



THE  
JOHN CLARE SOCIETY  
*Newsletter*

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## THE JOHN CLARE SOCIETY

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## Editorial

As usual, this autumn issue covers the John Clare Festival including an article by Mike Mecham that summarises the talks given by Ronnie Blythe and Carry Akroyd, and shorter pieces by Linda Curry and myself. On behalf of the committee and the membership I take this opportunity of offering grateful thanks to Ron Ingamells and his team for organizing yet another wonderful festival.

Ron stands down now as festival co-ordinator and has asked me to include the following note:

A word of thanks to all who have supported and helped with the festival during the last few years since I agreed to be the Co-ordinator. The Festival Committee has been a truly lovely group with which to work. We have had many laughs which is always the sign of a good committee! Best wishes to Ian [Ian Jebbett, whose details are on the inside back cover] as he takes over!

There have been several changes of committee membership, and these are outlined by Linda on p.21.

As always, I am most grateful to all those who have contributed to this issue. Please let me have articles, news items, photographs – anything you feel like submitting for the February issue – by 4 January.

Valerie Pedlar

## Clare's Birthday

On Friday 13 July the John Clare Primary School held its annual Midsummer Cushions ceremony – in St Botolph's church rather than by the poet's grave, because of the rain. The prize-winning poems in the Society's Poetry Competition for the school were:

KS1 prize Isabel Lawson  
Commended Marie Sieker

KS2 prize Hollie Hebditch  
Commended Maya Double

Here are the poems.

### Red Kite

Red Kite in the sky  
Ending its prey time  
Dinner time for Red Kite

Kidnapped a mouse and a rabbit  
In the nest eating time  
Tearing dinner to bits of crumb  
Ending time for Red Kite

Isabel Lawson (7yrs)

### Robin

He feels soft  
He's orange, black and white  
He can fly very fast  
He makes music with his beak

Marie Sieker (5 yrs)



*Red-breast*, Thomas Bewick.

## Robins

The adult robins are starting to rise,  
Hearing their chicks and their cries.

They wake their babies up, very early,  
Their soft brown feathers are curly.  
Their nest is made from leaves, grass or moss –  
Daddy robin is the big bad boss.

They fly out of the hole, looking for prey  
They could be out hunting all day.

They chirp and screech happily,  
They look around excitedly.

Berries and caterpillars all around,  
The robin must not make a sound.

The female swoops and pecks at the berries,  
The male drops down and steals the cherries.

Hollie Hebditch (9yrs)

## Midnight Barn Owl

Silent creature  
sunset screecher  
white tummy  
worms are yummy  
super flyer  
never tire  
heart ruffed  
owlets fluffed  
talons sharper  
night gets darker  
beautiful beautiful  
barn owl

Maya Double (8 yrs)

## 2012 Festival: Reflections on Clare

The annual John Clare festival has always been something to cherish. It offers surprise, reassurance and community; the community of Clare both in Helpston and among others who rejoice in his work. A highlight, therefore, has always been our President, Ronnie Blythe's, annual address providing us with continuity, insight and reflection. 2012 was not only his 31<sup>st</sup> address but it was also delivered in his own 90<sup>th</sup> year. Both he, and the afternoon speaker Carry Akroyd, gave us personal reflections on John Clare through two of his best-loved subjects, flowers and birds.



Linda Curry presents Ronnie with a birthday present.  
Photograph by Caroline Morgan.

Ronnie Blythe's theme was 'John Clare and the Commonwealth of Flowers'; a world lacking in the hierarchies that were crushing Clare in the human world; a world that later would largely be an imagined one as he lamented 'I am in this damned madhouse [Northampton] and I can't get out'. While he was later to write from the same place that he was still 'fond' of flowers, Ronnie reflected that it was more than just fondness but was both intimate and profound, going beyond his own expertise in botany. Clare made little division between wild and cultivated plants. His approach to wild flowers was both botanical and something Ronnie called 'other', his humanity and his own theology. It reflected something that in social terms would be called his 'condition', his place in society, something low yet high in his God's mind. Flowers might carry variety in botany but not rank. We

may give particular flowers additional purity but in reality one was no purer than another. Ronnie commended Simon Kövesi's 'John Clare Flower Poems' as 'putting the reader straight into Clare's flower-bound universe'.<sup>1</sup>

