



The John Clare & Society

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FROM THE CHAIR...

I am both honoured and excited to have been elected as the new Chair of our great Society; I am also particularly pleased that I will have the support of my Vice-Chair, Val Pedlar, who has long experience as Chair herself and as Editor of the Newsletter.

I am especially delighted to have been joined on the Committee by new members as well as welcoming back Revd. Gary Alderson who joins Anna Kinnaird to bring an essential local voice to the Committee. Three new members will also bring additional experience and scholarship that will help drive forward new initiatives. Jo Holliday, who is researching Clare and works as a lecturer, has taken over as our new Membership Secretary. There is John Stafford from Leicester, a regular visitor to the Festival and participant in the poetry readings in the church. At the last festival in July he cleverly linked together two Clare poems, 'Universal Epitaph' and 'Thoughts in a Churchyard', with the names of people, including Clare, buried in St Boltoph's churchyard. Finally, we welcome on board a young local poet, William Thompson. His poem, 'Clare Country', is reproduced below.

After last year's somewhat downbeat mood, the future is beginning to look more positive. A new JCS book, *Clare's People*, was launched at the festival and is selling well; and a new JCS scheme, the Ronald Blythe Fellowship and bursary award, was also launched to support Clare studies. We also have the new CEO of the John Clare Cottage, Keira Harvey, with imaginative ideas for the future which accord with my own in the sense of bringing our two organisations in even greater harmony in pursuit of our common goals of promoting the work and life of John Clare. In addition, there is also potential for collaboration with Northborough following the successful 'Patty' weekend in May. Finally, we are in the process of developing a new website which we hope will be in place by the end of the year.

I am also delighted to say that we are extending our collaboration with other disciplines, particularly labour history. The Society for the Study of Labour History (SSLH) recently posted an article on its website about *Clare's People* (<https://sslh.org.uk/2025/07/20/clares-people-poetry-from-below/>). Even more importantly it has invited our President, Professor John Goodridge, to give its annual lecture for 2026.

John Clare continues to be recognized for his influence on modern Irish poets, including Seamus Heaney, and details of *Clare's People* have been circulated across the Irish labour history community. That Clare is an international figure we already know from the existence of the John Clare Society of North America. But there are also translations of his writings in other countries such as Japan and France. When I was working in South America over many years, I would see selections of his poetry in places such as Buenos Aires, Argentina. After I presented Clare's selected poems to the founder of the English University in the

small country of Paraguay, he responded by saying that they read like the poetry of the indigenous Guarani people of the Amazon rain forests whose culture is deeply rooted in the land and nature. As Clare himself wrote (in 'A Vision') from the Northamptonshire Asylum in 1844:

In every language upon earth
On every shore, o'er every sea,
I gave my name immortal birth,
And kept my spirit with the free.

So let us rejoice that for over forty years countless people working through the Society have helped raise John Clare to his rightful place amongst the great English poets; and let each of us help to maintain that tradition in our different ways as we head into the future.

Mike Mecham

CLARE COUNTRY

It's true you got here first, that you were born
in a thatched house, that you burnt your calories
by working in the fields, that your mother's back
would've had welts from a seed bag slung
across her shoulder. That you sat under trees
to write: that you recorded folk songs on scraps
of parchment which curled like wood shavings.
That you found your way back to here on foot
from Essex, with just the stars, the sun
and roadside grass to help you on your way.

But I knew this ground before I knew of you.
I've inhaled air rising from the same flat land,
pulled pints in the same pub, woken up
at dawn to drag gas canisters through a farmyard.
Like you, I'm native here, and lay my claim
to see our skies as a big, blank open page,
to love the tractor-tyre chevrons on the road,
water under a bridge, song thrushes, that sound
as it they sing from your world into mine.

William Thompson

(from *After Clare*, New Walk Editions, 2022)

Farewell to Sue Holgate and Ann Marshall

It was my sad duty at the recent Festival to say farewell to two longstanding members of the Committee, Sue Holgate and Ann Marshall. They had been the bedrock of the Society, making a huge contribution to help steering our ship for more than twenty years.

Sue joined the Committee in 2003, where I first met her, becoming Secretary until 2008 when she stepped aside to become Membership Secretary and later added to that role as Festival Organizer – a vital role for all of us. She relinquished both roles in 2022 to become Chair until standing down in July. Sue

was always thoughtful, thorough and patient – characteristics she later brought to chairing an enthusiastic and at times effervescent Committee.

Ann joined the Committee in 1998 and remained on it, apart from a short break, until the 2025 Festival. Early on she became Publicity Officer, a role to which she fully committed herself. In 2022 she also became Vice-Chair and from 2023 through to 2025 she was Festival Organiser. Ann has been tireless in promoting John Clare and his work. Over the years we have become good friends. I well remember a long Clare walk we did together from Helpston one Saturday when we read aloud some of his poems at various points.

We will miss them both very much at Committee meetings but hope they will join us again at future Festivals. It seemed appropriate at the Festival to finish my thanks not just with gifts from all of us but with some lines from John Clare's great poem, 'The Flitting':

But times will change and friends must part
And nature still can make amends
Their memory lingers round the heart
Like life whose essence is its friends

Mike Mecham

MEMBERSHIP

As many of you will know, Valerie Pedlar has been the Membership Secretary in recent years. However, with her election to a new role on the Committee, I am now taking over the responsibilities of membership. Valerie's contribution has been phenomenal, and I am extremely grateful to her for the time she has spent with me, going through the different aspects of the role, and the key moments in the membership cycle. I am also relieved to take over such a well-organised administrative process – many thanks to you, Valerie, for both your membership endeavours and for helping me settle into my new role.

My own journey to the JCS Committee has developed over many years. I was first introduced to John Clare's poetry as an A Level student many years ago. Subsequently, my final year dissertation at university was centred on Clare's poetry, at a time when he was still such an unappreciated poet that I had a difficult task finding someone to supervise my work. My first career was in the corporate world in the City, but then, after living in Scandinavia for several years, and raising a family, I moved back to the UK and then into education. More recently, I lived in Canada for eleven years and taught at universities in Toronto while also working towards my PhD titled 'Ecospections'; in this, many of the ideas and themes are centred on Clare's work. Since then, I have taken every opportunity to introduce students to Clare's poetry and prose, particularly in my current role as a lecturer. I now look forward to my role on the committee and growing the membership, particularly among students and younger readers.

