



# The John Clare & Society

Newsletter no. 131

October 2017



## THE JOHN CLARE SOCIETY

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## EDITORIAL

There are probably as many different reasons for being a member of the John Clare Society as there are members of the Society. Our Journal is a significant and respected academic publication; our President and former President are well-known and very active in their fields. I have been gratified to receive appreciative comments even about this Newsletter and this despite my promotion of Matthew Arnold to the status of a musician! But I imagine that for most of our members, the high point of the year must be the Festival, held annually in Helpston, Clare's own village, on the weekend nearest to his birthday, June 13th, and of course reported at length in this issue of the Newsletter.

Festivals do not just happen! They require planning and organising beforehand. Liaison is needed with the other organisations that support us, ranging from Helpston WI who provide the lunches and the refreshments that are still served cheerfully even towards the very end of the day, through to the dancers and singers who entertain throughout the day and in the evening. I shan't attempt a complete list, for fear of missing someone out.

And, despite my use of the idiom, it is wrong to think of 'the day'. The Festival is a three-day event, which begins with the Midsummer Cushion ceremony and the School Poetry competition, and the Friday evening folk session in the Blue Bell (eloquently described by members Bridget Somekh and Ellis Hall in their report in the next few pages). There is also the Church service on the Sunday.

Festivals need volunteers to run the sales, membership and information stands. They need publicists. Members can help here by volunteering and even 'spreading the word' – I recall several people who Ann Marshall, Norman Lee and I met at the Peterborough Heritage Festivals who subsequently came to Helpston for the Clare Festival and enjoyed themselves immensely even though they had very little knowledge of Clare beforehand. Mostly of course Festivals need members – those who come and participate enthusiastically, or simply sit by the side of the Memorial soaking up the atmosphere, should not underestimate the contribution that they make to the success of the day.

We owe a debt of gratitude to Sue Holgate and the Festival Committee for their continuing work with this event. But we should very much appreciate some of those who come to the event – and already play, as I said, such a great part in its atmosphere – offering their help by volunteering for one of the stands, or joining the Festival planning group, or the Society Committee. Nothing will happen unless someone makes it happen. Please have a word with Sue, or with any other Committee member, if you think that you would like to help in this way. We promise that, at least to begin with, you won't be loaded with responsibility or commitment, but able to learn and participate, in a leisurely way. All Societies need (another misleading idiom) 'new blood': the John Clare Society is not an exception to this rule.

**Stephen Sullivan**

# THE JOHN CLARE FESTIVAL 14-16 JULY 2017

## Influences on John Clare

### A Personal view by Bridget Somekh and Ellis Hall

*Saved from the wreck of time – as beads  
Or broken pots among the weeds  
Of curious shapes –*

John Clare, 'July' (Feb 1826)



*This year's display of Midsummer Cushions, arranged by the pupils of the John Clare School.*

*Photo: V Pedlar*

This was our third John Clare Festival, and we were starting to feel like old hands, returning to a place that had grown so familiar and loved that it felt a little like coming home. We immediately headed for the Bluebell to get our pints of 'The Village Poet', this year's festival ale, and settled ourselves at a large corner table in The Poet's Bar. We had arranged to meet there with some fellow Clareans for a meal before the Music and Song session. The main topic of conversation, as we ate and drank, was our shared passion for Clare's poetry. Among other things,

we learned how Roger Rowe had discovered a previously unknown poem in the Peterborough archive, debated the advantages of adding punctuation before reading Clare aloud, and saluted the political acuity of a man in poverty writing about *accursed wealth*.

The room filled up quickly as locals and festival-goers gathered to hear members of Peterborough Morris, The Greenwood Quire, Peterborough Folk Club and Haconby Music in a session compèred by Mike Stevens. Players and audience alike were tightly packed beneath the same ceiling beams that had witnessed Parker Clare sing and his son play the fiddle. The session was kicked off with two tunes from the Clare manuscript: 'The Battle of Prague Quickstep' and 'Ashley's ride', led by Matt Simons on melodeon and Mike on viola. Mike's wife, Sally, sang among others 'The Farmer's Anthem' and 'The Sweet Nightingale'; and Matt, Mike and Vaughan Roberts (on fiddle) led several tune sets.

Other musicians included Mel on banjo and Ken Baddeley and friend Linda on various wind instruments. Memorably, Ken introduced us to an obscure brass instrument called the Ophicleide (Greek for 'keyed serpent') invented in 1817 by the army to replace their marching bands' wooden serpents, as these were prone to rotting in hot, damp climates. He explained that the Huntingdon Militia had purchased two of these contraptions, so it's likely Clare knew about them.