Ronnie also told us that in Australia early English immigrants had brought with them their native wild flowers which had helped to heal exile and bring some comfort. Clare's own exile in Northampton brought little comfort, however, even though Helpston flowers were just a few miles away. While he made an inventory of them in his head they were greatly distant from his feet. But he continued to write compulsively about flowers in and out of his imprisonment and drew emotional and philosophical recognition from them, particularly the lowest. He had joined in a 'conspiracy of common plants' that could be found in places such as rubbish heaps, woods and dykes. As an example Ronnie read Clare's poem, 'The Ragwort', a plant known by farmers as 'horse poison'. In many ways Clare's Helpston and ours are at one as some of what he described can today be seen around the village cottages. But the universe of Clare's flowers also began to be destroyed by crop spraying and later the lawnmower.

Clare used the word 'hunt' when he went looking for flowers. Despite lacking the botanist's equipment he simply possessed the drive of a lover and an instinct that put him on the same level as the plants and flowers that he went looking for. This gave him solace in his captivity and he would often see his own self in the mean and lowly flower, a reversal in which the plant bred the man. Like many country people he saw significance in visiting flowers and a hurt to them in the absence of such visits. He worried in his captivity about his unvisited flowers as much as his unseen Helpston family. In many rural villages too there were local floral customs. In Helpston it was the midsummer cushion which children had placed in his Poet's Corner spot. To end, Ronnie read Clare's beautiful 'The Evening Primrose'. Later, Carry Akroyd offered her own reflections on John Clare and his blighted landscape through his poems, which she both read and sung, and her own art. We were fortunate that instead of slides she chose to present actual examples of her work such as the screenprint 'Bend in the River' and 'Flood at Morton's Lean'. Her theme was 'Birds with Everything in John Clare'. She noted that birds appear in, or are a subject of, a large part of Clare's work. He was a defender of birds and often used them to moralise, as in 'Summer Evening'. As the poem 'Kingfishers' showed, his descriptions could be astonishing. He also reflected a lot on eternity and nature's continuity, for example in 'Song's Eternity'. However, she did not share Clare's confidence in continuity because we had lost such an

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<sup>1</sup> For a free down-load of Simon's Flower Poems: <http://bit.ly/NeSxVw>

abundance of wildlife since his time. The 'crowds' of lapwings in Clare's 'Martinmass' and the 'blackening of the sky' by starlings had gone from around Helpston along with many other species had disappeared. While things were changing all the time, Clare had left a record of what was then common and now gone, as in 'The Ravens Nest'.



Carry Akroyd giving her talk. Photograph by Peter Leverington.

Moreover, many of his nest poems also broadened out into contemplations about the joys of solitude or about migration and he would often compare the behaviour of different birds such as in 'Birds in Alarm'. The uniqueness of Clare's poetry, however, was in his association of human characteristics through birds such as love and superstition, although a recurring theme was the avoidance of humans, as we see in 'To The Snipe'. He tried to become them as he attempted to put into words their song. But they were also bound up with all of his nostalgia, sensations and memories as Carry sang 'My Early Home' (from Gordon Tyrell's CD *A Distance from the Town*). He would also describe his landscapes, such as Emmonsails Heath, from the bird's point of view and express his own political views through them as in 'The Mores'. But ultimately for Carry Akroyd Clare's birds represented freedom of access to the landscape, and a lot of her own work, she said, tried to see territories as the birds saw them. It was a thought-provoking presentation.

Mike Mecham

## The Village Walk

This year I decided to join the walk round Helpston village guided by Noël Staples. We were grateful to be leaving the Buttercross in sunshine, and those of us who hadn't taken umbrellas were glad that the rain held off till after our return, but the last part of the walk was along a very muddy path leading back to the village hall. I liked this, for it gave me a sense of the sort of paths Clare might have trodden. Noël's well-informed commentary helped us to imagine a village without clean tarmac roads and pavements, to substitute horse and cart for cars, and to recreate imaginatively a community full of people, noises and smells instead of the peaceful place it is today.



The walkers gather by the Buttercross. Photograph by Lionel Little.

We didn't walk far afield; nevertheless, Noël showed us parts of Helpston that I, for one, hadn't seen before, such as Bachelors' Hall, where Clare's friends John and James Billings lived. Although it is now a brick building, Noël told us that the original hall had been stone and thatched, and was probably quite prestigious.