With a growing membership in mind, the JCS is very pleased to welcome the following new members:

Stephen Breame, Sonny Peart, Richard Leigh, Andy Hamilton, Jane Roberts,
Geoffrey Payne, Timothy Fox and Linda Burrows.

For current members, this is just a reminder that memberships are due for renewal.

Jo Holliday

THE PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS 2025: In Conversation with Ian Collins.

At this year's Clare Festival I was pleased to host Ian Collins, the eminent Suffolk author and biographer of the painter John Craxton – and now of Ronald Blythe, the first President of our Society. Ian was fluent and insightful, and my prepared questions often lagged behind him, though I was able to add some personal touches from my own memories of Ronnie Blythe.

Ian emphasised the hidden stories Ronnie had not talked about in their 35-year dialogue: the extreme poverty of his upbringing, and his failure as a conscripted soldier. Poverty and restricted formal education left him uninterested in getting and having (no car, no washing machine, and so on), and a huge gratitude to be able to live as a writer, something not in his inherited script. As for the army, what appears to have been 'some kind of breakdown' in the naturally pacifistic Gunner Blythe led him safely back to his new destiny as a writer by keeping him from the hell of the Far East in wartime, and gifting him the job as a reference librarian in Colchester, whence he was helped by Christine Nash and others into a writing career.

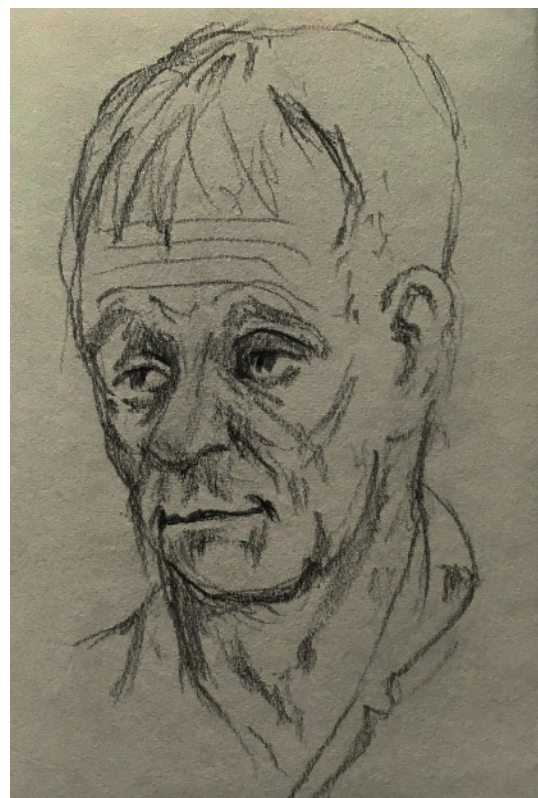
Ian's insights went beyond summarising the biography, intriguing as the facts are, to venture a philosophical view of Ronnie's life as a model for living. Ronnie's steely determination always put writing first, even at the expense of relationships – for his writing was itself based in love:

Ronnie thought the worst thing was to lose a book. But his whole outlook was about love, really. He was the great enthusiast, he had this great self-taught erudition. So it was all about love, but at a distance that was not going to stop him from being the person he wanted to be and needed to be, which was a writer.

Yet he remained the 'kindest, warmest, loving friend', and was 'quite happy' in his life. And his friendship with Patricia Highsmith, for instance, preserved in their letters, was transformative for both of them: he was as sociable quite as much as he was a 'Franciscan monk'. Despite his hardship, including importantly the fact that his sexuality as a gay man was criminally illegal until he was 45, he escaped the 'puritanical backdrop' of a small village community to develop an 'enviable balance of physicality, spirituality and intellectual prowess'.

As for Clare, he was for Ronnie a 'brother' and his greatest 'bond'. And though Ian and I differed slightly on questions of identity and Clare's later life, Ian did not hold back on the power of the connection:

He had a compete bonding with Clare, in a childhood of poverty and ecstasy, as I put it. The countryside was so beautiful, this scenery of hardship had some wild profusion that we can't imagine now, amazing numbers of birds and butterflies and woods and ponds and hedges, and it was a paradise. But a very hard



Sketch by Kelsey Thornton

paradise. And so Ronnie's eyes opened in the fields, like Clare's did. He didn't know about Clare too early – you all know the issues with Clare's work becoming known – but as soon as he knew about it, he loved it. And it became his greatest bond really.

A full transcript of our conversation will shortly be available on the John Clare Society website. I am grateful to Ian Collins, and the Festival organisers. My full review of Ian's biography and three other books on Ronald Blythe will appear in next year's *John Clare Journal*.

John Goodridge

CURRENTLY IN COMMITTEE

Hello everyone. and welcome to 'Currently in Committee'.

The article immediately following the John Clare Festival and the Annual General Meeting always feels a little strange, as many of the items discussed in Committee at our June Meeting are finalised as part of our AGM when we ask you, our Members, to approve proposals, and we provide updates on various initiatives. So, as last year, this will be an amalgamation of key topics discussed at our June meeting and items concluded or announced at the AGM.

Our June meeting was held in Peterborough, with an online meeting option for those who were unable to attend in person; and our Annual General Meeting (AGM) was held in Helpston on Saturday 12 July.

John Clare Festival 2025

This year's Festival was somewhat bittersweet, as we had the joy of launching our new book of poems, *Clare's People*, brilliantly edited by Mike Mecham, and illustrated by Petra Wonham and the late John Bangay. I'm very pleased to report that our first batch of printed books has completely sold out, and a further print run is in progress. We were also delighted to launch our bursary scheme initiative, which was the brainchild of Simon Kövesi, and has been developed in collaboration with Mike Mecham. This new scheme has been set up using the money from Ronald (Ronnie) Blythe's legacy to the Society, and will be known as 'The Ronald Blythe Fellowship' in his memory. We are very much looking forward to receiving applications from people wishing to take part in this new initiative. It was also a pleasure to formally welcome new members to the John Clare Society Committee (Jo Holliday, John Stafford, Gary Alderson and William Thompson), all of whom were voted in by a show of hands at the AGM.

