clare's traipsing home from High Beech asylum	£18.00	900g
B20033	<i>a JCS book:</i> The Wood is Sweet Poems selected by David Powell, illustrated by Carry Akroyd ppr rrp £7.99	£6.50	200g
B20115	<i>a JCS book:</i> 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 <i>a JCS book</i> 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 Journals: As available (some no-stock years). Please enquire for years wanted		£2.00 each UK Post £2.75
B20125:	Journals, 2020,21,22,23 & 24 (extra pages). State which dates required	£2.50 each UK:Post £2.75
Journal Index (1982-2011)		£2.25 post free in UK

MISCELLANEOUS/BOOKS/CDs/DVDs 2025

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 & env.: 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
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