Pat, who'd learnt all he knew in the Irish Guards, played 'She Moved Through the Fair' on the Scottish small pipes, Mike sang 'Fathom the Bowl' and Norman

performed, unaccompanied, 'The Week Before Easter', a song that has been in the Clare family for two hundred years. Just before the interval, members of the Greenwood Quire and the Bedford Gallery Quire sang a four-part setting of Clare's 'Nature's Hymn to the Deity', to earlier music by John Sheeles (1688-1761).

There was poetry, too: John Stafford read an extract from 'The Progress of Rhyme' about the rights of weeds; and Jilly Sage recited lines from the opening of 'Helpstone'. In what has now become a tradition, Ollie from the Peterborough Morris finished up the evening by giving a truly spellbinding and athletic performance of a jig to the Headington Quarry Morris Men's 'Old Mother Oxford', played by his brother, Matt.

Next morning, before the AGM, there was time to browse among the offerings in Botolph's barn. Among others, Noel Crick was there with his amazing collection of Clare-related books, as was Roger with his Arbour Limited Editions and chapbooks, and Clare's comic novel, *The Memoirs of Uncle Barnaby*, published for the very first time by Arbour earlier this year.

Apart from its business function, the AGM is important as a communal gathering. It was good to hear updates on much-missed absent friends in addition to having the year's procedures formally recorded. Carry Akroyd began her President's Address with two unforgettable readings from *The Seasons*: the first illustrating Thomson's exuberant over-use of exclamation marks; and the second his attention to tiny details of everyday life (including 'doggy dreams') which inspired the young John Clare.

Carry focused on the pictorial qualities of Clare's writing, reading from his sequence of badger sonnets, which she compared to the action-packed paintings of Peter Breughel the Elder. She went on to read from the first version of 'July' that Taylor refused to publish, illustrating how Clare builds up the whole scene with flourishes like 'the laughing prong' of the pitchfork throwing up hay, and comparing his writing method to her own desire in painting to go beyond the present scene, and produce a composite that shows both the here *and* what is beyond the next tree or hill. She ended her talk – in what we hope will become a tradition – by singing poems that Clare wrote as songs.

After lunch, John Goodridge's lecture on 'John Clare's Literary Hero - Robert Bloomfield (1766-1823), Poet and Craftsman' was a revelation. It was fascinating to learn about the similarities in the lives of these two self-educated poets from poor backgrounds, who greatly admired each other's work. Bloomfield was found unfit for agricultural work and sent to work with his brother, who was a shoemaker in London.



Peterborough Morris, at the Bluebell

Photo: David Dykes

Being a puny youth, Bloomfield did no manual work in the shoe factory, but fetched the newspapers and read aloud to the men at work, an occupation that gave him a good grasp of politics and popular literature. His family came from Suffolk and his most famous poem, *The Farmer's Boy*, described agricultural life in the four seasons, in the manner of Thomson. Like Clare he wrote songs and was deeply involved in the music and culture of his village. He became a maker of

the Aeolian harps that so fascinated Coleridge and the other Romantic poets. John's readings from Bloomfield's poetry opened our eyes to the feisty charm of his depictions of rural life, and it was a huge delight when John picked up his guitar and sang several Bloomfield songs. He had just put the last three copies of the Trent Editions Bloomfield's *Selected Poems* on the bookstall, he told us. This led to Bridget and several others madly pursuing Mavis and Peter Leverington across the road, and finishing up at their car where the stall had just been packed away.

*En route* to finding some refreshment we had time to stop and watch traditional dancing in the road outside the church, while a group of hardier folk, unencumbered by a thirst for beer, gathered around the Butter Cross to follow Roger Rowe on his Village Walk (or 'Virtual Pub Crawl' as he described it to us). This was a welcome return of what was always a favourite activity at the AGM.

At four we went back to St Botolph's for the Poetry Reading. In Peter Cox's absence, this was led by Michael Mecham, who welcomed and encouraged the fifteen or so readers to speak Clare's words with passion. The poems worked beautifully together. They ranged from old favourites ('Clock o' Clay' and 'Little Trotty Wagtail') to extracts from 'Don Juan', 'Childe Harold' and 'The Flitting'.

The day ended with a concert by Decent Scrapers, presenting their John Clare Project, *Music from the Manuscripts* (CDs available). Ed Caines's dynamic fiddle playing and Susan Cubbin's lyrical singing were supported beautifully by Paul McCann's duet concertina and John Cubbin's guitar. They performed pieces drawn from Clare's songs and manuscripts of folk music, interspersed with readings from the letters and the journal placed carefully within the context of his life and ideas; theirs was a thoughtful, intelligent and sensitive approach that made the whole experience hugely memorable.

Sadly, we were unable to stay for Sunday's church service, but by way of rounding off our festival, we spent Saturday evening enjoying a wonderful meal and good conversation at the Bluebell. It is magical that the pub still thrives where Clare had his first job, and every time we sat in the Poet's Bar we were aware that he had been there before us. Thanks to Lesley and her staff for the great welcome they gave us, as the Bluebell has done every year we have attended the brilliant John Clare Festival, highlight of the Society's calendar.

