



THE  
*JOHN CLARE SOCIETY*

*Newsletter*

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## THE JOHN CLARE SOCIETY

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**The John Clare Society Website:** <http://johnclaresociety.blogspot.com>

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## EDITORIAL

This newsletter begins with Linda Curry's tribute to Ronnie Blythe, who has been our valued President ever since the Society began, and a welcome to our new President, Carry Akroyd.

There is also news on p.6 of an award that is being made to one of the Society's most hard-working members, Vice President Peter Moyse.

As well as a preliminary announcement regarding events at the 2016 John Clare Society Festival on p.7, there are details of a number of forthcoming events on p.19. One of these, to be run jointly by the JCS and the George Borrow Society, will be held in Epping, and you will find other items in the pages that follow that relate to Clare's time at Matthew Allen's asylum in Epping.

Finally – and most importantly – we need a new editor for this newsletter. I have been editing it for 8 years now and cannot stand for chairman in July and continue as newsletter editor. I should be delighted to talk to anyone who thinks they might be interested and would like to know more about what is involved. Please contact me by email in the first place: [vpedlar@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:vpedlar@yahoo.co.uk).

Valerie Pedlar

## The John Clare Society President

Ronnie Blythe has been our President from our inception but, sadly, decided at the AGM this year that it was time to retire. We shall certainly miss his wonderful Presidential Addresses on the Saturday at festival, in addition of course to his help and support!

Our new President will be Carry Akroyd, whom those of you who are regular attendees at Festival will have met. Carry is a painter and printmaker, and has been a solid supporter of the Society for many years. She is also the illustrator for *The Wood is Sweet* and *This Happy Spirit*, published by the Society. We are delighted to welcome her as our new President.

As a token of our indebtedness to Ronnie, we are arranging for the planting of three oak trees at Swaddywell – with the help of the Langdyke Trust. The three trees will be around 6 to 8 feet high and will each commemorate Clare, Ronnie and Edmund Blunden. Edmund's daughter, Margi, will be giving the Saturday afternoon talk at festival, and there will be a slot in the programme for the official unveiling of the trees.

I am sure you will join with me in thanking Ronnie for the devotion he has shown to our cause over the years. We are forever in his debt.

Linda Curry, Chair



Ronald Blythe. Sketch by Kesley Thornton.

## Lifetime Achievement Civic Award 2015 to Mr Peter Moyse

We were delighted to accompany Peter Moyse to the Peterborough City Council meeting for the announcement of this year's Civic Awards. He has gained the Lifetime Achievement Award in recognition of his work as a founder member of the John Clare Society in 1981 and his diligence in promoting John Clare's work.

The citation recognises Peter as a well-respected individual both locally and in the field of John Clare studies, who has worked tirelessly in the community and deserves to be recognised for his work.

The award ceremony will be in February and we hope to cover this in the next newsletter.

Mavis Leverington



The medal donated by the John Clare Society for the winner of the Annual Poetry Competition held for the pupils of the John Clare Primary School, Helpston, on the Friday of the John Clare Society Festival in July. Photograph by Peter Moyse.

## The John Clare Society Festival 15-17 July 2016

Our annual Festival once again takes place during the weekend nearest to Clare's birthday, this year 15 to 17 July. As I write, the Festival Planning Group has not quite finalised the theme for the Festival but it will be something along the lines of 'Rediscovering Clare'.

We will begin, as always, with the Midsummer Cushions Ceremony at the church on Friday and the results of the children's poetry competition. In the past, the winning entries have had their names inscribed on a shield which is displayed in the John Clare School but this is now full, so this year the children with winning poems will receive special medals to hang round their necks and show off to their friends and families (see photograph on p.6).

On the Saturday, the main parking will be as last year, in a field opposite the school, and stalls will be in Botolph's Barn, down the road from the church, as well as one or two more along the roadside. The AGM, the President's talk and the afternoon talk will take place, as in the last two years, in St. Botolph's Church. There will be the usual excellent lunches and teas at the Village Hall and the Blue Bell and light lunches in John Clare Cottage.

