



THE  
*JOHN CLARE SOCIETY*  
*Newsletter*

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## THE JOHN CLARE SOCIETY

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## Editorial

It's good to see that two of the initiatives started in the 150th anniversary year of Clare's death look set to continue well beyond 2014. There is a report on p.10 about a symposium organized by the Centre for John Clare Studies that has been set up at Cambridge University. And on p.15 you will find an account of a presentation based on a film about Clare's journey home from Essex made by Andrew Kötting.

Sadly, I have to announce the death of one of our long-standing members, Bridget Smith. There is an obituary on p.6.

I am grateful to everyone who has contributed to this issue of the newsletter. Please could I have material for the next issue by 11 May.

Valerie Pedlar



An entrance to the University Botanic Garden, Cambridge. Photograph by Valerie Pedlar.

## The John Clare Society Festival 10-12 July 2015

The theme for this year's Festival is 'John Clare and the Seeds of Change' and we hope to reflect how change affected Clare in the early 19th century and how we cope with massive changes to our lives today.

We will begin, as always, with the Midsummer Cushions at the church on Friday and the results of the children's poetry competition. For anyone who has never been, it is a lovely event – particularly if the sun shines on us!

On the Saturday the main parking will be at the school as usual but the book stalls and other stalls will be mainly in Botolph's Barn, down the road from the church. We hope this will encourage as many people as possible to visit the stalls. The AGM, the President's talk and the afternoon talk will all take place, as last year, in St Botolph's church.

There will be the usual excellent lunches and teas at the Village Hall and the Blue Bell, and probably the Exeter Arms will be open most of the day. There will also be light lunches in John Clare Cottage.

The talk in the afternoon this year is to be given by Dr Robert Heyes, a long-standing member of the Society and of the Committee, and his talk will focus on our general theme. We hope to arrange a village trail and quiz but more about this in the next newsletter. Our aim, as last year, is to provide an interesting and informative Festival whilst also allowing time to relax and just meet and talk to friends old and new.

The evening concert will be in the Church from 6.00 pm – 7.00 pm and will be given by Chris Harrison, who will include 19th century folk songs related to Clare in his programme. Tickets for the concert will be available on the day.

On Sunday it is hoped that the Revd Dave Maylor, Vicar of St. Botolph's, will preside over a Clare-related church service, following which we will conclude our Festival with light refreshments.

We are always keen to recruit helpers and if you feel you can perhaps help with a stall or stewarding we would love to hear from you. Please contact me on 01353 668438 or [sueholgate@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:sueholgate@hotmail.co.uk)

Sue Holgate Festival Co-ordinator



Festival time in St Botolph's, Helpston. Bridget Smith is in the middle of the picture looking straight out. Photograph by Sue Young.

## **Bridget Smith**

John Clare Society member Bridget Smith died on 31st December 2014 after a short illness, aged 83 years.

A horticulturist by training, she worked in research and tropical agriculture. Then, in 1976, a post as training officer for the Nature Conservancy Council (now Natural England) brought her to live in Hemingford Grey near St Ives, Huntingdon. On retirement she pursued a wide range of interests. The John Clare Society combined her love of the landscape and literature. She always attended John Clare weekends in Helpston, usually with friends and fellow members. That is where I met her about 10 years ago. She was also a member of the Wildlife Trusts, Cambridge U3A botany group, a Friend of Cambridge University Botanic Garden and several local history societies. At the time of her death she held the St Ives Community Challenge Award for her service to the Town as Chairperson of St. Ives Civic Society.

Bridget's passion was for Hemingford Grey Meadow, having researched the history of the site going back to the early 16th century and acting as one of the Reeves appointed by the Parish

Council. On a national level she participated in the Floodplain Meadows Partnership, attending their conferences and giving lectures for them.

Her garden was a delight - full of rarities grown from seed or cuttings. Weeds were tolerated, indeed encouraged, she considered them as interesting as cultivated plants. I remember it on a day in early spring, buzzing with innumerable insects, a haven of biodiversity.

