

## 150 NEWSLETTERS: A RETROSPECTIVE

*As the founder members of the Society we are grateful and privileged to have the opportunity of sending you this newsletter, which, we hope, will give you some idea of the progress that has been made since we published our appeal nine months ago.*

Thus began the first *John Clare Society Newsletter*, dated December 1981: four typed A4 pages, the last of which consists of a complete list of the '198 paid up members' the Society had already proudly signed up following the aforesaid 'appeal'. And when the newsletter passed its 150th number this Spring, 2024, 43 years later, it seemed a good moment to look back through the years, talk to our five surviving editors, and consider what the newsletter has achieved, and how it has changed and developed.

That first newsletter appeared just two months after the Society itself was founded, arising out of a popular WEA (Workers' Educational Association) course on Clare, tutored by the poet Edward Storey in Castor, near Helpston. The first number was co-authored by founder-members Brian Blade (Chairman), George Dixon (Treasurer) and Edward himself (who also edited the first two volumes of the *John Clare Society Journal*). The Society's first Secretary, Pete Shaw, edited the second newsletter, and Edward Storey took on numbers 3–5, finding, as former editor Rodney Lines puts it, a 'fluid, friendly, chatty tone which set the style for many future editions'. This was important: to find a style that could connect with members, who might range from casual to devoted enthusiasts, and could be nature lovers, literary scholars, local or worldwide readers, perhaps new to poetry. Each subsequent editor has managed to achieve this aim, although their styles have varied.

Edward Storey was preparing his 1983 biography Clare, *A Right to Song*, at this time, so after three newsletters he passed the editing on to Rodney, which he was 'delighted to do'. He recalls: 'I took over at number 6 and went on until my last, 24' (May 1989):

*In those early days of a young society there was an air of excitement that Clare had at last begun to receive the attention that he deserved, and I was inundated with letters, articles, messages from journalists, academics and many new members announcing forthcoming concerts, WEA classes, BBC broadcasts, newspaper reports, both local and national, works by artists and actors, people's reminiscences of childhood in Helpston and so on. There was more than enough material for many editions to come, which was produced on an old portable typewriter on A4 paper and run off on an ancient Gestetner duplicator and stapled together with a green cover depicting Clare, designed and drawn by my wife, Pauline.*

Rodney developed a nicely engaging style, offering a rich, varied diet of news, opinions, and information of different kinds. Among the articles that appeared during his editorship were several intriguing first-hand recollections, such as Alice Essex's memoir of 1918, 'My Clare Summer' (no. 6, Nov. 1983), or Philip Huniken-Lepper's 'Memories of St Andrew's Hospital', where he was a choirboy in 1920 (no. 7, April 1984). Poems inspired by Clare began to be included, such as Neil Curry's 'John Clare and the Acts of Enclosure' (no. 16, May 1987) or 'A Free Soul's Asylum Dream' by RC Beeching (no. 15, Feb. 1987), reflecting Clare's ability to spark new creative work.

In 1989 Rodney became Vice-Chairman of the Society, and he was succeeded by Noël Staples, who brought his own unique style to the newsletter. Noël's stint on

the newsletter (Sept. 1989–Dec 1990, nos. 25–34) ran to ten numbers and covered some key technological changes, from a typewriter to an early word processor. As he says, these changes 'showed'. The first computer he used was very limited, but its 'ponderous "chink chink" sound' is 'engraved forever' on his mind, while the printer 'sounded like a miniature sawmill'. He remembers the printer paper, which then came in one long perforated sheet. Noël was a social worker and was allowed to use the Social Services franking machine, reimbursed by our treasurer, saving him 'one tedious job'.

As for the content, important things happened in those two years, one event in particular that was written up in the newsletter. Noel remembers it well:

*Re-reading those ten early editions has been fascinating – the initial edition recording the installation of Clare's plaque in Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey. I arranged the digital recording of the service by my late friend John Roberts, a retired BBC sound engineer. It's John's mellifluous voice you can hear narrating. Despite last minute changes it all worked beautifully.*

That recording is still in circulation, and indeed Ronald Blythe, our late founding President, chose a key moment from it, Ted Hughes reading 'The Nightingales Nest', as one of his eight 'Desert Island Discs' when he was invited on the show in 2001.