The talk in the afternoon this year is to be given by Margi Blunden, the daughter of the war poet Edmund Blunden who was one of the first 're-discoverers' of Clare in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The evening concert will be in the church from 6.00 to 7.00 pm and will be given by the Big Fiddle Band with music related to Clare and his times.

A Clare-related church service will take place on the Sunday and our Festival will be concluded with light refreshments in the church following the service.

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

## Solitude *versus* Society in Two Sonnets

When we read Clare's nature poetry, I suppose most of us imagine him walking alone through the fields, observing and meditating. The poet as solitary rambler is, of course, a familiar literary trope which can be traced back from the Romantics through Gray and Milton to Spenser and beyond. Clare, a great reader as well a great writer, was well aware of this, but his descriptions of solitary walks also reflect the inclinations of a man who sought out 'particular spots which [he] was fond of from the beauty or *secrecy* of the scenes' (my italics). There was another side to Clare, though. As a young man, he was a keen participant in village festivities which gave him the chance to pursue local girls and he was also a regular attender at the cottage known as Bachelors' Hall, the site of a convivial drinking club. As it happens, this conflict between solitude and society is displayed in interesting ways in two sonnets which lie on facing pages of Jonathan Bate's selection, 'The Sand Martin' and 'The Hollow Tree'.

Sand martins nest in holes in river banks and similar places. They are colonial birds, one of the last creatures, one might think, that a poet would choose as an image of solitude. Yet, look how Clare begins this sonnet:

Thou hermit haunter of the lonely glen  
And common wild and heath – the desolate face  
Of rude waste landscapes far away from man ...

Clare's wish to associate the bird with solitude and lonely places is abundantly clear. Nor can we resolve this apparent paradox by assuming that he is thinking of the species collectively, as we see here:

I've seen thee far away from all thy tribe  
Flirting about the unfrequented sky  
And felt a feeling that I can't describe  
Of lone seclusion and a hermit joy.

The solitary bird's ability to escape from its 'tribe' and explore 'the unfrequented sky' is felt as inspiring and exhilarating. The situation described here is the opposite, we might say, of Cowper's poignant identification with 'a stricken deer that left the herd'. Unlike Cowper's wounded animal losing touch with its fellows, Clare's sand martin makes a temporary escape from a 'tribe' which itself frequents lonely places: it achieves a quintessence of solitude.

The tensions between solitude and society in 'The Hollow Tree' are, perhaps, more difficult to resolve. At first the situation seems to be straightforward:

How oft a summer shower hath started me  
To seek for shelter in a hollow tree.

It's pleasing, though, to note the use of 'started', the word employed so often by Clare to describe the reaction of birds to human intrusion; here, it is the speaker who is 'started' by the shower. The shelter of

the huge tree, 'Where ten might sit upon the battered floor', provokes a fantasy of the solitary life:

And he who chose a hermit life to share  
Might have a door and make a cabin there.

We might find hints of tension here already. While the reference to 'ten' can be dismissed as merely descriptive of the tree's dimensions, the idea of *sharing* a hermit life is certainly odd. However, there is no denying that the sonnet now takes a radically different course:

They seemed so like a house that our desires  
Would call them so and make our gypsy fires  
And eat field dinners of the juicy peas  
Till we were wet and drabbled to the knees.

Suddenly, singular becomes plural: 'me' and 'he' become 'our' and 'we'. The solitary adult indulging fantasies of 'a hermit life' is abruptly replaced by a group of children pretending to live like gypsies, highlighted by the telling detail of the pea juice running down to their 'drabbled knees'. There is no return to the solitary adult. The sonnet ends with a familiar move by Clare, the claim that some experience in childhood was whole or perfect:

But in our old tree house, rain as it might,  
Not one drop fell although it rained till night.

It turns out that the tension between solitude and society in 'The Hollow Tree' is only one aspect of that wider process which is described so powerfully in Clare's great poem 'Childhood'. Youth, 'that place of prime', is the time of sociability, activity and wholeness; adulthood is characterized by solitude, introspection and, at worst, alienation. Solitude, however, can still be felt as positive, as when the poet identifies with the exhilaration of the sand martin leaving its fellows and seeking the freedom of the empty skies.

David Stokes



Samuel Palmer, The Lonely Tower (1879).

