



THE
JOHN CLARE SOCIETY
Newsletter

June 2014

No. 121



THE JOHN CLARE SOCIETY

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New members are always welcome. Please contact Sue Holgate, 9 The Chase, Ely, Cambs CB6 3DR (01353-668438) or sueholgate@hotmail.co.uk.

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Editorial

Festival time approaches. You will find information about this year's John Clare Festival on pp.5-8. Unfortunately, for the first time since I became editor of the Newsletter, I shall not be able to attend. I usually spend some time on the day persuading people to write about the various activities; clearly I won't be able to do that this year. So, please, if you can write a short account of something you've particularly enjoyed during the weekend (it's good to have reports on the Friday events as well as Saturday's) do send it to me. And I shall be particularly anxious for photos.

But as I write this (May 2014) a host of other Clare celebrations is happening or about to happen, and I shall be pleased to have accounts of them too.

John Goodridge has written in to me with the following correction:

I foolishly mixed up two names in the piece on Clare and Heaney in the February Newsletter (as John Lucas has very kindly pointed out to me). The book of essays on Seamus Heaney was by the late Dennis O'Driscoll not O'Donogue. Sorry about this!

Grateful thanks to the people who submitted material for this newsletter. The October newsletter will, I hope, have reports on the many activities, exhibitions and events that are taking place in May (and in other months) to mark the 150th anniversary of Clare's death. I shall be glad to receive offerings verbal or visual, and they should be with me by 1 September 2014.

Valerie Pedlar

The 2014 John Clare Society Festival 11-13 July

As last year's Festival was such a success in the church, we are again dispensing with the marquee and using the School for the stalls and the church for the meeting, talks and concert. This year we are marking the 150th Anniversary of John Clare's death and our theme for the Festival is 'Clare's Legacy'.

Friday

The Midsummer Cushion ceremony will once again take place at **1.30 pm** at Helpston Parish Church, when the prize-winning poems from the competition for pupils of the John Clare Primary School will be read. There will also be a short choral concert given by the children. Pete Shaw is, as usual, holding a folk music session in Clare Cottage on Friday evening at **8.00 pm** with drinks and light refreshments available. At the same time, **6-8 pm**, there will be an evening event at Torpel Field on the edge of the village – a place that Clare knew well and of course wrote about, presented by the Langdyke Trust as last year.

Saturday

On the Saturday there will be coffee and tea available in Botolph's Barn from **8.30 am** until 12 noon and the Primary School will be open from **9.00 am** with the usual stalls (Membership, Journal, Programme, Concert Tickets, Sales, and a variety of book stalls). There will be parking at the School and also behind the Exeter Arms. There will be one or two disabled parking places by the church but we want to try and keep the roads free of parking if possible.

At **10.15 am** the Society AGM takes place in St Botolph's Church in the centre of the village. For those of you who have never been to Helpston, St. Botolph's is a lovely Norman church, with Saxon roots, and we will again be using it for all the talks, poetry readings and evening concert.

The highlight of the Festival is always the Presidential address by Ronnie Blythe and that will start around **11.15 am**.

Lunches will be available from noon in the Village Hall and in the Cottage café. We have folk dancing around the village and there will be an exhibition in Botolph's Barn given by the Wildlife Trust focusing on the environment. The Annakin Gallery will be open and is well worth a visit and this year there are two Open Gardens: The Feathers, West Street, and Beaufort Barn.

At **2.00 pm** our annual lecture will be given by Professor Arthur Homer from Connecticut who will speak to us on Clare's legacy in the United States. His lecture is entitled 'John Clare: Earth Poet: An American Perspective' and should be very interesting.

After the lecture, you could meet up with friends for afternoon tea in the Village Hall or take the Village Walk around Helpson with our Festival Guide. There will also be poems in some cottage windows to spot.

The Festival would not be the same without our poetry reading session. Peter Cox will take charge of this as usual so please bring your favourite Clare poem along and make contact with him during the day. The poetry reading will begin at **5.00 pm** so do come along.

The concert this year is given by the Greenwood Quire and begins at **6.00 pm** for an hour. This will again be in the Church. The Quire gave us a short recital last year and was very popular. Tickets (£5.00) will be available from the stall at the School or you can pay on the door.