Bachelors' Hall. Photograph by Valerie Pedlar

I was not the only one to be struck by the number of pubs in the Helpstone of Clare's day, but, as Noël pointed out, beer was commonly drunk instead of water, which was of dubious quality. The other thing that struck me was the beautiful flowers in the cottage gardens and growing alongside the outside of the cottages; they, at least, seem to have appreciated the rain.

Valerie Pedlar

## The Coach trip

This year's trip was to St John the Baptist Church at Upton, on the edge of Castor Hanglands and Emmonsails Heath, passing Swaddy Well and Milton Park, with commentary on the coach. Luckily, the rain held off as we made our way across the field to the Church, treading carefully in the Revd Canon William Burke's footsteps to avoid the more boggy areas of grass.

The Church was built in 1120 as a Chapel-of-Ease to Castor and is one of the prettiest tiny churches I have seen – especially as it was decorated with swags of flowers when we visited. The Dove family mausoleum dominates the north aisle, beautifully crafted in Barnack stone: husband flanked by his two wives. We were given a brief history of the Church, and Roger Rowe, Peter Moyse, and Peter Cox provided the excellent poetic entertainment.

On the way back to the coach, those brave enough to wade through the quagmire slipped off to investigate the curious sundial which stands in the field to the south of the Church and dates back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, with much speculation as to the purpose of the various indentations in the stone. Probably one of the most enjoyable Clare festival coach trips I have been on! Where will it be next year?

Linda Curry



Upton Church. Photograph by Peter Leverington.

## The Saturday Evening Concert

This year, the concert was split into two halves: Vercoe the Clown with Professor Forte, and Pennyless.

Imagine a well-dressed city gent in a pinstriped suit, the only give-away being the extra long-toed shoes. Gradually - as we learned about the way in which he was drawn into clowning - the different types of clown and clown make-up and clothing, his meeting up with Alan Whiteley (Professor Forte), and the rationale behind some of the popular routines – Arthur Pedlar metamorphosed into Vercoe the Clown.



Vercoe. Photograph by Peter Leverington.

It was a fascinating journey, which made the resulting clown performance all the more enjoyable. Professor Forte provided a brilliant foil to the lumbering Vercoe. In a world of mime, facial expression and body language provide the humour – along with the crazy stunts, of course (like riding a unicycle on wobbly wooden boxed staging!). We have never before had a performance of this kind at the Clare festival and I am sure it will remain in the memories of those there for a very long time.

In contrast, the second half was taken over by Pennyless, who performed so well for us last year, and they continued to live up to their reputation. The music was lively and varied and clips from it can be seen on YouTube. Just search for 'John Clare Festival' on YouTube. You can see them performing 'John Clare' at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5gdz6DGj4nU>, and if you visit their website ([www.pennyless-music.co.uk/](http://www.pennyless-music.co.uk/)) you can purchase copies their CDs. There was quite a queue around their table after the performance!

Linda Curry



Pennyless. Photograph by Peter Leverington.

## An Outing to Langley Bush

As many will know I have been an athlete all my life. One of the joys of spending quite so much time out on the tracks and paths of rural England is to realise that often one is treading on land largely unspoilt in half a millennia. This is particularly true of the cliff-paths and common land I know so well in my native East Devon, but often visiting (as I do) what has properly become known as 'Clare Country', I have had many opportunities of covering the lanes and paths that Clare would have known well.

Just a few months ago I was running south down King Street (now known as Langley Bush Road) from Helpston, when I realised that the woods on my right and left were almost entirely unchanged since they had been walked by Clare in the early years of the nineteenth century. The names are so familiar to Clareans worldwide: Rice (Royce) Wood, Hilly Wood, Oxhey Wood, Lampits Spinney, Southey Wood and the quite wonderful Castor Hanglands and Emmonsale Heath.

