



The John Clare & Society

Newsletter no. 154

June 2025



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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/>

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Cover artwork: Carry Akroyd

RENEWAL OF MEMBERSHIP 2025-2026

Membership fees are now due. If you pay by standing order there is nothing you need to do.

I am happy to accept cheques (made payable to The John Clare Society) if that is your preferred method of payment.

Alternatively, you can pay by bank transfer:

Sort code 20-07-82

Account no. 50275239

Reference: your surname

If you can't remember whether you have set up a standing order or want to set one up please email me.

The rates remain at £15 for an individual, £20 for joint membership and £5 for students.

Dr Valerie Pedlar
JCS Membership Secretary
20 Delamere Road,
Southport
PR8 2RD
vpedlar@yahoo.co.uk

THE JOHN CLARE SOCIETY - 2025 FRIENDS OF FESTIVAL BOOKING FORM

Name: (please print)	
Address (please print)	
Email address if available:	

Please complete as applicable:

Please tick	Item	No.	Cost
	Friends of 2025 Festival (£5.00 per person) to include a Programme and reserved seating for the concert. These will be sent to you in advance of the Festival.		
	Priority booking and reserved seat for the Saturday evening Concert (Cut a Caper – a musical entertainment on the life and poetry of John Clare) 6.30 – 7.50 pm in St Botolph’s Church £8.00 per person (usual price £10.00).		
TOTAL AMOUNT			

Please indicate

- This completed form, along with a cheque made payable to The John Clare Society, should be returned to Sue Holgate, 9 The Chase, Ely, Cambs CB6 3DR, by 30 June 2025. Tel. 01353.668438**
- Or the form may be emailed to smholgate@outlook.com and BACS payment sent to The John Clare Society, Barclays Bank, Sort Code 20-07-82; Account Number 50275239 putting your Surname and FOF25 as the reference.**

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The 43rd Annual General Meeting of the John Clare Society will take place in St Botolph's Church, Helpston, on Saturday 12 July 2025 at 10.00am. All are welcome

THE JOHN CLARE SOCIETY FESTIVAL 11 & 12 July 2025

Roll up, roll up! Not for the fair, but for something just as much fun because of the variety of events on offer, all in one place, Helpston, over two Summer days.

The celebrations start on Friday 11 July at St. Botolph's Church, when the children of the John Clare Primary School gather to bring their Midsummer Cushions and to receive prizes in the annual Poetry Competition. The whole school attends, together with parents, friends, grandparents, carers, neighbours – everyone is very welcome. The start time is 9.15am, but please gather in the churchyard from 9am..

This is followed in the early evening by Choral Evensong, again in the Church, organised by the Rector, Gary Alderson. This is from 6 –7pm and is free to attend, as is the Folk Evening immediately afterwards, held at the John Clare Cottage from 7pm. Musicians, singers and audience – come to enjoy the live music, and there will be a bar and a raffle with lots of great prizes. If you can't make the whole evening, why not pop in for an hour? These events are open to the public as well as to Society members.

On Saturday 12 July the Church will be open from 8.30am for refreshments. The John Clare Society AGM is from 10 –11am and after that there will be a whole day of activities, including walks and talks. A particular highlight will be the Presidential Address by Professor John Goodridge, when he interviews Ian Collins, the biographer of our Founding President, Ronald Blythe, who died aged 100 in January 2023.

Lunches and teas (no booking required but don't leave it too late) will be available in the Village Hall 12 – 1.30pm and 2.30 – 5pm. Our faithful Morris dancers, who turn up come what may, bringing colour and tradition to the proceedings, will be out and about near the Cottage at lunchtime. In the afternoon, Richard Astle of the Langdyke Trust will give a talk in the Church about The John Clare Countryside Project, there will be two Open Gardens to visit on Woodgate, a chance to read your favourite poems, two guided walks, and stalls in Botolph's Barn (ground floor) will have new and second-hand books for sale.

In the evening we are delighted to welcome Cut-a-Caper, a band from the Northampton area, who are going to entertain us in St. Botolph's Church with songs and poetry, with words by and about John Clare, starting at 6.30pm and finishing at about 7.45m. Tickets are £10 each, two for £18, or £8 to Friends of the Festival members.

There will be an official, printed Programme and this will be available in June and July for collection in Helpston, or by post if you join the Friends of the Festival (maximum of 50 members), organised once again by Sue Holgate. An application form to join the Friends of the Festival is included with this Newsletter. Please complete the form and/or contact Sue by phone 01353 668438 or by e-mail at smholgate@outlook.com. For £5 per person you will be able to support the free-to-attend Festival, receive the Programme in advance and make a priority and discounted booking for Concert tickets.

The Programme is not just a timetable to help you to plan your visit, but will be full of interesting articles and poems, based around this year's theme of 'School Days'. And it is, of course, a lovely souvenir of the 2025 Festival, which you can then keep as a reminder of these special times spent in the birthplace of John Clare, making and rekindling friendships and memories.

For Friends of the Festival or for more information please call the Festival Organiser Ann Marshall 07815 640033 or Sue Holgate 01353 668438.

Please keep an eye on our Facebook page (The John Clare Society) as well as our website (<https://johnclaresociety.wordpress.com>) for any late changes to the schedule. We very much look forward to seeing members, friends, family and local residents in Helpston in July.