Wild flower display on green chair, Festival 2013. Photograph by Jean Stowe

Sunday

If you are still around on the Sunday, you might like to come to the Sunday Service in the Church, a celebration of John Clare – starting at **11.00 am**. Following the Service, our Vice Chairman, the Revd Ron Ingamells, will dedicate a new plaque near Clare's grave, which has been made possible by generous subscription from our members.

We will be running the Friends of Festival scheme again this year and a leaflet about this will be sent as a separate attachment. The benefits of the scheme (apart from showing your support for the Festival) include a free copy of the Programme (£2.00) and a copy of Helpston Village Walk (£2.00), a guide around the places associated with Clare with an appropriate poem for each place.

If you have not been to the Festival before and are concerned that you will be alone, give it a try. We are a friendly bunch – all brought together by a common interest in John Clare. The Festival is open to everyone so bring your friends!

Sue Holgate
Festival Co-ordinator



Helpston Parish Church. Photograph by Valerie Pedlar

John Clare Festival 2014 : *Men of Strings*

The Greenwood Quire sings and plays music in 'West Gallery' style, a tradition that flourished in English parish churches, and later Methodist and non-conformist chapels, from the early 1700's until the mid-nineteenth century. Much of it was composed, adapted and taught by people of humble origins and with little formal music education. The name 'West Gallery' comes from the rough wooden galleries built in most churches and chapels, in which the unrefined villagers, players and singers, were placed.

The music features a combination of string and wind instruments – whatever was in the village – playing unusual harmonies and unorthodox counterpoint as an accompaniment to usually four-part singing.

John Clare was also a fiddler, and a collector and writer of songs and folklore. Whilst the Quire doesn't know of any written evidence as to whether Clare joined the other village musicians in their venerable psalmody on a Sunday, he must surely have heard their tunes, played with them in the public house, and respected their skill as fellow 'men o' strings'.

The Greenwood Quire's festival programme consists of choral items that were popular with the village choirs of John Clare's day, who were charged with providing music for Sunday services. The amusing stories tell of the ways, customs and antics of these bygone instrumentalists, and perhaps shed light on their eventual demise. Some items are uniquely local, from music masters who travelled the countryside known to John Clare, and brought compositions to villages nearby.

The Greenwood Quire will perform, in costume, in St Botolph's Church, Helpston, from 6pm to about 7pm on Saturday 12 July. Entrance is just £5. The Quire's website is at www.greenwoodquire.co.uk.

Pete Shaw

Stan Nichols 1926-2013

Stan was born in Kettering and was educated at Kettering Grammar School where his English master was Edmund Kirby, who many years earlier had taught and encouraged H.E. Bates. Stan spent his working life as librarian in various public libraries in Northamptonshire and for many years attended the Clare Festival as a representative of Northamptonshire Libraries as well as as a member of the Society in his own right. Some time after his retirement in 1991 he joined the Society committee and served for several years. Sadly, age and poor health caught up with him eventually, so his visits to the Festival were infrequent in later years. He was a kind and generous person who supported many artistic and cultural causes, and had friends in all walks of life.

The poet Wendy Cope was a friend of Stan's. We asked her to suggest a poem of hers to read at his funeral. She suggested her poem about John Clare because a love of Clare's poetry was one of the things she and Stan had in common.

Jane Roberson



Stan Nichols. Photograph by Jane Roberson.

John Clare

John Clare, I cried last night
For you – your grass-green coat,
Your oddness, others' spite,
Your fame, enjoyed and lost,
Your gift and what it cost.

Awake in the early hours,
I heard you with my eyes,
Carolling woods and showers.
As if a songbird's throat
Could utter words, you wrote.

I listened late and long –
Each clear, true, loving note
Placed justly in its song.
Sometimes for sheer delight,
John Clare, I cried last night.

Wendy Cope

The poem is from *If I Don't Know*, published by Faber & Faber,
and it appears by kind permission of the publishers.



Almshouses, Helpston. Photograph by Valerie Pedlar.

Crows' Nest

Each Spring I've watched the ash tree,
big above the field's edge, break dark buds
as though the struggle took its toll
when all the rest, the thorns and sycamore,
put on an easy green.