## Freedom and Enclosure – for John Clare

Do not move my bones from this village, they would  
creak and be lost.

Without Royce Wood, my ears could no longer drink in the  
birdsong.

My heart would leave my chest without the hawthorn  
covered in front.

Never take me from the heath where my soul rises and  
shall always belong.

Woodcroft will forever scar the inside of my eyelids with  
its hills and brook.

My words run freely through its stream, bubbling to the  
surface with affection.

I have traced each boschage like the lines of my hand,  
each bramble and every nook.

This wild briar land is brimming with inspiration and  
nature's perfection.

My skull would crack if the sweet retreat of Swaddywell  
were to be closed to me.

All of its roaming contours are like old friends, I know it  
all piece by piece.

The hands I use to write could not compose if I am parted  
from the common ash tree.

The use of my fingers would decay and the ink that ebbs  
from my thought would cease.

To fell fair Oxey Wood's soft weald, is like carving a hole  
in my own vital force.

Framing the free and tangled hedges into tidy parcels by  
fencing and turning.

Swerving many a small river away from its natural flow  
and constant course

Is like ripping all poetry from out of their books for  
shredding and burning.

I fear the vast roads that would lay open the green  
pasture where I pace.

Where would I find amity? If not for the wild rosemary  
and its remembrances.

The privateers that stake claim to each childhood den and  
open space.

It would etch in my mind the stark phrases: no entry and  
trespasses.

Trap my body in small buildings and enclaves and my  
mind can survive.  
Till it wanders with its spirit amongst the supple fields and  
wild heaths.  
If those nature's gifts are taken from me then how can  
my ballads thrive?  
Gone would be the freedom of my thought and the  
enclosure of all beliefs.

Keely Jane Mills



Swaddywell, May 2014. Photo: Valerie Pedlar.

Alan Ross writes:

I am a relatively new member of the John Clare Society... and have to say I am thoroughly enjoying the experience. I stumbled on John Clare Cottage two and a half years ago while staying in the area, and returned again and again... I began what might be described as a travel diary, addressed to John Clare, in which I amble about the place rather self-indulgently and versify my impressions...

Here are a couple of excerpts from Alan's verse route planner.

### **A Route Planner for John Clare**

Excerpts from a travel diary to Peterborough and beyond, in the imaginary company of the poet John Clare.

#### **Introduction**

I'm hitching a ride with you,  
John. I hope you don't mind;  
Though an odder mode of transport  
It would be hard to find.  
Memoirs; letters; verse:  
All vehicles of thought  
Bringing renewal through  
Instruction and joy. You've taught  
Me there are other perspectives  
Glimpsed in other times  
And places. So let your rhymes  
Carry us onward; and as  
We go I'll dispense information  
On Twenty-First Century navigation.

#### **November 2012**

Had I read, snugly  
Home nearby, all  
Your reams, I might know  
If incarcerated  
At High Beech you ever  
Speculated on  
The homing instinct in birds –  
'Till Northampton discovered  
You there was no home.

My point is, you could  
Have strolled from your High  
Beech asylum down  
Mott Street, Avey Lane

Or Lippetts Hill, got  
Directions from a nurseryman  
On the Sewardstone Road,  
Then hitched at Junction Twenty-  
Six on the M Twenty-  
Five, with two options:  
West, then up on the A1  
All the way; or –

My preference – east  
To the M11, Cambridge,  
A14, Huntingdon,  
Peterborough turn-off,  
Yaxley, city centre,  
Then thread the needle up  
The western hem of the city  
Until you get to a sign  
Saying Crematorium...

Alan Ross

Anyone interested in reading more of Alan's *Route Planner for John Clare* can contact him on [alanross1311@gmail.com](mailto:alanross1311@gmail.com)

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Editor: While searching the internet for an illustration to go with Alan's poem, I came across an article which readers might find interesting on [http://www.guardian-series.co.uk/news/5029261.REDBRIDGE\\_HISTORY\\_The\\_secrets\\_of\\_Epping\\_Forest\\_s\\_forgotten\\_mental\\_asylum/](http://www.guardian-series.co.uk/news/5029261.REDBRIDGE_HISTORY_The_secrets_of_Epping_Forest_s_forgotten_mental_asylum/)

## John Clare's sojourn at Doctor Allen's Asylum, Lippits Hill, Loughton 1837-1841

### A Ballad

John Clare's now deemed a poet great,  
His lines now valued for their worth.  
But, in his time, it was his fate,  
He had the course of humble birth.