However, there was also some sadness as two of our very well liked and valued colleagues formally stepped down from their roles: Sue Holgate (Chair) and Ann Marshall (Publicity Officer, Deputy Chair and Festival Organiser) will be very much missed (please see the article above by Mike Mecham for more information).

At the Festival, as well as the usual popular activities, such as the Midsummer Cushions, open gardens, bookstalls, Morris Dancers, Poetry Readings, evening concert, walks etc, there was a talk by Richard Astle of The Langdyke Trust and the Presidential Address by John Goodridge. The Presidential Address took the form of an 'In Conversation' with Ian Collins, the author of the recent Blythe biography, which was absolutely fascinating. I took away a quote (which I believe to be accurate) referring to Ronnie Blythe: '*he had few possessions, but wanted for nothing*' which has certainly given me cause for reflection on the importance often given to material possessions.

The theme for the children of John Clare Primary School poetry competition this year was 'School Days'. Once again the children did us proud with some really excellent

poems, which Gary displayed in the Church (which has new and much improved welfare facilities, which were most welcome).

As always, we are hugely grateful for everyone involved in the Festival – both 'front of house' and 'behind the scenes', Members and the people of Helpston – for making this important event happen.

An additional John Clare Society Committee meeting will be held to discuss the 2026 John Clare Festival, which Mike Mecham confirmed will go ahead. As many of you know, Ann Marshall has been pivotal in planning and managing the Festival over the last couple of years; and we must ensure that this success continues, albeit without Ann. The planning normally starts in November each year, so if anyone is interested in being involved in the planning of the Festival, or helping out on the day, please contact me in the first instance.

John Clare Cottage – new CEO

We were pleased to welcome a very important guest to our June meeting – the new CEO of the John Clare Cottage, Keira Harvey, who provided an update of the current situation and of the ambitions for the Cottage. The Cottage re-opened in May this year, and is currently open on Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday, which will be reviewed periodically to ensure sustainability. The long-term vision is to expand the appeal of John Clare, for which there are three areas of focus: Wellbeing/Mental Health, Nature and Environment, and Education, which will mean working with local schools and also at a national level. Keira is optimistic and excited for the future, and about working with the Society. Other plans for the Cottage include partnership with the John Clare Countryside project and others to increase visibility. Keira is also hoping to secure a car park, and expansion of local footpaths to provide an additional activity for groups. Keira recognizes the need to review the infrastructure of the Cottage in terms of general maintenance; for example, the thatched roof and consequent re-decoration, and quotes for this work have been received but more are needed. Applications for funding have been made to Pilgrim Trust and Historic England, and other avenues are also being explored. The total cost of essential maintenance is estimated at c£56k, which is unlikely to be met by funding alone, so consideration needs to be given for planning for current and future maintenance. An official survey of the Cottage and the dovecote to support applications for donations may be required. The Committee reinforced our commitment to supporting the Cottage, which was gratefully received.

Building Developments around John Clare Countryside

As a Society, we are occasionally asked to support petitions to Peterborough City Council, challenging development plans in Helpston and the surrounding John Clare Countryside; and such a request was brought to our June meeting. The Committee accepted that the objectives of the Society, as set out in its Constitution, precluded it from doing so. Individual members of the Society were, of course, free to do so after details received were passed on to them which was an action taken by our Membership Secretary.

Building mutually beneficial relationships

The 'Posies for Patty – Remembering Martha Clare' event which took place in the neighboring village of Northborough over the May Bank Holiday weekend was a huge success, with a number of our Committee Members taking part and supporting. The event will be repeated next year, and we look forward to another opportunity to collaborate with our neighbors to promote the life and work of John Clare. We will provide more information nearer the time.

Website Development

At the AGM, Dr Sam Ward, our Archivist, provided an update on the Society's website, which needed updating. Developing a new website will be achieved in two phases. Phase 1 will focus on standard content: membership renewal, sales, publicity for events etc. The second stage will include other features, such as critical sources to Clare, links to related organisations and so on. The new website will aim to make it easier for existing and new members to join, manage their membership, and to have access to a wide range of information relating to John Clare and the Society. Sam invited ideas from Members; so, if anyone has any thoughts for the new website Sam would love to talk to you, and his contact details can be found on the inside cover of this Newsletter.

Finally, on to our 'Introducing' section of the article. This time, it is my pleasure to introduce you to Simon Kövesi, who, with support from his colleague Erin Lafford, produces our annual *Journal*. We are truly privileged to be able to provide our members with a regular journal of the standard achieved by Simon and Erin. Simon is also responsible for the creation of our new Ronlad Blythe Fellowship scheme.

Introducing: Simon Kövesi

What drew you to John Clare and when?

I did the third year of my University of Glasgow undergraduate degree in English Literature and Language at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1993–94. It was an amazing year in many ways, but I did miss home. I attended this informal poetry writing group at the late Professor Robert Kirkpatrick's house. I wrote a terrifically bad poem about a south-east London fox, because I missed the stuff, mess and noise of my English home. SE London has more foxes than rats or pigeons, it sometimes seems; they're the real pearly kings and queens of suburbia. Kirkpatrick very graciously asked if I knew Clare's sonnet 'The Vixen', and read it to us in his slow, syrupy, precise, southern voice. I was hooked. When I returned to Glasgow, instead of revising properly for my finals, I sat in the library reading Clare, agog.



Why did you join the John Clare Society Committee?

John Goodridge's boundless enthusiasm, no doubt. It was in the late '90s sometime, when I was in the last phase of my PhD on Clare with John. And people like Mary and Peter Moyse, Rodney Lines, Peter Cox, Valerie Pedlar, Linda Curry and of course Ronnie Blythe, were all so warm, welcoming and kind. I started out helping John with the *Journal* a little bit, learning what was involved in editing, then I was Reviews Editor for a while, then Assistant Editor, and took over as Editor for my first issue in 2008. Of course, I've helped out with other bits and bobs in the society too, but mostly my focus has been the *Journal*.