**Ann Marshall
Festival Organiser**

SALES REPORT

This covers ten months' sales from 1 July 2024 to end of April 2025. Postal costs are £53.72. The value of sales after postage is £751.94.

There are currently 30 each of *This Happy Spirit* and *The Wood is Sweet* with Carry at her exhibitions (Wisbech etc.) Payment for these will arrive when sold, after the exhibitions.

Sales have been slow throughout the ten-month period. Apart from *The Wood is Sweet* and its companion, the only items sold in more than odd copies, have been *A John Clare Flora*, tea-towels, old *Journals* and both the JCS CDs. Plus a few village maps and postcards.

The closure of the Cottage last October meant lost sales. Its re-opening in May should help as visitors return. The further increase in postage didn't help either.

We now have *The Poet's Wife* by Judith Allnatt in stock. It is a (just) re-published paperback with a new cover. It was out of print at its original publisher, so we are delighted that the author has been able to release it via a new imprint. On sale initially at the 'Posies for Patty' weekend and now in this Newsletter stock list.

Sales of the two JCS titles (*WIS* & *THS*) directly through Ingrams are currently £230.60

**David Smith
Sales Officer**

A Musical Entertainment on the Life and Writings of John Clare with the band 'Cut-A-Caper'

Saturday July 12th in St. Botolph's Church, Helpston at 6.30pm

£10 each on the door or two for £18 for advance sales

For tickets or more information:

Ann Marshall 07815 640033 or Sue Holgate 01353 668438

MEMBERSHIP

I have been pleased to report two long lists of new members in the past two newsletters, but I have received only one application for membership since the February newsletter.

We are pleased to welcome Joan Macdonald from Aberdeen to membership of the JCS.

I look forward to receiving renewals from current members. Full details are on the insert to the newsletter.

Valerie Pedlar
Membership Secretary

TREASURER'S REPORT as at 24 April 2025

As previously reported, we have received a £5000.00 legacy from the Ronald Blythe Estate, which is ringfenced for future bursaries. (Configuration not yet confirmed).

Running expenses have all risen over the last year from postage to petrol and printing, to insurance and hirings for the Festival. Additionally, Mailchimp now has a monthly charge.

There are some savings, but overall expenditure is up for the current financial year.

Savings A/c: £33,319.88 (of which £5k is legacy plus interest)

Current A/c £2,423.00

Some recent **expenses** include £100 for postage and Festival float, also Alliance of Literary Societies membership £15. To date, Committee expenses and admin: £1719.00 (includes Mailchimp charges) and £562 for 'bookstall' stocks including for Northborough (Martha Turner) weekend and onwards. Printing of Journal and Newsletters are at £4345.00 to date. Other outgoings due shortly are for the committee room hiring and the cost of illustrations and cover of the forthcoming JCS title *John Clare's People*, edited by Mike Mecham, which we expect to have in time for the John Clare Festival in July.

Some **incomes** include membership at £4262.00, US Affiliates at £775,.00 Gift Aid £755. Total sales income of £1137.00, with £414 from 2024 Festival.

Income for first 10 months 24/25: £12,487. (Includes the £5k legacy)

Expenditure over those 10 months: £11,271

The full results will be written and audited for the AGM at the 12 July Festival weekend.

David Smith
Treasurer

CURRENTLY IN COMMITTEE

Hello everyone

Welcome to our 'Currently in Committee' article. As usual, I will provide you with some insights into our activities as the John Clare Society Committee following our February 2025 meeting; but first – you may remember that we previously made a plea for more of our members to join the John Clare Society Committee. At our February meeting, we were delighted to have Jo Holliday, John Stafford and Gary Alderson in attendance. We look forward to formally welcoming them as Members of the John Clare Society Committee following the elections at the AGM in July. I'm sure you will see them in our 'Introducing...' section of this article in future!

As I mentioned in the last article, we were very pleased with the interest shown in joining both the John Clare Society Committee and our Festival Planning Group – but 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 contact either Sue Holgate, Chair of the John Clare Society, or myself, to find out more or to register your interest.

Once again, there was a full agenda for our February meeting, which reviewed action points and received officers' reports, as well as considering new initiatives, some of which are summarised below.

John Clare Festival 2025

The planning for the 2025 John Clare Festival is now almost complete. The theme this year for the children's poetry competition is 'School Days'. As always, I'm sure that the students of the John Clare Primary School will do us proud with their creativity and enthusiasm. The itinerary for the Festival weekend (as well as the Midsummer Cushions and the poetry reading on the Friday) will include a 'Presidential Address' which will also take the form of an 'In Conversation' with Ian Collins, the author of the recent Blythe biography, extended open gardens, bookstalls, Morris Dancers, Poetry Readings, a talk by Langdyke Trust, evening concert, walks etc. We look forward to welcoming you to this year's Festival.

New John Clare Society Book

Dr Mike Mecham, editor of the new poetry collection book *Clare's People*, has worked extremely hard and has made excellent progress. This means that we remain optimistic that the book will be published in time for first sales at the 2025 John Clare Society Festival in July. Having had the privilege of seeing a very early draft I, and other Committee members, are hugely excited to see the finished work and can't wait to get our hands on a copy. Unfortunately, book sales, which make up a significant part of the John Clare Society Charity's income have shown a decline this year, so we hope that *Clare's People* will bring in much-needed funds to enable us to continue to achieve our objectives and to deliver services to you, our members. We will, of course, provide information on how to purchase a copy of *Clare's People* nearer the time, if you are not able to be at the Festival for its launch.