As I often do on my perambulations, especially in the Helpston area, I was musing on some of Clare's lines. As I ran down past what I call 'Swaddywell Corner' I looked right toward Southey Wood and recalled Clare's words, this time from his Journal written in December 1824, and smiled quietly to myself:

Went with neighbour Billings to Southey Wood & Gees Holt to hunt ferns—found none—met with a new species of moss fern stripd growing on a common species like the mistletoe on a thorn it is a sort of moss mistletoe—preservd a specimen—saw a branch of blackthorn dogrose & eldern in full leaf all in one hedgerow—saw a bumbarrel<sup>2</sup> with moss as if building a nest

Then I reached the place where King Street makes a sharp turn west towards Southey Woods, and I spied the new Langley Bush, now, rather incongruously, in the shade of a huge pylon line; a raised grassy mound in the middle of a ploughed field. Langdyke or Langley Bush, the tree from which the area takes its name, is a hawthorn growing on an ancient mound at the junction of four parishes – Ufford, Helpston, Upton and Ailsworth. It has been reported that a thorn bush is likely to have grown there since 948 AD and the present tree was planted by the Society in 1996.

The site of the ancient thorn bush is thought to have once been a Bronze Age barrow and a Roman shrine, and was reportedly an open-air court in Anglo-Saxon times used by all the parishes in the area, known as the Langdyke Hundred. Clare knew all this of course, and

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<sup>2</sup> Long-tailed tit

Langley Bush was as much revered by him as it seems to have been by his Anglo-Saxon predecessors.

In the eighteenth century the court moved to the Exeter Arms, in Helpston, and the place became known as a haunt of gypsies. Here is Ronnie Blythe on the subject, from 'Vagabondage in a Native Place':

The enclosure of Helpston put many of Clare's best-loved spots out of bounds, and not only sometimes out of bounds but beyond recognition, for they were in our terms bulldozed...Bad enough for the villagers, now being pauperised, but quite terrible for the gypsies immemorially camped at Langley Bush. The Vagrancy Act of 1824, swiftly following the Enclosure Act, made it an offence, among other things, 'to be in the open air, or under a tent, or in a cart or wagon, not having any visible means of subsistence, and not giving a good account of himself, or herself.

In 1996 a tree was replanted on the mound and a memorial plaque, to mark the historic site, was added. All very much in keeping with Clare's original words in his 1821 poem 'Langley Bush':

O Langley Bush! The shepherds sacred shade  
Thy hollow trunk oft gain'd a look from me  
Full many a journey o'er the heath I've made  
For such like curious things I love to see

How ironic therefore, as I subsequently discovered, that to visit the site and stand next to the hallowed tree, the visitor has to trespass on 'private' land; as the *Village Tribune* reported in December 2009: 'The Langley Bush is situated on private land. Permission to visit the mound should be sought from Fitzwilliam Farm (Milton Estates)'. So to actually visit the site without 'permission', one must trespass on the land legally acquired from the commons during the enclosures.

Here is Clare bitterly railing on the subject:

I dreaded walking where there was no path  
And pressed with cautious tread the meadow swath  
And always turned to look with wary eye  
And always feared the owner coming by;  
Yet everything about where I had gone  
Appeared so beautiful I ventured on  
And when I gained the road where all are free  
I fancied every stranger frowned on me  
And every kinder look appeared to say  
You've been on trespass in your walk today

By 1824 we know that everything had changed, for an entry in Clare's Journal for 29 September 1824 states that:

last year Langley Bush was destroyed an old white-thorn that had stood for more than a century full of fame the Gipseys  
Shepherds & Herdmen all had their tales of its history and it will be long ere its memory is forgotten.

With a mind full of contradictory thoughts, I turned back the way I had come — ‘gaining the road where all are free’ — returning to Glinton via Rice Wood, Helpston, Maxey and Northborough. A ‘happy/sad’, and rather thoughtful morning’s run in the spring sunshine. All the way I continued to ponder on how Clare would view the ‘enclosed’ Langley Bush in 2012. Perhaps not too differently from how he saw it in 1820:

There once was paths that every valley wound  
Inclosure came & every path was stopt  
Each tyrant fixt his sign were pads was found  
To hint a trespass now who crossd the ground  
Justice is made to speak as they command  
The high road now must be each stinted bound  
—Inclosure thourt a curse upon the land

(‘The Village Minstrel’ (ll.1085 – 1091)

Roger Rowe

(An abbreviated version of this essay appeared in the 2012 Festival programme.)



Helpston Cottage. Photograph by Valerie Pedlar.