What do you enjoy about being on the Committee?

At core, the common care for Clare. We all have different reasons for loving Clare and for being on the Committee, but a passionate commitment to the poet, his work and his world, unifies us. I've caused trouble for Committee members, Chairs and Presidents in the past, and deliberately so – I'm talking of course about the copyright dispute – but even those members with whom I squarely disagreed were (mostly) able to work constructively with me again, united over the common cause of the poet of course. For me, literature is as much about healthy argument and open debate as it is anything else; not everyone feels that way, I know that now. That I did not get kicked out, says a huge amount about the resilience of us as a community. We support each other, we get stuff done, we're efficient, we're welcoming and we're open to new ideas about what a literary society ought to be.

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

First and foremost I'm partner to Vanessa, and dad to our two big boys who continually amaze me. I've dragged them all to the Festival in the past. We're kind of based in Oxfordshire and Glasgow, which is a stretch, because three years ago I went back to where I started as a student to lead the team which taught me. As a working academic in Glasgow I don't give much time to do anything else, sad to say. The job kind of sucks you in, if you're not careful, but I do love it, perhaps more than is good for me. Right now I'm working on an edition of Pierce Egan's 1821 classic comic novel *Life in London* (which Clare knew), a collection of academic essays close reading literary texts across the nineteenth century, and I am taking the first tentative steps towards my own edition of Clare's poetry and prose. I do find time for the odd piña colada or two though, and occasionally will drag one of my boys along to watch West Ham lose. I love mucking about in our wee garden but am the worst gardener imaginable. I can cut the grass, just about.

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



John Clare's grave with the Midsummer Cusions display, July 2025

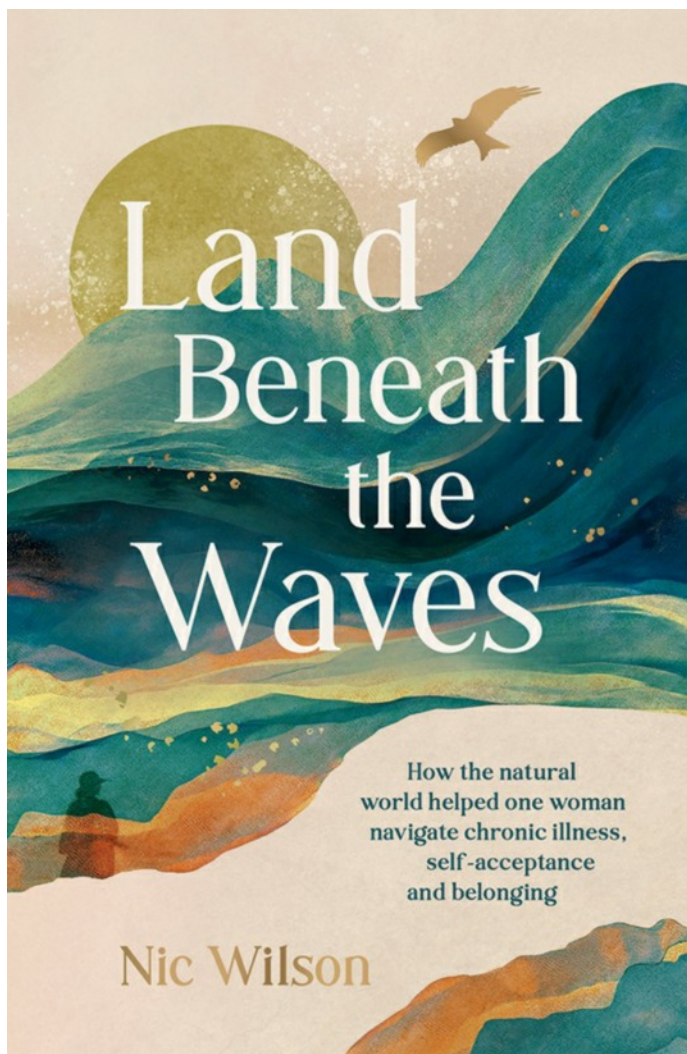
Gary Alderson

LAND BENEATH THE WAVES

There had always been rumours of links to John Clare in my family. My great-great-grandfather moved from Helpston to Manchester in the 1880s and I knew that Clare was my great-grandfather's favourite poet. But it wasn't until I came across Jonathan Bate's essay on Clare Cottage, a decade or so ago, that I realised my great-grandfather's father Henry Housden had been born in the cottage in 1820, within a few weeks of John Clare's first child, Anna Maria.

The more I learnt about Clare, the more similarities I saw between his interests and those of my family over the generations. It makes me wonder to what extent my love of nature, music and books, largely passed down on that side of my family, was originally nurtured in the same village environment. I've felt this connection to Clare's love of local nature particularly strongly while giving talks about my new book, *Land Beneath the Waves*, published by Summersdale (Hachette) in June.

Focusing on nature, place and chronic illness, my memoir begins with the story of my mum growing up with undiagnosed ME/CFS and the way she was repeatedly gaslit by the medical profession and society. I explore the effect this had on my



childhood and how my family found solace in the natural world. As an adult, coming to terms with my own chronic illness was a difficult task. Nearby nature provided me with a safe space to explore the effects of inter-generational trauma and make changes to my own mindset to avoid passing my issues on to my children.

I feel privileged to be able to write about the local landscape and its human and more-than-human inhabitants in my *Guardian* country diaries and *Land Beneath the Waves*. I hope my work, like Clare's, will help highlight the destruction of the nearby wild and raise awareness of its importance and fragility. Whether it's a fallen Helpston elm or Hitchin's famous nightingales, telling and retelling stories of local loss is vital. Without an awareness of what we've destroyed in the past, we're far less likely to make wise decisions that will create a better future.

Nic Wilson

Nic's nature memoir, Land Beneath the Waves, ISBN 978-1837996223, is available now online and from all good bookshops. You can read her Guardian country diaries at theguardian.com/profile/nic-wilson.