Building mutually beneficial relationships

Two of our Committee Members were invited to attend The Landyke Trust Conference, where a new forum, the 'JCC' (John Clare Countryside), was

introduced. The JCC has been set up with the objective of unifying all communities and groups trying to establish the diverse areas that Clare knew via all aspects of his interest in nature, flora, fauna, ecology, environments etc, with the help of his writings and, no doubt, his way of life. The conference focused on the opportunities that the JCC offers to address health and wellbeing, community cohesion, and to develop our visitor economy. Nearly one hundred attendees, from various groups, trusts, etc, attended to hear speakers and to network with like-minded people. The Keynote Speaker was writer and naturalist Mark Cocker, who talked 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. 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. This amalgamation of groups and trusts is an attempt to create an area plan which aims to win Government money to enable the development. Of course, we will continue to participate fully in this initiative.

Proposed post-graduate/early career scholar/researcher bursary

You may remember that I mentioned this in an earlier 'Currently in Committee' article. In summary, the Society would like to provide a bursary to one or two students of Clare to undertake research, and to support the Society in achieving its purpose and objectives. The Society was fortunate enough to receive a legacy from the late Ronald Blythe's estate, which we advised of our intention to use the legacy to fund a bursary scheme and to name it in his honour. We aim to announce details of the scheme at the forthcoming Festival, and they will also be published in the next issue of the Newsletter.

Finally, on to our 'Introducing...' section. This time, it is my privilege and pleasure to introduce you to David Smith, who has a dual role on the John Clare Society Committee (and is always very generous in offering expert advice to those of us who are less knowledgeable about Clare and his work).

Introducing: David Smith – Hon Treasurer and Sales Officer

1. What drew you to John Clare and when?

Gosh, that was sixty years ago. I found the Tibbles' books as secondhand. Clare's poetry was so different to reading requirements for 'O' & 'A' levels. I read others but Clare seemed an antidote in his 'apparent' simplicity and realism, which fitted my feelings of walking in the fields and floodplain of the Thames or the wooded areas around Burnham and Pinewood. His life story also piqued my interest. Poetry and writing was dropped for many years until I was able to spend more time on both some some twenty years ago.

2. Why did you join the John Clare Society Committee?

I had been a member of JCS for a few years, had interesting and informative times at the Festival and at an AGM they asked for volunteers for the committee, as is usual. This was to help with 'sales' and relieve Mavis and Peter Leverington of



some work. My working life was in marketing and selling books for publishing houses, so I felt at home doing this. It was also interesting and informative to work with JCS members and discover more about Clare. When asked to be Treasurer I agreed, and, with instructive help from the late Linda Curry, had a smooth handover. I still enjoy both activities even with the challenges.

3. What do you enjoy about being on the committee?

You need to learn how they work and not get too frustrated or relaxed about the meetings. Enjoyment comes from talking with others, discussing ideas from around the table or via Zoom. Delays happen but the pleasure is in finalising an idea. And seeing its fruition. Everyone has their special 'niche' when it comes to John Clare and answers to

problems or details can be found, or at least discussed, even if left on the table for the future. I have enjoyed learning enough to enthuse about Clare to anyone but am aware of how much I don't know, the beauty being that there are many others I can ask who likely will.

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

Apart from house and family? I help run a fortnightly poetry-writing group, 'Poetry ID', in Letchworth. I also attend and help other groups and open mic sessions. I write fiction and poetry, when time allows. Okay, walking the dog steals a lot of time, as does reading and answering many emails.

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

AFFIRMATION

*In the nineteen sixties
A broadleaf plantation
Uprooted and reduced to ash*

Being a teenager
I planted my foot
Down in the grey ash
Of the firebed

Saw its red heart
Felt its last breath
Not yet extinguished.

(John Clare was uprooted)

Bob Kelly

'POSIES FOR PATTY' WEEKEND

It was a unique, entertaining and successful weekend of 3 & 4 May at St Andrew's Church and the Pack Horse, Northborough. After months of planning by the W.I., members of the church and other local people, they and many visitors helped celebrate the life of Martha Clare, wife of poet John Clare. It was the 225th anniversary of her birth and she is buried in St Andrew's Churchyard. Martha, frequently called 'Patty', moved to Northborough with John in 1832 and lived there until her death in 1871.

The weekend events included a John Clare poetry trail around the village, a display of poems and drawings of Clare Cottage Northborough by local schoolchildren, and an art exhibition themed on rural life, local landscape and flowers.

Flower posies decorated the church, with a display of Martha's life story gleaned from the little documentation available. A second display told of the newly-discovered Overseer's Poor Rates book, in which John Clare's name can be seen as a rate payer. Several donations were made to aid its conservation.

In the breaks, the W.I. provided biscuits and an array of cakes plus tea and coffee. It was a plentiful and delicious selection, and close to the displays for browsing.

The Saturday afternoon session by Professor Simon Kövesi on 'John Clare's Northborough' argued convincingly that Clare had a 'satisfactory life' in his new home while he lived there and that he was *extremely* productive – which is not the impression a brief biography might give. His first few poems painted disappointment and sadness at leaving Helpston, but he was soon writing many other lighter, wider-ranging pieces, especially in the sonnet format, over many subjects and variations of form (see *Northborough Sonnets*, ed. Robinson, Powell & Dawson).