This late spring is harder still.
Like grim metal it holds its shape
against the cold but nothing has deterred
the crows. They're building now,
gathering blown debris from round its base
to claim a top-most fork as theirs.

There's no attempt to hide
their structured cone of twigs,
but, more, an acclamation of intent
at being at the top of things.

Mike Sharpe



Crow's nest using light-weight garden fencing.

Clare's Skaters

Do children still make slides in icy weather? Perhaps both health and safety issues and climate change have put an end to this practice, and these are issues that are better discussed elsewhere. The early nineteenth century, however, provided many opportunities for this activity, as stretches of water from the Thames to Cumbrian tarns froze over in the icy winters. The young Wordsworth made himself a pair of skates, which may be seen in Dove Cottage Museum, for use on Esthwaite Water near Hawkshead. John Clare, in his early poem 'Schoolboys in Winter', describes children making slides on 'each shallow lake' as they make their way 'with playing speed' to school.

I wonder about the location of the 'shallow lakes', but I shall leave that question to those whose knowledge of Helpston's topography is far superior to mine; perhaps they were merely flooded depressions in the fields. There are two issues that interest me in 'Schoolboys in Winter': firstly, the influence of Wordsworth and secondly, the ways in which Clare develops this subject both in this poem and elsewhere. The 'skating episode' from Wordsworth's *Prelude* has been familiar to many generations of students (including mine); it is one of those vivid 'spots of time' traditionally extracted for study from that vast and unwieldy poem. Wordsworth himself extracted the passage, along with the 'stolen boat' episode, for publication in the 1807 edition of his poems; Clare, I believe, may well have read these passages before composing 'Schoolboys in Winter'.

Both poets make use of liquid and sibilant sounds to evoke the skaters' activities: Wordsworth and his friends 'hissed along the polished ice'; Clare's schoolboys make 'glib slides'. The word 'shadow' resonates in both passages: Clare's boys 'run races with their shadows'; in rather similar fashion, Wordsworth's skater 'cut across the shadow of a star' (that is, its reflection on the ice). In both passages, the hectic activities of the skaters give way to beautiful images of stillness and tranquillity which focus on the sky: 'The orange sky of evening died away' (Wordsworth); 'In the pale splendour of the winter sun' (Clare).

It would hardly be surprising if Clare took inspiration from Wordsworth in this way; the range and depth of his reading in contemporary poetry has long been recognized. What is more interesting is to see how he developed the subject in his own characteristic style. Even in this early poem, Clare's confident use of dialect stands out in words such as 'awes' and 'clumpsing'. *The Shorter Oxford Dictionary* shows that the latter

word is closely linked in etymological terms to 'clumsy' and that the root meaning of this word-cluster is exactly that in the poem – numb, paralyzed with cold. 'Glib' is equally interesting: in Clare's lifetime, this adjective was in the process of moving from its literal sense (smooth, slippery) to its now dominant metaphorical sense (fluent, superficial of speech). However, a writer as far removed from Clare's background as one can imagine, Robert Browning, was still, in mid-century, employing the word in its literal sense: 'The snow lies glib as glass'. The lesson of 'Schoolboys in Winter' is that Clare's dialect words are not quaint rustic survivals sprinkled randomly over his verse; they are true, ancient English words, each with its own history and, as we would expect from Clare, they are used judiciously to achieve precise poetic effects.

Images from 'Schoolboys in Winter' recur in later poems and are developed in various ways. In 'January', from *The Shepherd's Calendar*, the schoolboys break off from football to seek 'bright glib ice' to make a slide; more expansive skating takes place 'upon the meadow lake' where the boisterous activity scares the snipe and moorhen. In 'March', from the same work, Clare picks up the image of the 'letters' made by the flight of the wild geese. This time it is the solitary, musing shepherd-boy who watches the geese

Likening their curious march in curves or rows
To every letter which his memory knows.