He had his time of fame and favour  
And Literary London courted him.  
He was their choice, the latest flavour,  
Until discarded on a whim.

So why was Clare thus treated so?  
Shaken by the loss of the commons free,  
He passionately penned poems full of woe,  
Describing this 'crime' for posterity.

He became depressed and lost his zest,  
But some loyal friends supported Clare.  
Arranged his asylum stay for rest,  
Adjacent to Epping Forest fair.

When Clare arrived he was feeling fine  
And described the place as 'beautiful'.  
The houses adorned with roses – grapevine,  
So therapeutic and so bountiful.

He roamed the forest as free as a lark  
And discovered its life with observant eye.  
He loved 'hill of fern' and the 'mossy brook'  
That crosses Fairmead – so often dry.

Further up Lippitts Hill was The Owl pub  
Where Clare enjoyed ale and good company.  
It was indeed the social hub  
For the folk in High Beech's community.

The publican was a literary lady  
And enjoyed Clare's cultured company.  
They used to swap books and poesy  
But homesick Clare was now feeling unfree.

His poems took on a different air,  
'Nigh Leopards Hill stands Allen's hells,  
A man there is a prisoner there  
Where lady sods and buggers dwell.'

Clare descends into a depth of despair,  
'My hopes are hopeless, my sky has no sun.'  
He then plans escape with some gypsies who care  
For a man who respects them, a man on the run.

The trees in the forest bade John Clare goodbye  
As he traipsed the long trail to a mute future night.

Pete Relph



The trail of the Centenary Walk in Epping Forest, north of High Beech, England. Photo from Wikipedia.

## Seer

Cursed with intelligence  
He set off  
To simply see.

One day two seasons' later  
In Winter's  
World of snow

He saw one single flower  
Fragisoft  
And trembling.

No name entered his head  
And he wept  
With compassion.

He slept for a lifetime.  
Meltwater spoke  
And he heard.

Into a coloursound world  
He awoke  
Happy twice over.

Roy Taylor



Lippitt's Hill Lodge Folly. Photo via Wikimedia Commons.

## John Clare and Robert Gouger

At the John Clare Society Festival in July, my attention was drawn to an article about Robert Gouger.

In his biography of Clare, Jonathan Bate mentions a Mr Gouger of Oakham 'whom he had met briefly at Gilchrist's [and who] asked him over for some informal "bachelor's fare"' (p.324). There is nothing further about this acquaintance in Bate's book, but an article by Paul Reeve in the *Rutland Record* no.30, pp.397-408 (the journal of the Rutland Local History and Record Society) gives a lot of detail about Gouger, whose family had a silk manufacturing business in Stamford, Nottingham and Oakham. Gouger appears to have written poetry himself, as well as being one of Clare's admirers.

Anyone who is interested in reading this article should contact The Honorary Editor, RLHRS, c/o Rutland County Museum, Catmose Street, Oakham, Rutland LE15 6HW. Or [book.orders@rutlandhistory.org](mailto:book.orders@rutlandhistory.org).

Valerie Pedlar



Statue of Clare at John Clare Cottage. Photo: Valerie Pedlar.

***The John Clare Project, by the Decent Scrapers, CD, £11.50 incl. p&p, available via their website at [johnclaremusic.com](http://johnclaremusic.com)***

The band call themselves Decent Scrapers in tribute to John Clare who described his fiddle playing in these terms. They comprise Paul McCann (concertina), Ed Cains and Susan Cubbin (fiddles and vocal), and John Cubbin (guitar). The music source of their repertoire is George Deacon's *John Clare and the Folk Tradition*, and all titles are from John Clare's notebooks, except *Bachelors Hall*.

If you like fiddle music, I am sure you will like this CD. There are 13 tracks, 3 of which are vocals. It's a real foot tapper. The band will also be performing live at Bishop's Stortford Folk Club on 31 March, and the Harwich Festival of the Arts on 29 June 2016. Check out their website for detail of other gigs.