Simon was followed by Nick Hamilton, President of the Cottage Garden Society, from Barnsdale (organic for 40 years), who gave a tremendous roundup of Cottage Garden flowers, starting with dahlias and stepping on with plant after plant via



their Latin and more common names that I cannot recall just now – around which he gave us numerous and humorous stories about his life in the horticultural world. He mentioned tobacco plants and salvias, plus lupin and delphinium. More plantings, colour-choices, positioning, soil, and practical gardening tips. Not forgetting my favourite: potentilla. A great run through, each with a slide; better buy his book!

Saturday evening, the focus shifted to the nearby Pack Horse, a 6pm dinner for three. At 7pm in the bar, folk group



Frumenty were offering music and song of the period, plus poetry throughout. All of which I missed, having to leave, but has been reported on as a great and late evening. I have seen Frumenty so know how entertaining they are. However, before I left the Pack Horse, they had such a wonderful display of raffle prizes that I bought tickets. And yes, dear reader, I won a prize, collected by John (Thank You) and it sat briefly in my kitchen as a superbly curated 'Sambuca with additions', a credit to whoever packaged it, ready for a family 'opening ceremony'.

Sunday opened with the art browsable from 10am, followed at 2pm with an introduction by Professor John Goodridge of Dr Emma Trehane talking about 'Letters from Eliza'. This interesting talk interpreted Eliza Emerson's letters as part of a triangular relationship between Martha, Eliza and John, so that Eliza was a constant presence in their lives. She was a woman from a different class, with literary knowledge and contacts, and an interest in Clare. Theirs was a relationship that grew and changed with the dynamics of time, insecurity and illness, yet she gave continued guidance and help to John and the family's living as well as 'editorial' advice. I had not realised how important and continuous Eliza's support was to John and Martha's family, until this presentation.

The day ended with a reading by a pupil from the local Primary school's poetry-themed lessons with the poet Hilary Steele who also read one of hers. Finally we had a Clare sonnet to close the weekend events.

The Society had a bookstall on both days, with one new special item, the re-issue of *The Poet's Wife* by Judith Allnatt, who had arranged copies for the 'Patty' weekend. Judith was unable to attend but hoped to visit a future local event for Patty and Clare.

The celebrations for 'Patty' gave insight into the caring, industrious and difficulty-filled life of the woman who loved and married John Clare. More than that, it threw a spotlight on her importance as an anchor for the whole family, especially Clare, whether he was working and lucid or spending the many years in Northampton Asylum.



The attractively-wrapped raffle prizes



In the Pack Horse.

Photo: John Stafford

I must highlight that the weekend was designed as a significant fund-raiser towards the cost of the roof and other church repairs. It felt successful and I want to offer the W.I., the Church, the Pack Horse and all people involved, a huge appreciative 'thank you' for organizing the celebrations. There is a further item on the Overseer's Book appeal later in this Newsletter; I am also sure they still need donations for the roof!

David Smith

ARBORFIELD PRESS

From the Introduction to the final book in the 30-book Arbour Editions series; it is entitled *Mary Joyce*, and is intended as a companion to No.29, *Patty*:

Looking at John Clare's long life as a whole, the time he actually spent with Mary Joyce was very short. She was four years younger than Clare and came from a prosperous farming family in Glinton. It was, it seems, a childhood friendship, though in his eyes, perhaps much more.