In this image, Clare moves into the mind of the shepherd-boy rather than simply noting the act of 'watching the letters' as he did in the earlier poem. Perhaps the most interesting and poignant development of the skating theme occurs in 'Childhood', that extraordinary, almost encyclopedic description of children's pastimes around the year 1800. Here, it is winter again and the children make a snowman representing Bonaparte and 'pelt' it before seeking out 'ponds for glibbest ice' to begin skating. In 'Schoolboys in Winter', these activities had rendered the boys' fingers 'numbed and clumpsing', but in 'Childhood', Clare's vision allows no sense of pain:

We sought out hips and felt no cold –
Cold never came to boys.

By the early 1830s, the pleasures of childhood, like the pre-enclosure landscape, were becoming, for Clare, part of an idealized, unrecoverable world which contrasted ever more painfully with reality.

David Stokes



An ice-skating scene, as seen in a print titled 'January', one of an early 1820's series of prints of the months.

Another Viewing of The Ash Grove (to David Nash, Artist and Woodsman)

Late October near Ffestiniog
on a green round table of grass
in an ever steepening wood

twenty two sapling ash
leaves almost vanished, lean
their nearly naked trunks
twisting and lichened, up

inwards, into a higher canopy
of thinning branches towards
their 'almost meeting'.

A 'work in progress'

making us fully aware that
a helping hand is engaged
silently, within;

that it takes more than a lone artist
chipping and strapping away
somewhere in a remote wood
to create a name for himself

even though three quarters
of his own surname
might appear bent on taking him
all the way there
by itself,
alone.

Bob Tristram

Hot work remembered

As we look forward to Festival 2014 we hope for fair weather once again. Last year was exceptionally warm and with such a good forecast we decided on some fair weather camping near Market Deeping as our Festival accommodation. We soon discovered it was too hot to be inside a tent!



Taking liquid refreshment at the Bluebell, Festival 2013. Photograph by Valerie Pedlar.

Helpston looked beautiful in the sunshine and on the coach trip through surrounding farmland to Swaddywell my mind went back to the sweltering summer of 1976. I was farm labouring not too far away in Nottinghamshire at that time. We started work at 6.30am some days, either on the home farm or contracting on other farms. By breakfast at 9am heatwaves were rising from the corn and our shirts were off for the rest of the day.

A lot of the farm work was tractor-driving but from midsummer onwards there was sugar beet to hoe. To keep the rows clear of weeds I sat on a machine behind a slow tractor steering five or six steel tines through the baking ground. When the corn was all in and the work was lighter I was sent to the beet field with a hand hoe to weed within the rows between individual beets.

Working in an open field in hot weather for five or six hours and taking a 'ploughman's lunch' in the shade of a hedge was more like the farm work that Clare and his community would have routinely experienced:

How drive the sun's warm beams the mist away,
How labour sweats and toils, and dreads the sultry day!
(*'The Harvest Morning'*)

In fact, Clare was born during a period of hot summers in the 1790s. Exceptionally dry summers were also recorded in the early 1800s when he was working in the fields as a boy – in 1800, 1802 and 1807 for example. There were also some late, cold winters during this period – similar to 2013 and all a long time before climate change had been thought of!

Around 1800 an adult employed for casual agricultural work, such as a threshing like Clare's father, could expect to earn about 12 (old) pence per day – or 8 shillings a week. Those employed by landowners on a more regular basis might earn 20 pence a day or 10 shillings a week if they were lucky enough to get 6 days work. Despite agricultural workers having the first organized trade union from 1872, wages were slow to rise and this has continued to the present day. In the 1970s my wage was only £20 for a 42-hour week plus overtime, of which there was plenty.

Before 1976 I had only come across one or two of Clare's poems in anthologies. Then in 1981 my sister gave me a copy of Robinson and Summerfield's collection called simply *Clare*. I quickly became a devotee of Clare and his work.

Meanwhile, the commemorative summer of 2014 promises to be a good one for Clare and his readers, whatever the weather:

Till the sun turns gold and gets more high
And paths are clean and grass gets dry
And longest shadows pass away
And brightness is the blaze of day
(*'Morning'*)

Nigel Rathmell

Charles Marter

Sweet native place, how dear thou art to me,
Once more, entranced, I've come to visit thee;
How often have I trod thy verdant plain,
At evening late, and early morning reign,
And roamed full oft, in meditative mood,
Among thy shady and thy smiling woods.