A private burial took place in January at Barton Glebe Woodland Burial Ground, but all Bridget's friends are invited to a celebration of her life on Saturday 25th April at 12 noon in the Free Church, St Ives, followed by a walk in her beloved meadow.

Jean Stowe



Bridget Smith on a Wildlife Trust holiday in Morocco in 2011.  
Photograph by Peter Payne.

## TWO POEMS BY MIKE SHARPE

### Still Birth

She calved in the early hours.

Looking across this morning,  
I watched her nudging a wet parcel,  
flat like a punctured tyre  
and her shouts carry over a wet field  
as big and empty as the sky  
and just as comfortless.

From this safe distance,  
I feel for her, my human grief misplaced,  
I'm told, for such a common death,  
and yet, in my late years,  
compassion comes unchecked.

As anger does  
but with an old man's impotence,  
a Lear berating heaven's indifference  
to man or beast who die with no memorial  
except a temporary pull of love.

Mike Sharpe



*Cows in a Pool*, Peter de Wint (1784-1849).

## Digging in the Earth

Digging in earth is elemental,  
a primitive obedience to things  
too over-whelming to be understood.  
It seems so serious, this breaking ground  
and, in this early morning light,  
something of awe and reverence  
accompanies the spade.

In youth, I'd dig for the sake of it,  
a test of energy, vigorously manual,  
without a thought.  
But now, in these contemplative slow days,  
I know I'm digging into what I shall become,  
a tilth in which this tiny, fingered seed,  
will have to tough it out and find  
its own regenerative power.

Mike Sharpe



*Farm labourers waiting to be hired, Samson Towgood Roch (1757-1847).*

## JOHN CLARE AND BOTANY: A SYMPOSIUM

Cambridge, 23 October 2014

The Centre for John Clare Studies was set up by three Cambridge academics, Paul Chirico, Mina Gorji and Sarah Houghton-Walker, in February 2014. Apart from a monthly lunch-time discussion group and Out of my Knowledge, an online forum for scholarly notes and queries on John Clare, the CJCS have collaborated with Peterborough Archives and Vivacity to curate a major exhibition based on Clare's manuscripts, held in Peterborough Museum from 10 May to 22 June 2014, described by Valerie Pedlar in the October *Newsletter*. There was also a collaboration with five exciting artists in 'UnEarthed: John Clare', exhibited at Clare Cottage during the summer of 2014 and subsequently at Northampton and Peterborough Museums.

It is intended to organise an annual symposium. The first of these, on Clare and early nineteenth-century botany, took place on 23 September 2014 in the Cambridge University Botanic Garden. There were about 30 participants, with a fascinating and volatile mixture of academic and 'freelance', specialists in literature, history, history of science and botany, old and young.

Because we were guests of the University Botanic Garden, it was appropriate that the opening address was given by Professor John Parker, formerly Director of the Garden. John fascinated us with the story of John Stevens Henslow (1796-1861, and so more or less coeval with Clare), who laid out the Garden on a 'systematic' basis, revived the teaching of botany in a 'moribund' university and taught Charles Darwin. He does not seem to have met Clare, although they are separated only by one step, having mutual acquaintances among the Northamptonshire botanical aristocracy, particularly Viscount Fitzwilliam of Milton. In his capacity as Rector of Hatcham, Henslow came to recognise the plight of the labouring poor; he set up charitable clubs, a village school (at which he taught), a library, one of the earliest village Horticultural Shows, and an annual outing for pensioners (many of whom would never otherwise have left their parish). He divided his own glebeland into allotments for the villagers, which made him unpopular with local farmers because it gave the villagers a measure of economic independence. Henslow's spirit and his aspirations were around us for the whole day, and for many of us the highlight was the tour of the Garden led by John Parker immediately after lunch.



John Parker pointing out features of the University Botanic Garden, Cambridge.  
Photograph by Valerie Pedlar.