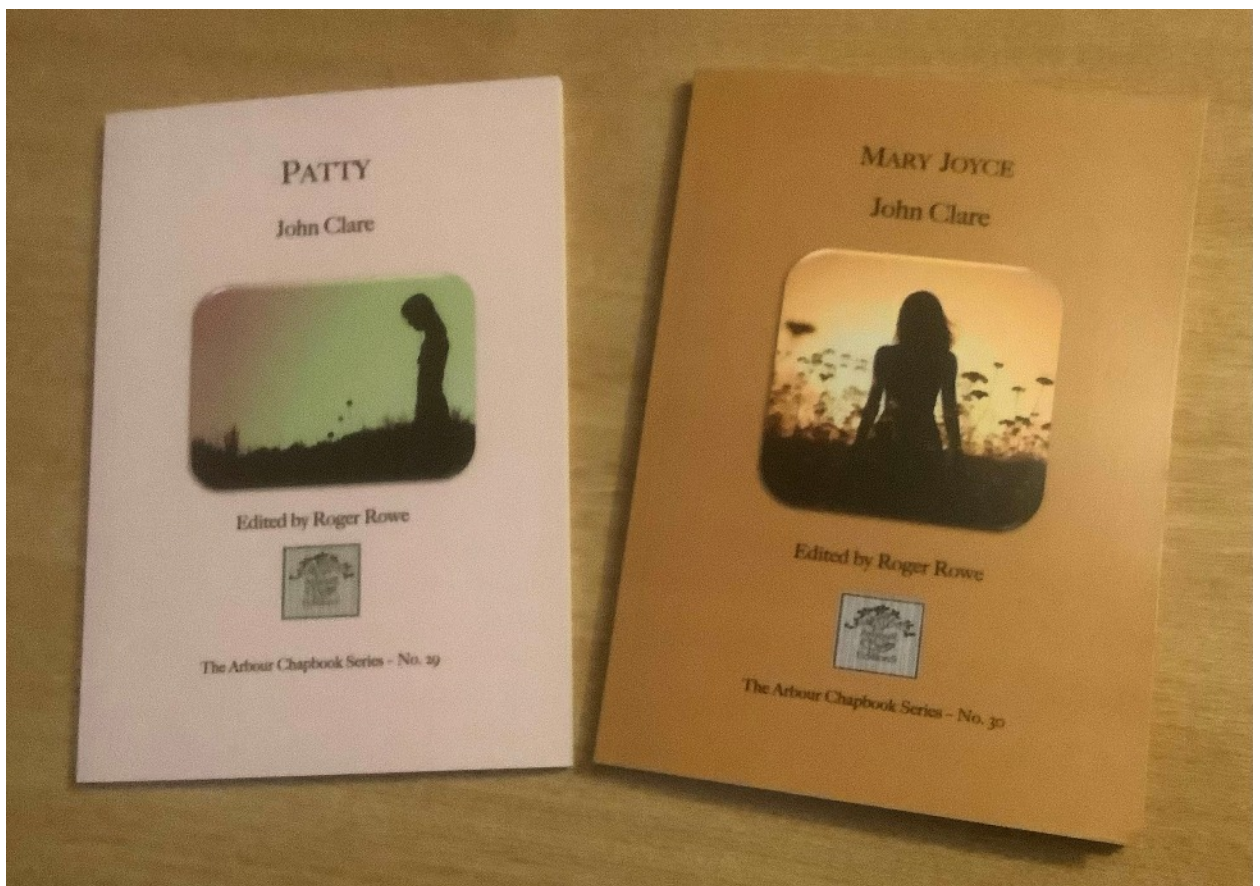
The strength of his feelings may only have developed in retrospect, for he wrote most of his poems about her long after they had parted. Most of what we are able to discover about Mary Joyce comes from this early period and largely from what Clare wrote about her:

If I could but gaze on her face or fancy a smile on her countenance it was sufficient I went away satisfied we playd with each other but named nothing of love yet I fancyd her eyes told me her affections we walkd together as school companions in leisure hours but our talk was of play & our actions the wanton innosence of children ...

After a short but intense friendship, Mary and John parted as a result of a misunderstanding, the precise nature of which is not clear. Clare alleges that her family felt her station to be above his.

I plan to be selling books from the whole series, together with several other titles, at the Festival in July, on a three for two basis.

Roger Rowe



JOHN CLARE AND THE PINK ROOSTER!

Thursday 17 April

Okay, the headline is misleading. I should have said: 'Pink Rooster fundraiser at Northampton High School'. Or better still: 'Jon Boden (Bellowhead/The Remnant Kings) plays Folk for John Clare, with poetry readings by Dr Mike and daughter Isobel Scanlan, to raise funds for the charity.'

Put simply, the audience of 150 or so had a great time. The first half was a brief introduction into Clare's life around a selection of his poems, including 'I am', 'Mary', 'Thrush's Nest' and 'Autumn Walk'. Isobel is an actor, and Mike was an actor in the 80s before moving into a medical career. It was interesting to hear their interpretations of the poems.

After the interval, Jon Boden gave a 45-minute set of music that Clare knew or collected, plus poems that Jon had set to music for choirs during the 'Nenescape Project' around the time of COVID lockdown. Jon included parts of Clare's life, albeit in little ways, related to the songs. His final piece was 'Skylark' – such a lovely song – playing a fiddle as a guitar.

Both halves showed John Clare's poetry via word and music in a positive, loving way, that would have impacted on the audience, discovering more of Clare's poetry and parts of his life. That is certainly the feeling I got from talking to people as I loitered around the table where I had left a few leaflets, Newsletters and old Journals to give away. I also promoted the Northborough

weekend and the Clare Festival, which several people, especially Dr Mike and family, seemed keen to visit.

The local charity, Pink Rooster, is supporting therapy work with people living with dementia and other life-limiting mental and physical health challenges, providing music, creative arts and assistive technology countrywide and beyond. It is based in what was originally Northampton General Lunatic Asylum, opened 1 August 1838, now known as St Andrew's Hospital, part of a private group. (Coincidentally, Martha Clare's Church in Northborough is St Andrew's.)

The evening started at 7, and finished at 9.30, when Jon Boden came out to the floor and chatted with people while selling copies of his CD. (Of course I bought one!) The event organisers were David Maxwell and his wife, Andrea; congratulations to them both for a successful evening.



David Smith

THE JOHN CLARE COTTAGE

New opening times

We are delighted to see that the John Clare Cottage museum, gardens and cafe has re-opened after its six-month hibernation. The winter closure was in line with other historic properties locally and nationally and provided the opportunity to carry out essential maintenance work and to further develop the provision for younger visitors, families and schools – securing Clare Cottage for the future.

Extended Opening Hours

Wednesday to Saturday from 10.30am to 2.30pm.

For more details visit www.clarecottage.org.



The John Clare Cottage

The Cottage is operated by The John Clare Trust, a registered charity. As a small independent charity they are entirely reliant on the support of donors, volunteers and individuals who share a belief in the importance of Clare's legacy.