Thanks also to Sue Holgate and the organising Committee!

**MUSICIANS WANTED** For next year's Saturday evening concert.

Do any members know of a folk band or instrumentalists/singers who could give an hour's concert? We usually like the music to be somehow Clare-related if possible. If you are able to help the Festival Planning Group in this way, we would be most grateful. We pay a small remuneration and cover travel costs. Please get in touch with me at [sueholgate@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:sueholgate@hotmail.co.uk) or phone me on 01353.668438 if you can suggest such a group who would like to perform at the Festival.

Many thanks.

**Sue Holgate, Festival Co-ordinator**

## I Was

I was. Yet what I was  
Now occupies the world  
My rhymes and songs  
Of flowers, fields and birds  
Are passed about and heard...  
Beneath the summer cushions  
Where I lie  
I hear the chancel ring  
With Decent Scrapers  
Celebrating  
Poor John Clare.  
I was, yet strangely now  
I am once more.

**Robin Robertson Edgar**

**5.3.36 – 19.7.17**

Helpston Church

July 15, 2017



Robin Edgar was an itinerant wordsmith, singer and musician throughout his social life; journalling life through poetry, rhyme and doggerel verse. His archive is at <http://worstverse.wordpress.com>. 'I Was' was to be – poignantly – his last offering, written a few days before his passing. The poem and photograph are printed by permission of Jon Edgar.

*As the band Decent Scrapers we were privileged to be the recipients of Rob's last poem 'I Was' following our concert at the John Clare festival in Helpston church on July 15th. We were very sorry to hear of Rob's passing.*

*We took his poem to be a reference to John Clare's 'I Am' which many will know. It was really moving to receive this poem. Although at one level it was Rob doing what he did so well – mimicking poets' 'voices' – we felt that Rob appreciated what we have been trying to do with the music that John Clare used to play and that he felt a human connection. As one poet/song-writing friend said, 'That's better than a thousand reviews.'*

*John Cubbin, Sue Cubbin, Paul McCann, Ed Caines*

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

Pat Harmer, Nailsworth  
Gary Haines, Bow, London  
Paul Toomer, Handsworth Wood, Birmingham  
W J Bartley, Newark on Trent  
Richard and Deborah Ollier, Solihull  
Bronwyn Schlenk, Cokethorpe School, Witney  
Julia Corbett, Taunton  
Keith Mitchell, Mawdesley, Lancs  
Clifford Cook, Dumfries  
Jane Benton, Bourne  
Peter and Nancy Baker, Peterborough  
Jo Isaac, Cambridge  
Paul Burns, Colchester  
David Grove, Stamford  
Paul Bennett, Stamford  
David Robbins, Soham  
Stephen North, Monmouth  
Philip Reddall, Cheswardine, Shropshire  
Patrick Vincent, Neuchâtel, Switzerland  
A H McCoy, Sturminster Newton  
Fran Hutchinson, Fleckney, Leics

*September 2017*

***Robert Heyes, Membership Secretary***

## **JOHN CLARE PRIMARY SCHOOL**

### **Prizewinning poems from this year's Festival**

#### **DAISIES**

Daisies are like sweet milk  
Daisies are like vanilla ice-cream  
Daisies are paper white  
Daisies are like boiled eggs  
Daisies are like the sun  
Daisies are like the numbers in a watch  
Daisies look like Santas's beard!

**HOME GROUP 2:** Tilly Ayres, Lacey Carter, Phoebe Copland, Immie Greville, Oliver Higginbotham, Georgina Kirk, Jasper Meadows, Lilly Tighe, Poppy Treliving.

#### **DAISIES**

Daisies are like white paper  
Daisies are like lemon juice  
Daisies are bright as milk  
Daisies are really white as coconuts  
Daisies are precious with white petals  
Daisies are little and pretty  
Daisies remind me of lemon ice-cream  
Daisies are lemony  
Daisies are beautiful, bright and shining flowers!

**HOME GROUP 4:** Charlie Breslin, Maddie Bunn, George Clarkson, Grace Frisby, JD McCloskey, Lily-Mai Rhodes, Hasan-Ali Said, Ronnie Townsend, Harvey Webb

## FLOWERS

Tulips as pretty as a rainbow  
Bluebells as straight as a ruler  
Sunflowers as bright as the sun  
Snowdrops as white as snow  
Lavender as gentle as a fairy's wing  
Roses as colourful as the sky  
Buttercups as the smell of butter  
Primroses as bumpy as a field  
Poppies as dark as night  
Daffodils as light as the moon  
Dandelions as sweet as lemon  
Crocus as pink as candy-floss.

**Evie Metcalfe**

Woodgate



Sweetful pollen  
Wild smelling  
Beautiful styles  
Job of work  
White glowing  
Water sipper  
Shine on me.