CAMBRIDGE JOHN CLARE STUDIES GROUP

The Clare Studies Group met online on 27 May, to listen to a talk by American writer and critic Julia Mueller. It's always good to meet in person, but the benefits of modern technology open meetings to a much wider audience and allow us to enjoy contributions from distant speakers.

Drawing from a chapter about birds' eggs in her forthcoming book *The Poetics of Birds*, Julia described the fascination, sometimes leading to an obsessive compulsion, to seek, take, collect and study these beautiful creations. It was a fascination that John Clare shared, but of course the taking of birds' eggs was made illegal in the UK under the Protection of Birds Act, 1954, and most of us never acquired the countryman's skill and guile of watching a bird to see where it was nesting. Nor, as good conservationists, would we let our curiosity overcome our desire to put the welfare of the bird first. But, for Clare, bird-nesting was a commonplace pastime and a subject for his poetry.

Julia suggested that birds and poets had much in common, building complex and intricate structures, creating and making beautiful and fragile objects, both subject to sudden predation or destruction.

It was a thought-provoking talk, ranging from a more detailed look at Clare's poems about the Wryneck and the Yellowhammer or writing lark, as Clare said it was sometimes called, to introducing the luminescent eggs of the Tinamou – a South-American bird that would have been unknown to Clare, but doubtless would have intrigued him, as it did Julia's audience.

Julia Mueller is a writer, critic and scholar living in rural West Virginia. She completed a PhD for the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago in 2021. Her dissertation, 'The Intelligence of Attention', is about the writing of attention to the natural world in natural history and lyric poetry.

Sylvia Sullivan

JOHN CLARE COUNTRYSIDE: Restoring John Clare's lost landscapes

For me, perhaps rather sadly, when I think about John Clare, I often think of grief and loss. I often read his wonderful descriptions of the wildlife and landscape around his (and my) home in Helpston and reflect on just how dramatically that landscape has changed in the last 200 years.

Gone are the vast heaths that would have stretched along the low ridge line between the Nene and Welland. We've lost the original Swaddywell Pit; it now lies under a line of pylons and tonnes of household waste. The Snow is an intensively farmed set of nature-denuded fields. Cowper's Green? I don't think we are even sure where that was. And while the names of the woodlands remain, the trees in them are young – the original ancient woodlands have all been felled.

You can no longer hear Nightjar as you tread wearily home. Wryneck don't hiss from their holes at unwanted onlookers. There are no Martens in the woods. And if some of Clare's beloved birds are still with us, they are in much reduced numbers. Lapwing are absolutely no longer as 'common as crows' around here. Indeed, if you look at the most recent State of Nature reports, it is hard to find many of Clare's natural subjects that are not in decline. Nightingales have declined by 90%; Turtle Dove by 95% and Brown Hare by 50%.

As many members of the Society will know, the Langdyke Countryside Trust was set up in 1999 by local people in a specific attempt to reverse some of these depressing trends. To take action, rather than lament hopelessly. The Trust

actively promotes the restoration of some of Clare's lost habitats and takes steps to help the natural subjects of his poems to prosper.

We began this work by acquiring small sites and managing them as nature reserves. In 2005 we acquired 35 acres of former quarry and household waste tip and started the long journey to restore Swaddywell Pit to some of its former glory. In 2009 we bought Torpel Manor Field (9 acres) and then started at work at Etton Maxey Pits (90 acres).

Our work has grown in ambition in recent years. We now have nine reserves and manage over 250 acres. That's a significant achievement. But on its own it won't overcome the tragic loss of biodiversity that characterises the John Clare Countryside (and indeed the UK as a whole). That can only be done if we take a full landscape scale approach to the area, engage with landowners and tenant farmers and restore the lost heaths, grasslands and wetlands at scale.

That's exactly what the John Clare Countryside partnership aims to do – and it is supported not only by local communities and nature conservation organisations, but also by the landowners, tenant farmers and local MPs and councillors. And it is vision is starting to take shape.

This is not a 'rewilding' project where the land is abandoned by farmers. It is about how we create a mosaic of restored habitats alongside sustainable and prosperous farming. John Clare's countryside was just that – it provided sustenance and livelihood for its residents alongside large areas of habitat for nature.

We want the John Clare Countryside to be rich in nature, and rich in the opportunities it offers people to enjoy nature. Rich in heritage and rich in inspiration, helping people to value and understand Clare and to value and respect the farmed environment and nature.

Clare was very dependent throughout his creative life on the support of the local aristocratic families of Milton Hall and Burghley House – the Fitzwilliams and the Cecils. At times, he worked for both. So, it is very fitting that those families are now at the forefront of these efforts, working alongside Natural England, the Wildlife Trusts, Nene Park and Langdyke to make that vision a reality. Milton, Burghley and Walcot Estates have developed plans for the restoration of thousands of acres of limestone grassland, wetland and woodland across the landscape between Stamford and Peterborough. They are now waiting for Government to assess those plans and, we hope, award funding through its Landscape Recovery programme to take them forward.

Such an ambitious project is incredibly exciting, but also very long-term. To maintain momentum while we wait to hear from Government about how these wider plans can become reality, the JCC Partnership is focusing on two key restoration projects to drive forward more quickly. These involve the restoration of Helpston Heath by bringing together Swaddywell Nature Reserve with two similarly sized blocks of land currently managed by the Environment Agency. This could create a much larger, much richer area of grassland, wildflower meadow and gorse heath across the top of Heath Road, with the potential to host populations of Nightingale, Cuckoo and limestone flowers.

The second project aims to rekindle the concept of Westings Meadow – a large area of wetland between Maxey, Helpston, Etton and Northborough that thrived in Medieval times and is described by Clare at the heart of the rural economy and was home to Snipe, Lapwing, Bittern and countless winter waterbirds. And again, this is a project already in process. Working with Milton Estate, Tarmac and the Environment Agency, Langdyke is managing large areas of former farmland now restored after gravel extraction and creating a large, inter-woven mosaic of open water, reed-bed, meadows and pastures. It will never be the pristine natural wetlands of Westing

Meadow, but it is already evolving as a space full of nature, and full of people, as they enjoy new footpaths and viewpoints.