**John Clare, *Voice of Freedom* by R.S.Attack. Shephard-Walwyn Ltd, 2010, 96pp., £9.95.**

Thus came enclosure – ruin was its guide,  
But freedom's cottage soon was thrust aside  
And workhouse prisons raised upon the site.  
The common heath became the spoiler's prey;  
The rabbit had not where to make his den...

From 'The Fallen Elm'.

These lines, part of a longer quotation in Rosemary Attack's book, express the main theme of *John Clare, Voice of Freedom*. 'But freedom's cottage soon was thrust aside' is actually a telescoping together of lines 66 and 67 of the poem, and suggests the author's passionate advocacy of her subject. It is good to be reminded of the economic background of the Clare family's poverty and of how it informs poems such as *The Fallen Elm*, 'The Mores' and *The Parish*.

The effect of Enclosure upon Clare, materially, psychologically, and in his poetry, have been discussed before, in Jonathan Bate's biography, for example (2003, pp.46-53). Bate quotes the classic *Village Labourer* by the Hammonds (1911) and E.P.Thompson's *Customs in Common* (1993). Attack does not mention Bate or Thompson in her text or bibliography, but relies on the Tibbles' biography of 1956. She stresses the importance for her theme of *The Parish* and makes reference to Eric Robinson's comprehensive introduction in his modern edition of the poem. She writes that Clare 'has left us a vivid record of the rustic characters of his neighbourhood and the effects upon them of the social changes brought by the Enclosure Act of 1809' (p.10).

Clare's story is told against the background of national events like the fear of a Napoleonic invasion (1812). Attack's narrative at times presents probabilities as facts, but always with the message that 'we need Clare's truth now...perhaps Clare's comet is returning to us on an elliptical path':

Fame blazed upon me like a comets glare  
Fame waned and left me like a fallen star –  
Because I told the evil what they are...(p.80).

The book ends with a few Reflections on Clare's relevance for some contemporary social and 'green' issues'.

Peter Cox



Flowers in the churchyard. Photograph by Valerie Pedlar.

***John Clare, a Poet for All Seasons* by Peter Moyse. Melrose Book, 100pp., £15.99.**

Peter Moyse's new collection of photographs coupled with writing by Clare is a hardback with an attractive dust jacket. The photographs are in colour and all except two are different from those in *John Clare, the Poet and the Place*, Peter's earlier book of monochrome photographs (1993, 1999). Ronald Blythe, in the Foreword to this new book, praises Peter's nearness to Clare's world, his 'photographic extension of Clare's poetry', suggesting that he 'translates [Clare's] words with his lens'.

Photographs in the Spring section foreground single flowers, whereas the Summer section features landscapes and superb cloudscapes. In Autumn, as we'd expect, there are fruits and leaves and vivid colours. In Winter we do have snow and frost, but also exhausted vegetation, wonderful patterns of reeds and grasses, and subdued colours in the landscape.

Clare's writings, facing each photograph, include verse and prose from all periods of his life. The content is preponderantly descriptive, but Clare often becomes reflective too:

And all the pictures of lifes early day  
Like evenings striding shadow haste away

or

Freedom haunts the humble glen  
That blest my happier hours

The poems usually take us beyond the picture, and the photographs often show us something more than the text. The richness of Clare's response to the natural world of the seasons is complimented by the wealth of colour and beauty in the photographs. For example, a wonderful picture of a fern on a multi-coloured bed of leaves is coupled with

Pleasures lie scattered all about our ways  
Harvest for thought & joy to look and glean  
Much of the beautiful to win our praise  
Lie where we never heeded aught had been...

The printing and layout of text are excellent, and the photographs are very well reproduced. There are, unfortunately, a few misprints in the introductory matter. But nothing to mar the pleasure which the book offers, both pictorially and poetically.

Peter Cox



Photograph by Peter Moyse.

### **Linda Curry's Email List**

Due to problems recently with my computer, my email address book was wiped, including the John Clare Society email group. I use this list to send out news and information which I think that members might be interested in and which fall between editions of the newsletter. I also use the list to distribute electronic copies of the Alliance of Literary Societies journal and newsletter. In the meantime, I have created a temporary group but I fear that most of the addresses are out of date and so need to reconstruct it. If you wish to remain (or be) on this reconstructed list, please email me at [ljc1049@gmail.com](mailto:ljc1049@gmail.com). Equally, if you are willing to receive your newsletter electronically in the future, could you please indicate this in your email to me.