**Oliver Oxbury**

Broadwheel

## FLOWERS

Wood anenomes as bright  
White as a cloud sun light.  
Poppies as red as a heart

Sunflowers filling up field  
Beaming gold in the sun  
Flowers as bright as the moon light.

Lavender as purple as beetroot

**Emily Lawson**

Woodgate

Sweetly smelling  
Field beamer  
Wild grower  
Happily blooming  
Perky petals  
Scenting smells  
Lavishing looks  
Brilliantly bouncing  
Careful colours  
Water wanter  
Summer seeker  
Silently singing  
Gently gazing  
Smell sensation  
Memory soothing  
Beauty symbol.

**Isla Docherty**

Broadwheel

## BLUEBELLS

Silent bells swaying in the spring wind,  
Randomly placed and undisciplined  
Flowers of ye old English ground  
Make not a single sound.  
A blue mist carpet sways in the woods  
Produces a thrill for neighbourhoods  
Heads drooped, not sad.

A sad flower never alone  
During the year they have slowly grown  
A little bulb growing in the earth  
Waiting, waiting for your rebirth  
Unknowing of what lies ahead  
Now little seedling it's time for bed  
Heads drooped, not sad.

The plague of the untamed wild  
Doesn't hurt a single child  
While months go by  
You may very slowly die  
Once your roots are planted there  
You don't go anywhere  
Heads drooped, not sad.

As blue as the midday sky  
What a sight for the eye  
An array of still soldiers  
People don't see you as blurs  
You may have wonderful smells  
Produced by your amazing bells  
Heads drooped, not sad.

Silent bells swaying in the spring wind,  
Randomly placed and undisciplined  
Flowers of ye old English ground,  
Make not a single sound  
A blue mist carpet sways in the woods  
Produces a thrill for the neighbourhoods  
Heads drooped, not sad.

**Jake Fraser**  
Torpel



## THE WILD FLOWER WORLD

Watch my show  
Watch me grow  
I have a lion's mane  
My name is Dandelion.

Cousin Dandelion may have a mane  
But I am not the same.  
White with pink tips  
My name is Daisy

Tall as a tree  
Small as a bee.  
Pretty pink.  
My name is Blossom.

Survivor of war  
Each year I am wore  
Beady black eye ruby red hair  
My name is Poppy.

I'm a cup of gold  
Played with young and old  
I have creeping leaves.  
My name is Buttercup.

Silent bells ringing  
Silent bells singing  
I have a loving smell  
My name is Bluebell.

**Isobel Mason**  
Torpel

## **BLUEBELL**

In the ancient wood I spread and roam  
It's not just me, I know I'm not alone.  
I can be pink or I can be white,  
I like to grow and grow at night.  
As purple as as fresh, ripe plum  
Waking up in the morning sun.  
Bluebell.

I'm very keen for the deep, dark shade,  
It's simply you can see how I'm made.  
I droop and hang all the time,  
I am sure it's definitely not a mime.  
I am so very wild and free  
Although I sit under the big, brown tree.  
Bluebell.

A hundred blue choir bells covering the forest floor  
While the sun sits in the sky watching us in awe.  
I come alive with different colours in May,  
It's no wonder I always want to play.  
People say I'm always bowing, always sad,  
I am a bit sorrowful, just a tad!  
Bluebell.

I am special so they say,  
You cannot pick me, not today!  
One particular insect likes me,  
Also known as the stripy bee.  
I am supposed to catch children for the fairy.  
Don't worry, it's just a myth - I'm not that scary!  
Bluebell.

### **Caitlin Walls**

TorpeI

The three senior poets in TorpeI Class have been given a copy of *The Wood is Sweet* to take to Secondary school with them.

The John Clare Society would like to thank Mavis Leverington and the three judges, Mrs. Sue Young, Mrs Linda Black and Mrs Margaret Chirico, for their work with the school poems this year. Readers may not realise that the original entries are often bright and colourfully-illustrated in a way that we cannot easily reproduce in this publication.

## AMUSED WITH ... INSECTS

*Insects as small as dust are never done  
Wi' glittering dance and reeling in the sun*

....

*The hay-time butterflyes dance up and down  
And gads that teaze like wasps the timid maid  
And drive the herdboys cows to pond and shade  
The Shepherd's Calendar, 'June'.*

Summer insects: not so numerous now as they were in Clare's world – although he certainly did not take them for granted. Besides those in the 'June' extract, there are dragonflies, glow worms, bees, ants and others. From one of his Natural History Letters: *I have often been amused with the manners and habits of Insects but I am not acquainted with entomology to know the names they go by.* [JW & A Tibble, *The Prose of John Clare*, 1952, p.193]. Modestly admitting a lack of entomological learning, Clare nonetheless succeeds in revealing what he sees, hears and, at times, physically feels about insects.