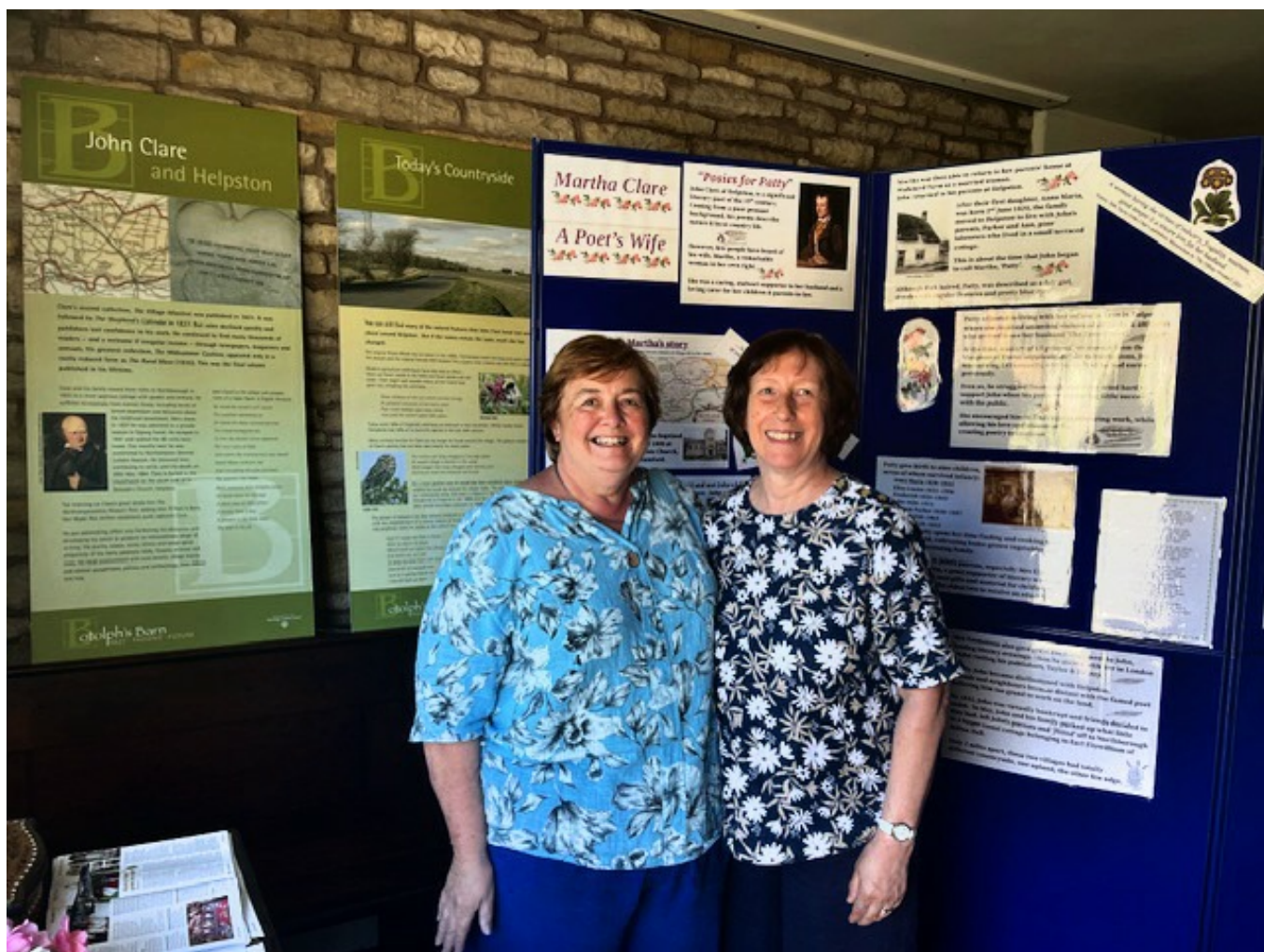
Already we are starting to see nature thrive. Lapwings breed successfully on the meadows. Bitterns boom from the reedbeds. Bats fly over the restored gravel pits, and clouds of butterflies dance across the newly created wildflower meadows. Nature is returning.

And we know that we can do more. We have the vision, we have the right partners; together we are starting that long journey of nature recovery that is of course good for wildlife but also so very good for people. Just imagine what the John Clare Countryside will look like if we can replicate these successes over thousands of acres, not hundreds?

Perhaps then my perceptions of Clare will change – we mustn't forget the loss, but we can dare to hope too.

This is an abbreviated version of a talk given during the Festival, 12 July 2025

Richard Astle



The 'Posies for Patty' display from the Northborough celebration in May this year was featured in Annakin's Gallery during the John Clare Festival. The presenters are (left) Teresa Scott, from 'SOS' (Save our St Andrew's Church) Northborough, and (right) Gail Richardson, of Peterborough Libraries and Archives. Both thoroughly enjoyed every moment, and had a happy, memorable, day.

David Smith

UPDATE FROM CLARE COTTAGE

Dear Friends,

It has been a lively and encouraging few months at Clare Cottage as we continue to build our offer in line with Clare's enduring themes of wellbeing, the arts, and nature.

We are now open four days a week, Wednesday to Saturday, and have already seen a substantial increase in visitor numbers – particularly in relation to our museum offer. This has been supported by our much-enlarged volunteer crew of around 30 people, who give their time in the café, gardens, and with essential maintenance on site. Their day-to-day work is supported by our site leads, paid members of staff who not only oversee the practicalities on site but also take responsibility for specific areas such as museum development or managing the café. Together, this blend of staff and volunteers has brought renewed energy and capacity to the Cottage.

In addition, we have extended the range of activities at the Cottage. Workshops, retreats and talks are now a regular part of the programme, each one drawing inspiration from Clare's deep connection with people, poetry, and place. We have hosted a number of successful private hire events, including a 60th birthday celebration and several baby showers – further demonstrating the Cottage's place as a warm and welcoming venue for our community.