### **The ALS journal 2012**

This came out in May and copies were on sale during the festival. If anyone wishes to receive an electronic copy, just let me know at [ljc1049@gmail.com](mailto:ljc1049@gmail.com). If you want to receive a printed copy, you should send a note of your name and address along with a cheque for £6 (made payable to the ALS), which includes postage, to me at 59 Bryony Road, Birmingham B29 4BY. The theme for this year is *Fashion in Literature* (with articles ranging from *Finding Aspects of Dickens through Almost Forgotten Writers to On Belts, Corsets and Uplift Brassieres* - the latter about the symbolic importance of ladies' underwear in fiction). It's an entertaining read!

Linda Curry

### **Changes in Committee**

This year, we have seen various changes in roles for members of the committee. Ron Ingamells and Mavis and Peter Leverington are stepping down from their main roles on festival committee although they will continue to be involved to a small degree - and our thanks go to them for all their hard work. Ian Jebbett has now taken over as chair of the festival committee. If you are interested in joining the festival planning group, please get in touch with Ian at [ian.jebbett@hotmail.com](mailto:ian.jebbett@hotmail.com).

Norman Lee has served for six years as Treasurer, having taken over from me when I became Chair. I know from experience that it is an extremely busy role, and certainly taxing when it comes to juggling the books at year end! He has managed to keep us all in line admirably - with tight control of the purse strings - and now hands over the baton to Jim Heppell. However, Norman is not leaving us: it's very hard to escape, once captured! He will be working with Ann Marshall on publicity - a role he has been informally undertaking over the past couple of years. So, a big thank you to Norman.

### Friends of the Festival Scheme

This year, we ran the Friends of the Festival scheme for the first time. It was highly successful and we will be repeating the exercise next year. Friends received a free copy of the festival programme and the opportunity to order coach/concert tickets in advance. Our grateful thanks go to the following, as well as those who signed up at festival: R.Roberts, N.Titman, S.A.Sullivan, D.Day, Mr & Mrs D.H.Jones, M.Hiscock, L.Tooby, M.Davis, R.Heyes, S.Savva, D.Rose, N.Lee, C.Morgan, C.& M.Marshall, T.Long, D.Greenwood, M.Dunne, O.Turnill, W.Williams, R.Kelly, D.Reed, J.Finch, P.Jenkins, J.Rytina, D.Ward, P.Bainbridge, L.Little, L.Reason, C.& J.Holmes, L.Curry, A.Richards, P.Johnson, R.Ingle, J.Bancroft, P.& S.Woodsford, B.Smith, C.Carlin, P.Cox, G.Bruce, J.Heppell, M.Sharpe, G.Cleave, C.Noyes, J.& K.McVittie, L.Wright, and C.Durrant.

### MEMBERSHIP

#### Reminder for Renewal of Subscriptions – 2012/13

If you have a Membership Renewal Form with your newsletter it means that you have not yet renewed for this year. We rely on your subscription to keep the Society going and if you wish to renew, please do so by sending the form to me together with your cheque made payable to the John Clare Society **and a stamped self addressed envelope**. Those who have not renewed by 1 December 2012 will unfortunately be removed from our membership database and will no longer receive Newsletters and information from the Society. Thank you.

Sue Holgate, Membership Secretary

### New Members

We welcome the following new members since our last newsletter.

Dr. W.J. Allen from Harrogate

Mr. Harrison Booth from Leadenham, Lincoln

Lynda and Peter Brown from Rushden

David Butcher from Totton, Hants

Tim and Chloe Cockerill from Weston Colville, Cambs

Frederick Lavender from Bedford

Malcolm Morrison from Bowden, Melrose.

Dr. Q. MacGarvie from Carmarthen.

Angela Pankhurst from Harpenden (re-join).

Dave Pearce from Watford.

Jim and Ivy Pringle from Market Deeping.

Alan Robertshaw from Bugbrooke, Northants.

Peter Skipworth from Hagworthingham, Spilsby.

Mary Smout from Perry, Huntingdon.

Sheila and Don Whelan from Cuffley, Herts.

Thomas Williams from London.