On the process of looking back, Noël concluded that it was a 'fascinating trip down memory lane after 30 years, remaking many connections! No Internet! No emails! Such a different IT world then! I moved on to edit our quarterly Quaker A5 booklet newsletter – like the current Clare Newsletter'.



Three editors (Rodney, Noël and Peter) - three piles of newsletters, in the old A4 format  
(**photograph: Noël Staples**)

The newsletter was next put into the capable hands of Dr Peter Cox, who edited nos. 35–95 (March 1992–March 2007). This was a very substantial tranche indeed, one that took us past the millennium, and saw the completion of the great Oxford Clare editing project. Peter, the longest-serving editor to date, remembers how the early newsletters had 'eight pages, A4 size' and a cover sheet which 'showed a young Clare outside his cottage, and the threshing barn and church spire'. From

June 1993 there was 'a new cover design by John Lincoln, of an older Clare looking at a rural view with the river bridge and distant spire'. And in June 1999, the format was reduced in size from A4 to the 'digest' size of A5, much easier to hold and read, and much expanded in length from the earlier newsletters. Carry Akroyd's design was used for the front cover from the second of these compact numbers, and proved to be an image so attractive and appropriate for a miscellaneous Clare newsletter that it remains on the cover to the present day.

While the early newsletters began in the style of a personal letter ('Dear Member...'), as the membership increased it changed a little. Peter Cox favoured poetry as a way to lead into the main matter, and 'nearly always my newsletters began with a few lines of Clare's verse, with comment on them'. There were many contributions from members on subjects around Clare's life and poetry now, feeding into what Peter calls a 'companionable publication, linking the large and varied company of Clare-lovers to each other'.

## *The John Clare Society*

### *Newsletter No. 95 – March 2007*

Dear Member

March month of "many weathers" wildly comes  
 In hail and snow and rain and threatening hums  
 And floods: while often at his cottage door  
 The shepherd stands to hear the distant roar  
 Loosed from the rushing mills and river locks 5  
 With thundering sound and over powering shocks  
 And headlong hurry through the meadow brigs  
 Brushing the leaning willows fingering twigs  
 In feathering foam and eddy hurrying chase  
 Rolling a storm o'ertaken traveller's pace 10  
 From bank to bank along the meadow leas  
 Spreading and shining like to little seas  
 While in the pale sunlight a watery brood  
 Of swooping white birds flock about the flood  
 Yet winter seems half weary...

*Shepherd's Calendar, March, 11.1-15*

Tim Chilcott's parallel text edition of *The Shepherd's Calendar* (reviewed on page 8) enables us to see very easily how John Taylor edited Clare's manuscript. Studying the texts side by side is fascinating. At first Taylor regularises spellings but makes no other changes except to put in 8 commas and 2 hyphens, in cottage-door and river-locks. The commas do not really improve clarity but do impede the sense of rushing water which Clare is describing. Modern readers would not expect or require the hyphens. In its context "threatening hums" seems to me unexpected, an original choice of words, presumably explained by lines 4 and 5, the rising waters coming closer and getting louder.

Perhaps the highlight of Peter Cox's time as editor was the bicentenary year of 1993 and the busy preparations leading up to it. There was a lot going on, as Peter remembers. In 1993 there were 'talks and events everywhere', and membership of the Society was 'rocketing'. As yet we had no online or email resources, but the newsletter gave long lists of events in every number. (I can remember updating these with the late Mary Moyse, our then Secretary.) Peter also recalls the spirited, if ultimately unsuccessful, campaigns to get Tom Bates's statue of Clare placed into appropriate civic arenas (fortunately, some of his work may now be seen, for instance in St Andrew's Church, Northampton, and the John Clare Lecture Theatre at Nottingham Trent's Clifton Campus).