The other speakers were equally engaging, representing a wide range of interests and disciplines. Dr Sue Edney (Bath Spa University) showed us how botanical collection and research tended to cross class boundaries - plants are cheap to collect and specimens can be exchanged. But there is a real problem of identification: 'What is the name of this plant, and why is my name different from yours?'. Bob Heyes corrected some of our misunderstandings about Clare and 'The Natural History of Helpstone' while fascinating us with Clare's involvement in a natural history of British birds - which he found that he could not complete.

Fiona Stafford (Somerville College, Oxford) offered a stunning reading and analysis of Clare's 'Sycamore', including parallels with 'Kubla Khan' that grew more and more striking as the talk continued.

Hetty Saunders, a Cambridge post-graduate student, gave us a new insight on Clare 'finding his poems in the fields' in her talk on 'Inscribing the Landscape', focussing on ten key passages where writing and Nature come into balance or conflict, starting with Clare's point that Keats 'often described nature as she appeared in his

fancies', and including a spirited defence of Clare's use of terms like 'calyx' despite the claim (in Molly Mahood's *Poet as Botanist*) that his 'unhappiness' with the word involves him in 'confusion of syntax and scansion'.

With the author and essayist Rosamond Richardson, we were taken on a virtual 'wildflower walk' around Helpston, with pictures of the flowers that had significance for Clare (mostly) still on the sites where he got to know them. The symposium was completed by Richard Mabey (President of the JCS) with a compelling argument that Clare was committed to the plant's-eye view, 'dropping down' to the level of experience of the creatures that he was writing about.

It was a fascinating day, with a great deal of variety and a number of things to take away and think about. You can read more about this symposium on the University website at:

<http://www.cam.ac.uk/research/features/besom-ling-and-teasel-burrs-john-clare-and-botanising>

Stephen Sullivan



In Cambridge Botanic Garden. Photograph by Valerie Pedlar.

## TWO POEMS BY TOM RYDER

### Fate

(For Mary)

Now I know  
how the fated buck or doe  
must feel  
when confronted in the open field  
by the farmer with his loaded gun,  
for I equate such an encounter  
with the sudden approach of love.  
Lover, when you came near  
my every breath, my every sinew  
did surrender to my heart's rapid thump;  
like a frightened rabbit  
I trembled, body and mind benumbed.  
I could not muster  
enough strength to run  
from that fateful explosion  
when the naked trigger-finger pulled:  
I shall forever feel  
the impact from your look,  
I shall forever reel  
from the power with which it struck!

Tom Ryder



Photograph by Tom Ryder.

## ENCLOSURE

(New York - Helpstone)

His *Midsummer Cushion*  
enclosed  
with 'Shelley  
and His Circle',  
in the Public Library.

His alabaster head  
enclosed  
within a glass case  
within his home of homes.

His placid face  
as it was  
on that final journey:  
enclosed  
within a box,  
within a train,  
within a pub,  
beneath the mud  
of his beloved  
Helpstone.

Tom Ryder



Photograph by Tom Ryder.

## **BY OUR SELVES**

### A Presentation at Oxford Brookes University

When I signed up for the presentation at Oxford Brookes University on 31 October I had little idea what to expect. *By Our Selves* is described by the filmmaker Andrew Kötting in the recent *JCS Journal* as a film and performance project, and the event at Oxford Brookes was a sort of mini version, in which we saw some of the film based on Clare's Essex journey that Kötting had made during the summer, together with some performance elements.

The presentation started with Freddie Jones, who as an actor has long been associated with Clare, reading 'I am'. This much-read poem is in danger of over-exposure, but Freddie Jones's reading was magnificent and moving. It was like listening to those well-known speeches in Shakespeare when the actor makes you feel you're hearing the words for the first time. This was followed by Iain Sinclair talking about his relationship with Clare.

Then came an edited, shortened version of the film. The cover of the 2014 *JCS Journal* shows Toby Jones as John Clare, photographed using pinhole photography, a still, one might say, from the film, and it gives a good idea of the visual quality of Kötting's work. Opening shots of the forest, all black and white of course, had a ghostly luminescence that was absolutely beautiful. Live performers on a range of unconventional instruments, provided an accompaniment that sounded like birdsong. Later they were joined by a singer, who also appeared in the film.