YOU CAN SUPPORT THE JOHN CLARE COTTAGE IN MANY WAYS

Visiting Often

Every visit helps. Relax in the warm and welcoming café, enjoy the beautiful gardens and dovecot or perhaps purchase a special something from the gift shop. There is no admission charge for the café, garden and shop – admission is only charged to visit the museum.

Supporting Clare Cottage Financially

The John Clare Cottage is currently raising funds to repair and rethatch the historic cottage roof. To donate please visit www.justgiving.com and search for 'rethatch Clare Cottage'

Thatched o'er with mosses green
Photographs of John Clare's Cottage
before and during thatching *in the 1990s.*
The Peter Moyse Collection



WE ARE BEING TESTED

Our muscle would waste
If we weren't tested
And the heart is a muscle.

(John Clare was tested)

Bob Kelly

I HAVE NOTHING

*Northampton General Lunatic Asylum, March 8th 1860,
To Mr. James Hipkins, London:*

Dear Sir

*I am in a Mad house, I quite forget your Name or who you are you
must excuse me for I have nothing to comunicate or tell of & why I
am shut up I don't know I have nothing to say so I conclude
yours respectfully*

John Clare.

Jas Hipkins, spouse to Eliza, father of three,
middling build, in a small way of business that,
times being what they are, is often
pushed for breath, lays the letter down
so its edges trace the grain.

The lamplight bobbles and retreats...never again
with those slack-braided wicks. He reaches
to adjust the dial. The light gulps and flares
on *you must excuse me and I have nothing to say.*
It's as if the evening wants to read by itself.
London darkens. Outside, a sweep's
shoulder-going brushes muck the air
into a proper state. Someone yells at someone
to come home. A child surrenders
all its age of weeping. The day runs the bolt
and curls in a corner, brow to palms.

Jas Hipkins reads again, regards the room
beyond the letter. Bookends vanish
in a blow of celandine. A hare starts
at a sofa's end, furrows a hide of antimacassar.
Thistledown urges along the dado rail.
Fleeting in a pier glass, high-boned eyes
fill up with love and seasons,
pray for the badger to rout the Whitsun-skinned boys,
watch as the year discards its minutes
in the field-end pool, a new shade
for each commotion, till the water
bellies out with skies that will never come again,
mist that looped this hornbeam and no other.

Jas Hipkins presses the letter
between halved muslin,
lays it in an oaken drawer
so what it cannot tell or know
may at last gently unlace
as in the sweet sleep of childhood.

Michael W. Thomas

Michael W. Thomas's latest poetry collection is *A Time for Such a Word* (Black Pear Press). His latest novel is *The Erkeley Shadows* (KDP / Swan Village Reporter). His work has appeared in, among others, *The Antioch Review*, *Critical Survey*, *The London Magazine* and the *TLS*. He is on the editorial board of *Crossroads: A Journal of English Studies* (University of Bialystok, Poland).

A review of *A Time for Such a Word*:

<http://quillandparchment.com/archives/July2024/book1.html>

www.michaelwthomas.co.uk

<http://swansreport.blogspot.co.uk/>

[@thomasmichaelw](https://twitter.com/thomasmichaelw)

NORTHBOROUGH OVRSEERS OF THE POOR PARISH BOOK 1823

In 2001, during the renovation of an eighteenth-century cottage in Northborough, a volume of handwritten text was found in the roof space. On investigation, it was discovered that the volume was an original account book for the Overseers of the Poor, local literate people appointed by the parish to manage and distribute poor relief to their own parishioners who were unable to support themselves.

The contents of the book mainly date from 1832–1837 and describe the assessment of property owned or rented in the village and the Poor Rates due to be paid to the parish. The twice-yearly assessments varied according to the number and the needs of the parish poor, with disbursements listing the villagers in need of relief, along with the amount they received.

This volume is a unique primary reference. It is relevant to three different historical interests: local history, family history and, most importantly, John Clare scholars, as significantly this volume covers the first five years that he lived in Northborough.

The entry for 18 May 1832, about the time the Clare family moved to Northborough, indicates that as tenants renting property, John Clare was a rate payer and was required to pay the Poor Rate. The Clares did not receive poor relief themselves. They were assessed and their rate calculated as:

Property rental: £6.14.00

Poor Rate: calculated at a rate of 1 shilling in the pound

Payment due: £0.06.08

Recently, this volume has been passed to the Peterborough Archives Service for safekeeping. James Keech, Archivist at Peterborough Archives Service, writes:

Due to its historical significance, we were interested in adding this volume to our collection to ensure its long-term preservation. Heavy surface dirt, staining, discolouration, water and mould damage, tearing and broken sewing makes the volume unusable. Due to its fragile condition, it will need significant conservation work to ensure that the volume can be used by archive researchers. The National Conservation Service is conserving the item and creating a digital copy, another means of access for archive users. But conservation comes at a price. This volume will cost £1,430 (including VAT).

JOHN BANGAY

On Monday 20 January 2025, I went along with many other people to All Saints' Church, Stamford. We were giving thanks for the life of the utterly inimitable John Bangay. I first came into contact with John when he pushed his bike into one of the lights on the churchyard path at St Botolph's, Helpston. Being John, he immediately owned up. Also being John, he offered to paint me a picture of St Botolph's, to sell – the proceeds to pay for the repairs. Like a fool, I got someone to fix the light for free. I should have stuck it out for the painting, I have since discovered.