Here I pass over *insects of mysterious birth, Bumble bees ... clinging to the drowking flower* and the *clumby brown beetle* to concentrate on the insect that Clare brings to us through some of his most minimal and lovely writing. He clearly enjoys the grasshopper! His writing about it scintillates; light and physical at the same time, and wholly appropriate. His prose comes alive off the page: *I noticed the cracking of the stubbs in the increasing sun while I gazed among them I lovd to see the heaving grasshopper in his coat of delicate green bounce from stub to stub I listend the hedgecricket with raptures* [Tibble p.26]. Grasshopper – hedgecricket: same family, different genus. He does *know the names they go by!* (Keats also *walked stubble fields* and noted the *hedge-cricket sing*. It does, too, in 'To Autumn'.)

Clare's prose extract deserves close study and *I lovd to see the heaving grasshopper* takes my interest. One of his participles, preceded by the very familiar *I lovd to see*. This isn't a lazy throw-away. We believe him. He has not merely glimpsed a grasshopper, but given it the closest attention. Once again, he surprises us with his word choice: *heaving*. Suddenly the moment is no longer ordinary; it is raised to the particular. *Heaving* can suggest something laborious. An incongruous choice in the context of a grasshopper? No. Clare is aware of its breathing, panting, as it makes its *bounce*. Relative to its size, it is an effort!

This is Clare at his extreme closeness to his subject. Intimate. He shares that intimacy with us, as he does in the masterpiece 'nest' poems. The variation in 'distance' is one of the most fascinating aspects of his writing: His own physical distance in relation to the object or place that, through our imagination, also becomes our space; the closest proximity on one occasion, or the more circumspect restraint (as in 'To the Snipe') or the *unbounded* expansiveness of 'The Mores' .

*In his coat of delicate green* some might dismiss as conventional. But Clare is being direct and honest again. He doesn't try to come up with anything 'poetic' – beyond choosing that *delicate*. No longer merely convention! Next, the verb *bounce* took my attention. Say the word. So 'springingly' onomatopoeic. We will spot an alternative below.

Poets familiar to Clare – Cowley, Keats and Hunt – also wrote ‘grasshopper’ poems. One element common to all is the mood that the poets feel the insect communicates: happiness, contentment. Clare has already told us that he *listend ... with raptures*. But two lines in the sonnet-like ‘Summer Evening’ might seem to contradict this:

*And grasshoppers in merry moods still wear  
The short night weary with their fretting song.*

*Fretting* – isn’t that interesting? Agitated at close of day? Also an association with a stringed instrument, perhaps?

Cowley : ‘Happy insect’ :

*Happy insect, what can be  
In happiness compared to thee ?*

....

*Thou dost innocently enjoy;  
Nor does they luxury destroy.  
The shepherd gladly heareth thee  
More harmonious than he.*

Hunt : ‘To the Grasshopper and the Cricket’:

*Green little vaulter in the summer grass,  
Catching your heart up at the feel of June  
Sole voice that’s heard amidst the lazy noon.....*

Hunt sums up both insects’ songs, concluding with the single word *Mirth*.

Keats : ‘On the Grasshopper and the Cricket’ (The two friends were engaged in a sonnet challenge!). In the heat of the sun

*a voice will run  
From hedge to hedge about the new-mown mead;  
That is the Grasshopper’s – he takes the lead  
In summer luxury, – he has never done  
With his delights; for when tired out with fun  
He rests at ease beneath some pleasant weed.*

Finally, to Clare’s six-lined miniature masterpiece, full of movement and sound, a visual gem of habitat. The mood, undeniably uplifting:

*GRASSHOPPERS go in many a thrumming spring  
And now to stalks of tasselled sour-grass cling,  
That shakes and swees awhile, but still keeps straight;  
While arching oxeye doubles with his weight.  
Next on the cat-tail grass with farther bound  
He springs, that bends until they touch the ground.*

[John Clare Selected Poems, ed Feinstein 1968]

Clare is there, crouching down and in close. And we are with him.

**Norman Goodman**

## **Dr Ronald Blythe CBE**

### **Past President of the John Clare Society**

As Ron Ingamells highlighted at the Society's AGM, those who subscribe regularly to the *Church Times* were concerned to find in February that the editor was having to resort to the archival entries to maintain Ronnie's weekly column. For more than 24 years his 'Word from Wormingford' had appeared regularly each Friday. That equates to 1250 columns or, so we are told, three-quarters of a million words; but it is not these statistics that impress me, so much as the inspiration and freshness that Ronnie brought to his article each week – for here you will find his finest writing on nature, the seasons and the countryside. The Canterbury Press have over the years published ten selections of the columns in book form. The final volume, *Forever Wormingford*, should now be available.