*Poetry for the people: from Peter Cox's final newsletter, no. 95*

Dr Valerie Pedlar took over from Peter in 2007, editing the newsletter for nine years (June 2007–June 2016, nos. 96–127) until she was elected Chair of the Society in 2016. As with Noël Staples, her editorship saw important technological changes:

*I felt it was necessary to move from paper-based production into the digital world and instead of physical cut-and-paste to its electronic equivalent; in effect to reduce the work of the printer since I could send print-ready copy. Thus I was able to produce an e-newsletter for those members who were happy to receive it this way.*

Our newsletter had developed into a well-ordered and handsome publication, whether delivered on paper or in electronic form, and Val now needed to meet the challenge of finding suitable illustrations to add to the text. Continuity proved an advantage when Peter Cox, her predecessor, 'introduced me to a wonderful book of Bewick prints, many of which marry beautifully with Clare's work'. Val found that the other enjoyable aspect of editing lay in getting to know the contributors, for although 'we always encourage new people to submit pieces for publication, there have been certain regulars, and communicating with them and reading their work has been a great pleasure'.

Supporting this interest in the personalities of her readers and writers, Val introduced a series of sketches of 'distinguished Clareans', beginning with Ronald Blythe, in her first newsletter, some of these sketches illustrated by Vice-President Kelsey Thornton's attractive line portraits. A greater range of music and films, art, events and performances, as well as books were more fully reviewed now by a range of contributors. Among the more adventurous contributions printed during Val's time as editor was Tom Ryder's piece, 'Was Jimi Inspired by Johnny?' (no. 97, Sept, 2007) – on whether Clare's love of Mary Joyce may have fed into the great guitarist's song, 'The Wind Cries Mary' (1967).

Finally, Dr Stephen Sullivan took over from Val in June 2016 (no. 127), and has now taken us past the 150 mark – with the help of his doughty proof-reader, Dr Sam Ward. Stephen warmly remembers the kindness and hospitality of the Society's President, the artist Carry Akroyd, when he was getting started, which including the gift of a sheaf of drawings for his use. Like Val Pedlar before him, he realised he had to find a good way to illustrate the newsletter, and he found it through the thoughtfulness and sense of continuity in the Society's officers.

Leafing through these well-produced and attractive recent newsletters, as the Society itself moves deeper into its forties, I noticed at once a number of sad but celebratory obituaries to key founding members – those who set the Society in motion, such as Edward Storey and Ronald Blythe. At the other end of the scale, so to speak, we now print in full the children's poems that have won awards and commendations in the John Clare School annual poetry prize competition, which the Society sponsors. One-name societies tend to be over-stocked with older folk like myself, so it's lovely to see youngsters drawn towards Clare and poetry in this way. Besides the children's poems, there are always exciting 'before and after' accounts of the annual Clare Festival, in the June and September numbers, along with a regular diet of stimulating short essays and contributions by members and friends.

In the age of blogs and Tiktok, with a number of social media channels dedicated to Clare, the newsletter remains an important resource for all those who love the poet. We now have a number of sister organisations: the John Clare Society of North America (with its own annual newsletter and regular sessions at the MLA convention), the Langdyke Trust that cares for Clare country and the John Clare Trust that cares for his cottage, as well as the now well-established Centre for John Clare Studies at the University of Cambridge, with its programme of seminars and welcoming events. The newsletter enables information on all these and other activities around Clare to reach our members and, one hopes, to stimulate greater participation in events. So may it long continue to thrive. Perhaps the next stage –



following the technological advances Noël and Val describe – will be to digitise the first hundred numbers, filled as they are with much material of continuing interest to Clareans, and put them online for all to see (as we have done with our *Journal*).

**John Goodridge**

*Some recent newsletters, with the cover design by Carry Akroyd. Note the different design for 2020.*

Published in the John Clare Society *Newsletter* No. 151, June 2024, pages 10-14