He was a keen cyclist. Despite being fifteen years younger than John, I realised on a ride from Barnack (Stamford in his case) a couple of John Clare Festivals ago, that the chap rapidly catching up with me along West Street Helpston was John. I'm told his ability to manage his e-bike's range was less successful.

John was an excellent artist, an endlessly creative man. When we met, we mostly disagreed – but that was fine. He'd have ideas about the life of John Clare that he wanted to put into his play about Clare's life. I'd tell John that he was wrong about the details – but that didn't worry him in the slightest, nor put him off what he had decided to write, nor offend him in any discernible way.

At his funeral, we heard warm tributes to John – a family man, a kind man, and a complete one-off.

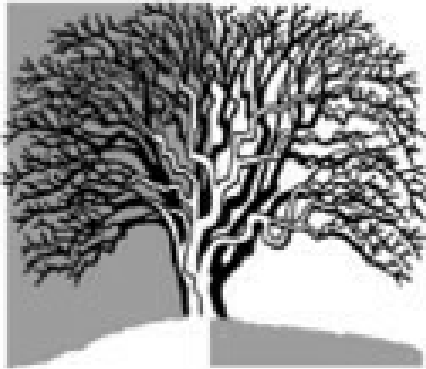
Mike Meham writes: 'During his last year, John gifted a series of pen and ink drawings to a new selection of John Clare's poems, entitled *Clare's People*, to be published by the John Clare Society in 2025. Thirteen are included and they add a grace to the book which acknowledges John's generosity and stands as a tribute to him.' Mike will be acknowledging John's contribution in the book.

A kind, warm, and lovely man. Taken from us far too soon. And he will be much missed.

Gary Alderson



LANGDYKE COUNTRYSIDE TRUST



Langdyke
Countryside Trust

It has been a hectic past year for Langdyke Countryside Trust, with a number of projects aimed at improving and enhancing nature coming to fruition. The organisation, run entirely by volunteers, manages a number of nature sites across the area and is the leading supporter of the John Clare Countryside vision. The most recent developments include:

The introduction of viewing points at Maxey and Etton, giving walkers wonderful views of the wildlife from already-established footpaths.

The building of three new wildlife ponds and a new area to encourage turtle doves and butterflies at Etton High Meadow.

Major work to remove an invasive and damaging weed from the water areas at Etton Maxey nature reserve, which has been affecting bird life.

Clearance work to restore the ancient M'Lady's Pond near Ailsworth.

The finalisation of a management plan and the start of work parties at the recently-acquired Christ's College reserve between Helpston and Maxey.

And while this has been going on, Langdyke has also relaunched its website, making it easier to navigate and with a cleaner design.

Langdyke chair Richard Astle said: 'It's been quite a year in terms of projects. All of this has been in addition to our continued work to manage, maintain and enhance nature on sites across the area.'

Walkers using the banks and footpaths near to the Maxey Cut have already welcomed the opening-up of three viewing areas on to the Christ's College Nature Reserve. New information boards will be put up in the near future providing information about the site.



Christ's College Nature Reserve along Maxey Cut

The reserve, in more recent times the site of gravel extraction, is the latest to be acquired by Langdyke after a successful public appeal for financial help.

Three other viewing areas, all with disabled access, have been created along the Green Lane Bridleway at Etton, providing lovely views of the Vergette Wood Meadow water areas.

Across the road at Etton High Meadow, three new ponds have been dug out and a bank established which has been sown with seed that

will attract butterflies and, we hope, provide feed for Turtle Doves during their summer visits.

Tackling problems affecting nature is also an important task for Langdyke's volunteer workforce. The main pond at Swaddywell, which has leaked, is currently being rescued by volunteers, saving plants and creatures, clearing out debris and installing a new lining to restore it to its former glory.

Likewise the ancient M'Lady's Pond near Ailsworth – which has been in a sorry state in recent years – has undergone similar restoration work. And major work has been undertaken at the Etton Maxey reserve, with a digger being used to scrape away invasive crassula, also known as New Zealand Pygmy weed, which takes over the muddy margins of water areas usually a home for wading birds.

Meanwhile, work has continued in pursuit of the wider John Clare Countryside vision project, designed to restore nature areas to how they were when the peasant poet walked the meadows and wrote his poetry.

The latest project involves a number of major landowners coming together to put together a joint bid for funding which would see major improvements to nature between Peterborough and Stamford.

You can find out more about Langdyke's work or become a member and help nature thrive by visiting www.langdyke.org.uk

David Rowell
Langdyke Countryside Trust

PETRA WONHAM AND CLARE'S PEOPLE



Petra Wonham, John Clare on *Friendship and Courtship*

2025 will see the launch of another selection of John Clare's work by the Society. It is entitled *Clare's People*, and focuses on Clare's poetry and prose about the people in his world, in and around Helpston as well as beyond. I am the editor and the book is split into six thematic sections, beginning with childhood and family and coming full circle by finishing with Clare's reflections on outsiders and outcasts. Many were written in the High Beech and Northampton asylums. While we are placing it as companion to *The Wood Is Sweet* and *This Happy Spirit* it will have different illustrators. Heading some of the poems will be illustrations generously donated to the book by the late John Bangay of Stamford. But the cover design and section title page illustrations have been specially commissioned for the book from Petra Wonham.