These lines are not taken from a little known work by Tennyson or Wordsworth, though they may have merit enough. In fact, they are the opening verse of an ode written by Charles Marter of Market Deeping, in his book entitled *Poetical Effusions*, which was printed and published by J.S. Clarke of Peterborough in 1868.

Marter dedicated his book to a Lady Bunbury, and there must have been a great deal of interest and anticipation about its publication, because more than 400 people had ordered copies in advance. The names of those patrons are printed at the back of the book. The list is headed by Sir John Trollope, Bart. MP, of Casewick Hall, and included the leading inhabitants of Market Deeping, Deeping St James and Peterborough, well as people from as far afield as Ipswich, Leeds, Derby and Cheltenham, where a Miss Wherry lived who ordered seven copies.

Some of the poems are written to flowers: rose, honeysuckle, fuschia, violet and daisy: 'Hail small flower of lovely form,/The earth's green carpet spotting o'er'. Marter is fond of birds too, especially the nightingale. And there is a charming poem entitled 'Lines to a redbreast which perched itself on my window before the coming of a storm'.

He noted the changing of the seasons and wrote: 'Now Spring, sweet Spring presents her form/Dress'd in her flower embroidered vest'. Other poems provide us with a glimpse of a long past era, as in 'The Postman':

With his little tin horn by his side and wide strapp'd
waist...
Before he reaches our wide village green
His horn is heard, at pauses, short between.'

Some of the poems are somber and melancholy, dealing with death, despair and tragedy, but Marten was a typical mid-Victorian, deeply religious and moralistic, who wrote at a time

when the country was plunged into gloom and mourning after the death of Prince Albert. In fact he wrote a poem in 1862 on the anniversary of that sad occasion and in 1864, when John Clare died, he paid tribute to him in a lovely, contemporary poem written very much in a style often favoured by Clare himself:

Sweet bard, he's left this earthly sphere
No more he'll sing of Nature here...
He lov'd the Autumn tints of brown
Her yellow tinge and russet gown...
He lov'd to find in lonely spot
The primrose and forget-me-not.

The poem ends with the couplet:

Ye birds, sing with a dirge for him,
Ye insects, hum a requiem.

Nancy Titman

This is an extract from an article that first appeared in *Deeping Parsons and Personalities*, a book published by the Deeping St James Family and Local History Group, 2010.



Woodcut by Thomas Bewick.

Philip Spratley, Orchestral Music Volume 2

Symphony no.3: Sinfonia Pascale

Cargoes: Suite for Orchestra after John Masefield

A Helpston Fantasia

Siberian Symphony Orchestra conducted by Dmitry Vasiliev.

This CD comes to us from Market Deeping via Siberia. Philip Spratley lives in Market Deeping and is fortunate to be a friend of Mr Vasiliev, thus solving the problem facing all composers – that of getting performances of their work. These are excellent interpretations, from the large, sweeping sections to the more intimate, quiet passages of each work.

If you are familiar with John Masefield's poem, 'Cargoes', you will enjoy this sound picture from the delicate writing describing the sophisticated 'Quinquereme' to the rumbustuous 'Dirty British Coaster' with the majestic sarabande representing the 'Stately Spanish Galleon'.

The *Sinfonia Pascale* is the most substantial work on the CD. Three contrasting movements demonstrate the skill and musicianship of the composer. New ideas are developed throughout, while references to what has gone before assure us that this is, indeed, symphonic writing of high quality. The first movement is marked 'Allegro tempestoso' and stormy it certainly is – very exciting and full of tension. The second movement is more despondent, the third more optimistic and dance-like.

I am guessing that for members of the John Clare Society the middle track will have the greatest interest. In the excellent booklet Philip Spratley explains how he used Clare's book of fiddle tunes as inspiration for this delightful Fantasia. Lots of folk songs are included. The atmosphere is airy and full of sunshine.

This composition is dedicated to Albert and Doris Snowball of Helpston. Albert was organist at Helpston church for 71 years and Doris organist at Barnack for 34 years.