We have also begun the important task of updating our museum catalogue and archive, with a view to achieving full museum accreditation. This is an opportunity not only to strengthen our collection but also to reconsider the narrative we tell about Clare, ensuring we can engage a 21st-century audience with his relevance today. If you have items or stories of interest – particularly relating to the resurgence of Clare's reputation since the Society's founding – we would be delighted to hear from you.

Our next challenge is securing substantial funds for maintenance work to re-thatch the Cottage and to create a site set-up that is practical, environmentally conscious, and cost-effective for the future.

Looking further to the future, we are beginning conversations with the Helpston Village Hall committee, who have recently secured land in close proximity to the Cottage. This may provide opportunities to work together on car parking and potentially create multi-use spaces that could be drawn upon in our educational activities. In addition, we are exploring partnerships with local wildlife groups and landowners, including Langdyke and Milton, to improve access to the landscape around the Cottage and to make engagement with this part of our standard visitor offer.

There are many ways you can support our work:

Follow and share our social media channels to help spread the word.

Visit the Cottage and bring friends along.

Consider loaning or donating items to enrich our museum collection.

Donate to our Thatch Appeal, which will help us safeguard the fabric of the Cottage for future generations.

Finally, I would like to offer heartfelt thanks to Ann, Sue, and Mike M. for their warm welcome and encouragement to take part in the Festival offer. In what is both an exciting and challenging role, I greatly appreciate this spirit of generosity. And thank you to David for keeping us stocked with Clare titles – books which so many of our visitors are inspired to take home.

With warm regards,

Keira Harvey
John Clare Cottage

CLARE'S DEPTH

At the latest John Clare Festival, I picked up some copies of the book I did with John Goodridge, *John Clare, Trespasser*, which has just been reprinted. It's a book I'm still proud of, but, on reading it again, I felt that it didn't say clearly enough what I feel to be one of its important points, which is that the strength of Clare's poetry is that his observations are always enlivened by some metaphoric meaning behind them. He is not a versifier of bird books, nor some naive nature writer. Even a simple action like climbing a wall is full of symbolic implications. It is this perception of what Wordsworth would call 'something far more deeply interfused' that makes his poems at their best so powerful. His poems have a strength beyond the literal, so that it seems almost like what Yeats said in 'John Kinsella's Lament for Mrs Mary Moore': 'being old, she put a skin on everything she said'.

By some form of serendipity I was also clearing up an old copy of the *John Clare Society Newsletter* (no.129, February 2017), and in that I came across a note by Noel Crack which related to the same point. So I thought it worth writing a note to point that out.

Noel Crack's note was to alert readers to a book of 1851, *Pictures of Life in England and America*, by an American called Dean Dudley, and Noel quoted the whole of the entry on Clare, whom Dudley had visited at the Northampton General Lunatic Asylum in 1850. What caught my attention was Dudley's comment that Clare's 'insanity consists in believing his fancying to be realities and what he reads to be his own experience'. This formulation, made many years before Clare's death, seems to me to locate something of the depth of Clare's poetry, as well as to indicate what it was that connected the poetry to Clare's madness. It is of course impossible to sum up Clare's madness in such a simple way – there were many possible contributory causes, and to many of us he seems among the sanest of men – but his doctors and friends at the time felt that he was sufficiently delusionary to merit the long stay in the Asylum.

Another set of comments that this brought to mind is in Tim Chilcott's brilliant book on Clare, *A Real World & Doubting Mind*, whose title summarises the relationship of two of the elements in Clare's work. On p.178 he offers this summary of the change from Clare's first poems and *Child Harold* by suggesting variations on a simple sentence:

These trees are on this bank.

I see the trees that are on this bank.

I seem to see these trees and banks.

It seems that there are shapes like trees and banks.

My mind is seeming forms like trees and banks.

As Tim Chilcott emphasizes, this is crude and far too schematic, but it does clarify the way that Clare's perceptions developed. So all I really wished to say is that it seems to me that Clare's poetry is not merely a versified set of nature observations, but a perception of the world which sees things as both real and metaphoric. This is both his power and his problem. It intensifies the strengths of his poetry, but it also helped to get him into the Asylum since, as Dean Dudley expressed it, 'his insanity consists in believing his fancying to be realities'.

Kelsey Thornton

JOHN CLARE SCHOOL POETRY COMPETITION 2025

Once again it is our pleasure to print the winning entries from the John Clare School poetry competition. Here we can only print the words; the colourful and decorative entries from the whole school were on display in the church during our Festival and AGM.

BUTTERCROSS

The Buttercross entries were a collective effort, using the text printed here. Entries were judged on their colour and decoration. Unfortunately we are unable to reproduce them in this Newsletter, but the three winners were:

1. Daisy
2. Grace
3. Percy.

ALL ABOUT SCHOOL

I got up and went to school today,
And with my friends I had a play.
My teacher helped me to learn
How to be kind and take turns

I like my school and hope I stay,
So I can play with my friends all day.
Learning at school is so much fun,
My heart is happy, like the sun!

WOODGATE

MY SCHOOL

Every year in May
I really, really, like to play
All is fun because I get to colour and paint.
In PE I like to run
Because it is so much fun.
It is fun in the dazzling days.
Sadly the sky can be grey
Sometimes.

Kester Wright (Woodgate 1)

John Clare School is the best
In the hall, dinners galore!
Packed lunch and hot dinners,
But some kids just munch on chicken nuggets.
In the mobile, Year 6 learn.
At my school I want to stay.
Football is so cool!

Rory Andrews (Woodgate 2)

I go to John Clare School
But my school is really small.
And cool.
At my school we read our books,
We count to ten,
Then paint bright rainbows with our pen.

Louis (Woodgate 3)

BROADWHEEL

SCHOOL DAYS

I wake up with a yawn on my face, while I eat my
breakfast sleepily. Then I jump into my uniform,
brush my teeth and put my hair in a slick back.
Then I set off to school with a smile on my
face. After English it's break, Maths, then
lunch. First we play on the swings.

Ding, ding, ding! Lunch is over; it's time for Assembly. Yay!
Mr Weston's doing PE and we're playing netball.
It's almost done - one more lesson to go.
Shelly, our class mascot, is getting ready
to sit with someone new. It could be you!
Quick, tidy table. I hope my table gets it!
Now it's home to go gymnastics.
In the car I think about the next day.