Ronnie's last column was on 17 February, when he had chosen appropriately one of his favourite writers, George Herbert, the greatest poet of the Church of England. Here was a short essay on his proverbs, such as 'The best mirror is an old friend' and 'Soldiers in peace are like chimneys in summer'. Ronnie had been unwell: in particular, his sight had deteriorated; and the time had come to step back from the literary world and to retire from the Church as a lay reader. I am pleased to report that he has made a very good recovery. Cataract operations have restored his sight – no need for glasses – and he is now enjoying life again.

So that I could spend time with him, I spent a week at the end of June at Thorington Hall, on the outskirts of Stoke-by-Nayland, just across the River Stour from Wormingford. The magnificent tower of the Stoke-by-Nayland church would come into view as one descended the farm track to Bottengoms – a quaint name with an unknown origin until Ronnie's book *At the Yeoman's House* was published and brought a document to light that gave the name John Bottengom and a date of 1375. It was a delight to spend beautiful hot June days with him in the cool of that ancient timber-framed farmhouse with the garden flourishing at the height of summer in its bosky way. It is now a relaxed life for Ronnie, taking each day as it comes, there being little need to contemplate the morrow, seeing all the peace of Eden, days of tranquility giving a sense of eternity.

Our friendship goes back to 1950, a span of well over 60 years, when we met in Colchester. Now that the population has trebled, the High Street is full of strange faces and it has lost its intimacy, while the surrounding countryside has become bereft of agricultural workers. We sit and pass the time of day without an agenda, sharing whatever comes to mind: influences, reminiscences, friends and acquaintances, artists, writers and musicians, with a blend of local history and church life. Ronnie is a good raconteur and brings touches of humour to our ponderings. The white cat that featured regularly in the *Church Times* passed away in his sleep last year so we now have the company of Kitty and Dinah, two fine black and white short-coated sisters with bright emerald eyes, re-housed because their mistress was taken into full-time care.

My first introduction to John Clare was around 1950 when I had Geoffrey Grigson's small volume for The Muses Library. Grigson was a writer who introduced me to a number of artists and writers. *The Englishman's Flora*, and *The Shell Country Alphabet*, together with volumes of his essays, sit on my shelves alongside his two pioneering books on Samuel Palmer.

Ronnie and I regularly visit The Crown at Stoke-by-Nayland, one of our favourite haunts, journeying through Nayland where cloth-making flourished, and driving along country lanes where John Constable wandered with his sketchbooks. Ronnie gives the commentary and like the Magi we return another way, via

Wissington ('Wiston'), taking the road in the direction of Bures. We pass Creems Farmhouse, where Adrian Bell lived, and a nearby cottage called 'The Thatch', where Christine and John Nash stayed for the summer vacation when they first came to the Stour Valley in the 1930's. Ronnie never tires of this as a route home, passing Smallbridge Hall, the home of the Waldegrove family and where Queen Elizabeth I visited in 1561 and 1579. As you look across the valley, Bottengoms is shrouded in trees, but neighbour Duncan's barn, a large conspicuous grain store, is a reference point in the landscape. We cross the bridge across the Stour at Wormingford Mill and are back in Essex. This is the part of Wormingford where John Constable's Uncle Abram farmed and worked the mill.

It was a great pleasure to be at this year's Clare Festival. I have not missed an annual gathering at Helpston since the Society's inauguration. John Goodridge's excellent and entertaining talk on Robert Bloomfield revived my interest in this poet. Simon Kövesi was right – when I got home my *Journal* awaited me. The Nightjar, Clare's crepuscular Fern Owl, churrs in Hertfordshire!

## Ronnie receives the CBE at Wormingford

Our Past President, Canon Dr Ronald Blythe M.A. (and one could add 'etc.') was presented with his CBE (Commander of the most Excellent Order of the British Empire) for services to literature by Lord Petre, Lord Lieutenant of Essex at St. Andrew's Church, Wormingford, Essex, on the afternoon of Saturday 29 July.

The Reverend John Chandler gave a very warm welcome to a full church; we had been heralded by a fine peal of bells as we approached the south door. Ian Collins made the introduction to the ceremony, outlining Ronnie's life as a writer and emphasising the praise that is justly due to him for his achievements as novelist, biographer, poet and essayist, as also his writing for the *Church Times* and long service as a lay reader. Ian drew attention to the important role that Christine Nash had played in establishing Ronnie's career as a writer; she was very perceptive and confident that he would become a successful writer and persuaded him to vacate the security of the public library and to freelance. The composer Peter Paul Nash and his wife Kate represented the Nash family. Ron Ingamells and Ann were there as members of the John Clare Society.

Before Lord Petre made the presentation David Holt read extracts from Ronnie's books:

1. *At the Yeoman's House*: part of the section 'The Dwindling' - the early days of John and Christine living at Bottengoms.