The video fell into separate sections, some showed Toby Jones as Clare wandering through the forest, some showed a motley collection of people in costume walking along the obviously modern road. There was an encounter between Clare and a Straw Bear (played by Andrew Kötting), and another scene showed our own Simon Kövesi impersonating Jack Randall, the boxer whom Clare admired, and being interviewed by Iain Sinclair.

Another 'performance' aspect of the presentation was Iain Sinclair's intermittent spoken commentary. And at one point we saw the Straw Bear (in Kötting's words, 'an alter-ego and metaphor for "otherness"') both on the screen and in the flesh – or should I say in the straw? – followed by a musician playing a drum.

The total effect of the combined filmic and performance elements was disorientating, hallucinatory; it captured, I felt, something of the mental and physical confusion that Clare describes in *Journey out of Essex*. There is a short clip on YouTube which gives some idea of the film the Kötting has made: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fbLcxGudnys>.

Valerie Pedlar

## NEW PUBLICATIONS BY JCS MEMBERS

***Just Deserts* by Mark Storey.** Flemish Old Masters Press, 56 Queenswood Road, Moseley, Birmingham B13 9AX, 2014, £7.50. Mark has published several books of poetry, but *Just Deserts* is a prose fiction that draws on his experience as a literary academic. Like the short stories of his earlier *Are We Having Fun Yet*, this long story indicates a keen interest in the follies and quirks of human relationships.

***Number Sixty Six* by Pete Relph.** P.R. Books, 61A The Broadway, Loughton, Essex IG10 3SX, 2014, £6.20. Set in 1976, the year of the long hot summer, this fictionalized memoir describes the lives and loves of a disparate collection of people, who arrive to squat in a former grand Victorian mansion, Number Sixty Six. Pete moves beyond the private and the personal to describe the cultural and environmental concerns of the society of that time.

## **FORTHCOMING EVENTS**

### **Saturday, 9 May 2015**

Performance of *Clare's Journey* at The Chapel Royal, North Street, Brighton at 2.30 pm.

As part of Brighton Fringe Festival the Maida Vale Singers are giving a concert which is part financed by The John Clare Society. They will perform *Clare's Journey*, a dramatic cantata for tenor, baritone, mezzo soprano and soprano voices and piano, with music by Terence Deadman and words by Trevor Harvey, telling the story of the arduous journey Clare made from Epping according to the account in his journal. Tickets are available for society members at the special price of £4.00 and may be reserved through Terence: 01273 775729 or [terencedeadman@gmail.com](mailto:terencedeadman@gmail.com).

### **Saturday – Sunday, 30-31 May 2015**

The Alliance of Literary Societies annual weekend, York.

All members of the John Clare society are automatically members of the ALS, through our affiliation. If anyone wishes to attend the annual weekend, they will be most welcome. This year's event takes place in York and is hosted by the Trollope Society. It will include walks and talks and possibly a short coach trip. There is also a most enjoyable Saturday evening dinner. These events really are good fun. More detail and a booking form will appear in due course on the ALS website, or you can email me at [ljc1049@gmail.com](mailto:ljc1049@gmail.com) and I'll circulate the info when I have it. You can read reports on previous events at the website: [www.allianceofliterarysocieties.org.uk](http://www.allianceofliterarysocieties.org.uk). We already have some JCS members going, so you will not be alone!

Linda Curry

**...and of course the JCS Festival 10-12 July 2015.**

## NEW MEMBERS

The following have joined since the last newsletter:

Mr G J Catt, Horam

Ms J M Gruber, Saffron Walden

Dr C Hunter & Mr F Bonham, Ruislip

Mr & Mrs J Marter, Blandford Forum

Mary Ellen Smith, NAJCS

Mrs S Dring, Stamford

Mr D Bishop, Chorlton-cum-Hardy

Lesley Newitt, The Bluebell, Helpston

Prof C Pinney, Cambridge

Miss A Bow-Bertrand, Cambridge



Participants in the Cambridge symposium wend their way through the Botanic Garden. Photograph by Valerie Pedlar.