Petra is an impressive young illustrator now based in London. Her parents are both artists. Her mother,

Tilly, paints small abstract still life and landscapes and her father, Nick, is a printmaker and illustrator, specializing in relief printing, particularly linocuts. Petra is herself a multidisciplinary artist working mostly with paint and paper in various forms, as well as in linocuts which she is using for the book designs. She developed her practice in Edinburgh, where she received a first-class degree in BA Illustration at Edinburgh College of Art in 2021. Her range of work can be found on her website (petrawonham.com) and on Instagram (@petra.wonham). The illustrations Petra has designed for *Clare's People* are both imaginative and striking. They encourage the reader to think and reflect. The example reproduced above opens the section on friendship and courtship. Petra says of the commission and her work on the book:

I am honoured to have been chosen to bring John Clare's poems to life. The imagery is so strong in Clare's works, and it has been a joy to illustrate them. Each linocut has been designed from the poems that will be in the book, with the theme of each section running through the image. We as people are a reflection of nature; we can recognise friendship by two everlasting oaks, we can see the importance of community by a murmuration in the sky, and we can see familial relationships in the animals around us. My illustrations depict nature, and aim to capture and convey the emotions of Clare.

I hope that the book will also bring the quality of Petra's work to a wider audience.

Mike Mecham



HUMANS AND THE ROBIN: A SYMBIOSIS?

The following is an extract from an article in *The Listener* of 19 Oct 1961 by the ornithologist James Fisher, entitled 'John Clare: Naturalist and Poet':

One frosty day in January 1946, the two Oxford ornithologists Dr Southern and Dr Lack went for a walk in Wytham Wood. The ground was hard and when Dr Lack scraped aside a small area of the top layer a robin immediately dropped down to feed. In other parts of the wood three other robins followed Dr Lack and fed as soon as the two scientists had broken the ground. Dr Lack concluded that inside woods robins had come, through generations, to recognise man, or indeed any earth-kicking animal, as an agent for breaking through the frost layer. Dr Lack is a high scholar in literature as well as ornithology and would never offer such an observation as a new one without much checking. But this time he overlooked something. Clare, the country boy, had recorded just such a thing in a poem written 120 years before, or more, in his first home at Helpston in the Soke of Peterborough.

Fisher goes on to quote from Clare's poem:

Yet all, save robin, will retreat
and shun rude man's forbidding sight
who seemingly welcomes trampling feet
and ruffs its feathers in delight
brisk hopping from its shielding thorn
as one who would our steps retain –
then drops his wing and sits forlorn
when left to solitude again.

This behaviour of the robin is now well-known and I often encounter it in my garden. I should say that my 'garden' is more like a small nature reserve, with three lawns and heather beds, surrounded by large conifers and an undergrowth of various shrubs and brambles. If ever I disturb the soil there or attempt to cut things back, almost at once a robin appears to inspect what is happening.

But there is also another aspect of their behaviour, especially in winter, that I find very interesting. The robin's appearance is often accompanied by a song. Not the boisterous or aggressive notes that it uses when defending or claiming its territory, but a gentle, relaxed, rendition with none of the short, sharp sounds of alarm that it is noted for.

It has been shown that robins can learn to feed from the hand. But could this ability have its roots in an interaction long ago between two animal species going about their daily lives and each gaining something from it – access to food for the robin and the sound and pleasure or beautiful bird-song for the human? To me, it seems that the bird is remembering a symbiotic relationship that robins have had with humans in the distant past and which we have long forgotten. I feel sure that John Clare would have agreed with me that a special relationship has existed.

Noel Crack.

SOODLING WITH JOHN CLARE

As we goo out vill, a crane makes a nest
on a chimley. Sturt, it takes off with a cranking cry.
Blood-walls glow between bricks and stones.
When we git to pond, it's still crizzled

on swaliest side. There are flags,
kingcup petals gleam like gold coins,
gelid frog spawn, newts. Damp margins
host light purple cuckoo flower peeps.

'Gis me progging stick.' he says.
Then as he pokes around for pooties,
a startlin frog jumps out, crawks,
soshes back in. In brook bank grass, he finds

a yellowhammer's nest, leaves alone
the, as if scribbled upon, eggs.
We shool down pads, pass by pilewort's
bright yellow stars, aconite's cups of gold,

jack-by-the-hedge's pungent odour.
In the sun's warmth, we joll with butterflies:
blues skip, whites dance, sulphury birmstones flit.
Whilom we rest on a stulp, in awthorn and blackthorn,

strunt-tailed wrens chitter, titmice twit, redcaps tink.
In eldern, piegons croo, crows crawk, starnels babble.
Younkers snudge and squirk in a pink's nest.
In meadows, red and black-spotted clock-a-clay

clamber over grass. Humble bees burr and float.
On hills o'ants, rampling pale yellow cowslaps
bloom and shed fur their sweet perfume.
A groundlark haply sits and pips on a mouldiwarp-hill.

.
Agen and agen, chaffinches carry moss;
awks whew; skylarks rise, swiver, trill.
Ater sun goos down, our soodling over, we warm
clumpsed hands gin a roozing fire in his cot.

Terry Sherwood

*Selected words are from the glossary in: John Clare: Major works;
Oxford World's Classics, 1984.*

(published in *The Cannon's Mouth* 88; June 2023)

THE JOHN CLARE SOCIETY

SALES ORDER FORM June 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.

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With thanks

*David
David Smith, Sales Officer*

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