Photo: Ian Collins

2. *Akenfield*: 'In the Hour of Death' – William Russ, gravedigger. A grim subject to which the author brings humour recorded in a Suffolk accent.
3. *Outsiders*: 'The Iris Master' – here Ronnie recalls his first visit from Cedric Morris at Benton End, The East Anglian School of Painting and Drawing, on the outskirts of Hadleigh, with the poet James Turner.
4. *Word from Wormingford*: The first collection 1997, 'The Barley Harvest' – in which Ronnie wrote, *I give the annual John Clare Lecture at Helpston, and of the poet's liking to work beside the motherly women as they weeded the crops because he could listen to their stories. It was Clare who identified himself with the vagrant Christ, a fugitive Lord who, although 'the blind met daylight in his eye', encountered inhospitality. In the lecture I call Clare the July man – it is his birth month - and I connect his countryside as best I can with our own. His hymn is painfully direct – 'The sick found health in his reply ... yet he with troubles did remain.'*

Stephen Varcoe, baritone, sang two folk songs, one an arrangement by Imogen Holst, the other in the Essex dialect.

John Chandler gave a short address, linking with Ronnie's ministry in the Chelmsford diocese (where he holds the St. Cedd medal for his role as a Canon at St. Edmundsbury) and expressing thanks for his long service in the benefice of Mount Bures, Little Horksley and Wormingford.

Then came the presentation to Ronnie of the CBE by Lord Petre, with everyone standing to applaud; the cameras started clicking to provide a memento of this inspiring day.

The Rector brought the proceedings to an end with a Closing Prayer.

A marquee had been erected in the churchyard and we shared Ronnie's favourite afternoon treat – tea, cake and sherry!

The programme sheet we were given on its reverse side listed Ronnie's major books, and the list may be useful to members and will be printed in the next Newsletter.

**Alan Cudmore**

*We were very privileged to attend this wonderful ceremony for Ronnie. Everything was beautifully done in his local church at Wormingford – a place which he has served for so many years. What a well-deserved award!*

Ron & Ann Ingamells

## **CENTRE FOR JOHN CLARE STUDIES**

A full report of the conference, "John Clare and the Art of Birdwatching" held on 15 September 2017, will appear in the next Newsletter. The Centre for John Clare Studies proposes to continue with its series of lunch-time discussion groups in Cambridge during the next academic year. All those interested in Clare are invited, and it is suggested that you should register with them at [cjcs@english.cam.ac.uk](mailto:cjcs@english.cam.ac.uk).

## THE ARBOUR CHAPBOOK SERIES: No.5, *ACCURSED WEALTH*

On 16 July, whilst many of us were still at the Society's Festival, Jeremy Corbyn quoted John Clare at the Tolpuddle Festival:

Inclosure came and trampled on the grave  
Of labour's rights and left the poor a slave ...  
And birds and trees and flowers without a name  
All sighed when lawless law's enclosure came.

Even in 2017, without doubt, Clare is as relevant as ever. Here are the lines from his 1820 collection *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* that his publisher had expunged from the book in the second and subsequent editions, much to Clare's annoyance:

Accursed wealth oer bounding human laws  
Of every evil thou remains the cause  
Victims of want those wretches such as me  
Too truly lay their wretchedness to thee  
Thou art the bar that keeps from being fed  
& thine our loss of labour & of bread  
Thou art the cause that levels every tree  
& woods bow down to clear a way for thee

'Accursed Wealth' – those two words echo down the generations for any student of Clare, whether a scholar or simply a reader of the great poet's work. Right from the early poems that have come down to us, we find in Clare an honesty that is often painful to observe. We all know that here was a man born in grinding poverty but, perhaps because of naivety, roundly cheated by his publishers of much of his earnings:

& tho I know I am cheated such is the cunning of avarice [that] like the  
tricks of a conjuror it defies detection

It is hardly surprising that Clare was personally affronted by the actions of those who should have been acting on his behalf. As he appended to one 'financial' statement from Drury and Taylor:

How can this be? I never sold the poems for any price -- what money I had of  
Drury was given me on account of profits to be received but here it seems I  
have got nothing and am brought in minus twenty pounds of which I never  
received a sixpence -- or it seems that by the sale of these four thousand  
copies I have lost that much-- and Drury told me that 5,000 copies had been  
printed tho' 4,000 only are accounted for.

Clare claims not to have benefitted from these sales by a single penny. All this simply cemented his long-held belief that, in the words of his essay 'Apology for the Poor':

Every restraint now adays is laid on poverty & every liberty is given to luxury  
..... every nessesary article with the poor is taxed & every luxury with the rich  
goes riot free

For Clare all this is cemented into to place in his mind by the evidence of the enclosure around Helpston.

Clare's poetic response to the dramatic transformations in society of the time provides a unique, eye-witness account of the impact these changes had on the people who were their victims. The only voice of a rural working man and victim of the enclosures that we have. Read Clare for yourself and will get a very good idea of what the ordinary labourer thought.