Janet Ingamells

NEW PUBLICATIONS

Mark Storey has two new publications, a collection of poems, ***Ancient history***, which I hope to have reviewed in the next issue, and ***Notes towards a Tao of Walking*** (£7.50). Both are published by Flemish Old Masters Press and are available from 56 Queenswood Road, Moseley, Birmingham B13 9AX.

Jim Hepple has sent in the following information about two other publications of interest to JCS members.

John Clare in Haiku by Cardinal Cox

The active Peterborough poet and John Clare aficionado Cardinal Cox has produced an interesting little booklet of haiku assembled from Clare's poetry. Several of these come from bird poems and feature Bewick-style illustrations. A stimulating (and brief!) read. Cardinal Cox is on Facebook. Copies of the pamphlet are available for a C5 SAE from the publisher at 58 Pennington, Orton Goldhay, Peterborough, PE2 5RB or email cardinalcox1@yahoo.co.uk.

First Publications of John Clare's Poems by David Powell

The revised and augmented second edition, an excellent 100 page book (a listing of titles and sources), is described as 'the definitive guide for researchers on John Clare, and offers detailed bibliographic information on the first place of publication for every poem included in the complete Oxford English Texts edition of Clare's poetry – spiral-bound it lies flat for ease of reference. It is exclusively available from the John Clare Society of North America who ship to any destination worldwide, and there is no extra charge for shipping, handling, or sales tax. Price: \$12.00'. See <http://www.johnclare.org/PowellBook.htm> for fuller detail. This is a genuinely good value price which we cannot beat, but if anyone is interested in collecting a copy at the festival please contact the Treasurer/ Membership Secretary.

Changes at John Clare Cottage

This summer sees the fifth anniversary of the opening of the Cottage to the public and the 150th anniversary of Clare's death on 20 May 1864. We will have a special opening on 20 May with readings and performances to mark the anniversary.

The opening times of John Clare Cottage have changed while we review the best way to manage the Cottage in future. The Cottage and Café will now be open Friday through to Monday 10.30am until 4.00 pm. We will continue to take group bookings for the other days and we are keen to hear ideas about how you would like to use the Cottage for the village.

Janet Dykes will continue to manage the Café; this and the rest of the centre will now be run by volunteers. If you would like to help, in the café or front of house, please contact the Cottage on 01733 253330. We are particularly keen to hear from volunteers interested in managing Front of House and with ideas about running the shop over the weekends.

We will continue to manage a wide programme of events. The Acoustic Café on the fourth Thursday of the month will continue with the Rev. Dave Maylor. The Pantaloons outdoor theatre group return on 19 June with The Pantaloons History of Britain and on 27 August with their version of Shakespeare's The Tempest. Tickets are available from the Cottage.

To mark the 150 celebrations we are hosting a group of artists in the Cottage. After last summer's successful residency at Burleigh House we are looking forward to seeing them reveal Clare's life and home in a new light in a project called Clare UnEarthed. The current art exhibition in the Café is from the Deeping Art Club and will be on show until the end of June. Please check our website (www.clarecottage.org) for information about events to commemorate the 150th anniversary of John Clare's death.

David Dykes

Friends of the Festival Scheme

Once again, we are operating the Friends scheme in support of our festival this year. Becoming a Friend involves a donation of £8. For that, not only will you be supporting us, but you will receive a copy of the festival programme, along with the ability to order tickets in advance for the Saturday evening concert at a cost of £5 per ticket. They will be sent out to you in advance of the festival – as the collections process did not work well last year.

Linda Curry

New monument to John Clare in the churchyard at St. Botolph's, Helpston

It is intended that the new headstone will be in situ during the 2014 John Clare Festival at Helpston and will be formally dedicated on the Sunday of the Festival Weekend. The Appeal to get a little closer to what Clare wanted as a memorial has obviously struck a chord and the Committee is very grateful to the generosity of Members and others. The final cost of the installation is not yet known but is expected to be covered by the appeal. A listing of Donors will (unless they request otherwise) be recorded in a book retained by the Society to commemorate the setting up of the new memorial. This will be on display at the Festival and the list will be published in the next newsletter. This will provide the opportunity to review the wording – if you wish your record to be worded differently please let me know.

Jim Heppell, Treasurer

New Members

The list of new members will be published in the next newsletter.