Linda Curry



*Robert Kinloch's Ball* by Thomas Bewick (1753–1828). Licensed under Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons.

## **FORTHCOMING EVENTS**

### **Centre for John Clare Studies (Cambridge)**

A reminder that the Centre for John Clare Studies discussion group will continue to meet at 1pm on Tuesdays. Forthcoming meetings include:

16 February 2016, led by Erin Lafford

15 March 2016, led by John Goodridge

For further information contact [cjcs@english.cam.ac.uk](mailto:cjcs@english.cam.ac.uk).

### **David Morley, *The Gypsy and the Poet***

On Friday 7th March at 7.30pm in the Saloon, Kimbolton Castle David Morley reading from his book, *The Gypsy and the Poet*, with fiddle and melodeon music from folk band Sheepish Grin Entrance: £4 at the door. All welcome.

### **Mark Storey at Leamington**

The Leamington Literary Society is holding a talk on Tuesday 8 March at 7.30pm at the Dormer Conference Centre, St Peter's Church, Dormer Place, Leamington Spa. Visitors are welcome and the fee is £2.50 per person. The speaker is Mark Storey, that well-known editor of *Clare*: [www.leamingtonliterarysociety.org.uk/programme.php](http://www.leamingtonliterarysociety.org.uk/programme.php).

### **The Alliance of Literary Societies AGM Weekend 2016**

The 2016 ALS weekend takes place 21/22 May in Haworth, hosted by the Brontë Society. (The John Clare Society is affiliated to the ALS, and our members are welcome to attend this event.)

Details of the event can be found at the ALS website:

[www.allianceofliterarysocieties.org.uk](http://www.allianceofliterarysocieties.org.uk). The Brontë Society are opening the Parsonage Museum early on Saturday 21 May (9.15 am) for ALS members, ahead of the public. Registration, etc. will begin at 10.30 am. The weekend includes a talk by Juliet Barker (author of *The Brontës*), entertainment, and optional visits to the Brontë Birthplace at Thornton and a tour of Ponden Hall (*Wuthering Heights*).

### **John Clare and George Borrow weekend**

We are currently working with the George Borrow Society to hold an event in Epping Forest next October. The provisional date and title are 7-9 October 2016: 'Clare, Borrow and the Gypsies of Epping Forest'. Details will appear on the website in due course; so keep an eye out for that, and of course we will say more in the next newsletter.

We hope to have a couple of talks on Borrow and a couple on Clare, linked by the gypsy theme. (They knew the same gypsy families.) There should also be a walk around the High Beech area. So, put it into your diaries. The fee will be an affordable one – and the event will be enjoyable.

Linda Curry

## RECENT PUBLICATIONS

- Sara Guyer, *Reading with John Clare: Biopoetics, Sovereignty, Romanticism* (Fordham University Press, 2015).  
[www.combinedacademic.co.uk/reading-with-john-clare](http://www.combinedacademic.co.uk/reading-with-john-clare)
- The 1827 text of Clare's Shepherd's Calendar is to be circulated monthly by the Journal•Lists website, from New Year's Day. Find out more and subscribe (free and very simple) at <http://journallists.org/sign-up/clares-shepherds-calendar/>.

## JCS COMMITTEE

Would you like to get more involved with the Society? We currently have a vacancy on the committee, but you would be expected to take on a role. It would not be particularly onerous and you could try us out first by attending one of our committee meetings. Our meetings take place on a Saturday in Peterborough about three times a year – and we all attend the Festival in Helpston in July.

If you would be interested, please contact me at [ljc1049@gmail.com](mailto:ljc1049@gmail.com) or by phone at 0121 475 1805.

Linda Curry

## NEW MEMBERS

We welcome the following new members who have joined since the last Newsletter:

David Smith, Hitchin  
Florian Gargaillo from Boston, USA  
Floyd Lockie from Portland, USA  
John Nickerson from Waterlooville, Hants

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My grateful thanks, as always, to the contributors to this issue. Please keep sending in your articles, poems, photos, reviews and thoughts. Items for the June issue should reach me by 1 May please.

Valerie Pedlar