Sophia (Broadwheel 1)

ACROSTIC

Super kind friends
Cool interesting books
Happy and jolly
Outdoors with cool adventures
On the right track with learning
Love and kindness spread around.

Daisies and dandelions - loads of beautiful flowers
Awesome teachers
Yellow sunny days
Surprising summer.

Arthur (Broadwheel 2)

A SPECIAL SUMMER MORNING

I woke up on a special summer morning
And jumped out of bed.
I sprinted downstairs at the fastest of speed
and got all the things that I really did need.
I hopped on my bike and sped off to school.
Now all I needed was a bit of hope
For my poem
That I'd been working so hard on
Just to win
Or come third, second, or even
A win!
At school in the morning
We had lots of fun.
Then we went down to the church
to see who had
Won!

Charlotte (Broadwheel 3)

SWADDYWELL

MY FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL

What if
my headteacher looks like a bear?

What if
they don't like me because of my hair?

What if
they don't accept me but instead they reject?

What if
it's all because of my project?

What if
I'm not as fast as them running round the bend?

What if
they don't call me their friend?

Ethan Tucker (Swaddywell 1)

WHEN I ARRIVED AT SCHOOL

When I arrived at school today
I found my friends, so we could play.
Our teacher greeted us at the door.
We found our seats and learnt some more.

When I arrived at school today
The sun went in and the clouds turned grey.
My mind was filled with great dismay
When I remembered the test we had today.

When I arrived at school today
I remembered my jumper was on the wrong way.
I tied my laces at the gate.
Today was super-duper great!

Margot Smith (Swaddywell 2)

MY FIRST DAY AT SCHOOL

A brand new
bottle, a brand new friend,
a brand new ruler not to bend.

A brand new
pencil, a brand new bag,
a brand new game called tag.

A brand new
teacher, a brand new class,
A brand new field with lots of grass.

A brand new
pen, a brand new book,
a brand new friend called Brooke!

A brand new
rubber, a brand new pencil case,
a brand new book to learn about space.

Florence Hudson (Swaddywell 3)

TORPEL

SCHOOL DAYS

On the morning of a school day
I leap straight out of bed.
It's going to be a good day,
No matter what learning fills my head.

Walking through the gate,
The day has just begun!
Thankfully, I'm not late
But I am ready to have lots of fun.

Each day I work at my best,
Whether I'm playing outside
Or doing a reading test
Which the answers to the questions I cannot decide.

Finally, it's lunchtime!
I am SO hungry.
My friends and I make up a rhyme
While to the line we all hurry.

At last, our teacher says, 'Time to go home!'
Which (let's be honest) is something we all want to hear.
Towards my house I begin to roam.
I've had a great day, near the end of this year.

Matilda Breslin (Torpel 1)

I wake up in the morning and I jump right out of bed.
I get dressed in my uniform of grey, white and red.
I brush my hair, nice and neat,
And brace myself for summer heat.

I walk to school and greet my friends.
At break we talk about the latest trends.
Maths, English, lots of singing –
The morning at school is just beginning.

Yay! It's lunchtime. I am hungry. Surely no one can be grumpy.
Oh dear, the custard looks a bit lumpy.
Outside, what can I hear?
The sound of laughter brings no fear.

History, Geography, loads of lessons,
All our teachers have different professions.
Three-thirty! The end of the day.
Come to an end, my day of play.

On the way home, I feel quite sad,
Thinking about how much fun we've had,
Planning for tomorrow, what to expect,
What experiences will I collect?

Elsie Thompson (Torpel 2)

Each day, I work hard.
Each day, I feel jarred.
But because I have friends
It always mends me when I feel sad;
That's why I'm glad about having friends.

Each day, I learn.
Each day, I earn
Housepoints for my team,
Which makes me really gleam.

Each day, I play.
Each term, we make clay.
Each year, I have fun.
And that is my poem done!

Sebastien (Torpel 3)

THE JOHN CLARE SOCIETY

SALES ORDER FORM Sum/Aut 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 as required) 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.	£6.00	Free postage
B20023	<i>a JCS book:</i> John Clare: New Approaches rrp £7.95 ed. J Goodridge & S Kövesi ppr (essays on Clare)	£6.50	400g
B20031 *NEW*	*NEW* <i>a JCS book</i> Clare's People: Poems and Prose. ed: Mike Mecham <i>publ. July 12, 2025</i> illus Petra Wonham & John Bangay. Ppr rrp £12.00	£12.00	Free postage
B20128	Love's Cold Returning: Hall & Somekh ppr rrp £22.00 Detailed research into Clare's traipsing home from High Beach asylum	£22.00	Free postage
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	200
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	200
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	£6.00	500g
B20133 **NEW*	The Poet's Wife By Judith Allnatt rrp £10.99 Re-published in Paperback by WRP	£10.00	330g
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
B20034	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	300g
B20134	A Writer's day-Book by Ronald Blythe. Rrp £10.99	£9.00	Post free
B20122	Torpel Manor: The Biography of a Landscape by F Gosling, SP Ashby & A McClain. ppr	£12.50	Post free
B20032 A John Clare Flora (M M Mahood) rrp £15.00. ppr **Back in Stock! With colour-section	£14.00	368g

JOHN CLARE SOCIETY JOURNALS

1982-2019 Journals: As available (some no-stock years). Please enquire for years wanted		
B20125:	Journals, 2020 - 24 (all available)	£2.50 each UK:Post £2.00
Journal Index (1982-2011)		£2.00 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	£5.00	Free postage

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			
M20064	CD: 1989 Memorial Service of the unveiling of John Clare Plaque in Westminster Abbey (re-issue from cassette)	£6.00	140g

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2025

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751-1000g	£5.80	£9.55	£15*
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Greater than 1251g	£9.00	£13*	£22*

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<i>Or enclose a cheque (sterling) payable to The John Clare Society for £</i>			
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ADDRESS:			
POST CODE			
In case of problem or query, please add mobile/ phone number			
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