They give me eight pence by the day

& make it up at night  
With six pence worth of parish pay  
& can ye call it right

Nay they have stopt me when Ive gone  
To take that weight away  
& backed deceptions wrong  
To take your gains away

*Accursed Wealth* is the fifth Chapbook in the series, and was published on 4 September. It is available from me for £4 including P&P. Email me at arborfield@gmail.com

**Roger Rowe**



## **JOHN CLARE: An Introduction**

At the kind invitation of Sue Holgate, on 28 May, our mutual friend Jane and I went with Sue to John Clare's birth village of Helpston to attend an event aimed at widening one's knowledge of this famous 'Pastoral Poet'. It was a delight.

The event was held in the village church of St. Botolph and we were led through Clare's story via an excellent laptop presentation of visual images relating to his life and the reading of his poems. We journeyed through Clare's 71 years of mixed fortune and poor health, during all of which he never failed to relate to the countryside surrounding him. Through his poetry he documented the changes in farming methods, the surrounding flora and fauna, love and life. All aspects were thoroughly and skilfully covered by John Stafford and Richard Ollier. What is more, during the interval, we were treated to a superb tea provided by members of the Society.

Sitting in the church that Clare attended, surrounded by the churchyard in which he is buried, made the afternoon even more significant and poignant; I almost felt his presence. Previously I had only an over-view of Clare's life, loves and inspirations. This May afternoon brought everything into focus and greatly enhances my knowledge and understanding of the man and his life. As a result his poems have even greater meaning and significance. In a world that sees the ever-changing nature of – well – nature, I feel that Clare's insights may indeed have some bearing on the work of those who today write equally eloquently about nature, Robert McFarlane for example. Thus Clare's legacy continues and his poems remain as relevant as ever. The Society's aim was met and I am very glad I went to Helpston on a Sunday afternoon in May.

**Diana Silk**

# JOHN CLARE SOCIETY BOOK SALE

Thanks to all those members who supported the sale of the books that Peter Moyse bequeathed to the Society - and to Mavis and Peter Leverington for organising everything. Only 16 of Peter's books remain unsold, and they are re-advertised here. They have been joined by 27 other books, the remainder of a collection donated to the Society by a former member, which we have numbered using an alphabetical system, and listed in such a way that duplicated texts are easily identified.

This time around, the sale is being handled by Stephen Sullivan (address below). The sale is now open, and requests will be dealt with in order received. E-mail orders can be accepted, and prices remain broadly the same.

Please note that it is not the intention of the Society to remain in the book-selling business. We are all volunteers, responding as best we can to the wishes of our former members in dealing with two remarkable collections of Clare material.

## CONDITIONS OF SALE:

- 1. SOCIETY MEMBERS wishing to purchase at the listed sale price, one or more of these donated books, please send an e-mail or a written note by post to Stephen Sullivan at the address below, quoting the book reference number(s) giving your name, postal address, and EITHER an e-mail or a telephone contact.**
2. DO NOT SEND MONEY or any form of payment at this stage.
3. If you are ordering by post, it will only be possible to to reply by post if you include a Stamped Addressed Envelope. We suggest that you should include an e-mail or a telephone number if at all possible.
4. All books are pre-owned and are offered in good faith to members at a fair price that the Society believe reflects their good condition and rarity. Some of the books are signed by their authors. Books which are worn or marked are described as such, and this is reflected in the price.
5. The sale is immediately open. Requests will be dealt with strictly in the order that they are received.
6. Stephen Sullivan will contact successful buyers by e-mail or telephone to arrange payment to the John Clare Society, preferably by cheque. Cheques should be made out to the John Clare Society.
7. The listed prices do not include postage & packing. To cover this an additional cost of £2 will be added to the purchase price of each book except for the very lightest. If you are successful in buying a rare or more expensive book from Group 4 of the list, the Society will arrange recorded postage at an extra charge. Overseas postage will be charged at cost.

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## ***Wind, Rain & Sun: a concert at Christ Church, West Didsbury, Manchester***

On 20 May, the anniversary of John Clare's death, as it happens, I attended a concert which included *The John Clare Cantata* by Malcolm Arnold. Like many other lovers of Clare's poetry I had heard of this piece, but I had never heard it performed, nor, despite nearly fifty years as a choral singer in the north-west and in London, had I ever had the opportunity of singing in a performance.

There were, of course, other works in the concert, but it was the Arnold I was most anxious to hear, and I was not disappointed in the performance given by the William Byrd Singers under their conductor, Keith Orrell, with the unusual accompaniment of piano duet (Rosalind Hall and James Pelham). The cantata was written in 1956, a time when Clare was not so well-known a poet as he is now, and I was intrigued that Arnold had chosen his poetry to set to music. In fact the indefatigable Clare scholars, John and Anne Tibble, had published their attractive two-volume edition of Clare poems (a treasure-trove for composers) in 1935, Benjamin Britten had already drawn on Clare for one of the movements in his *Spring Symphony* (1949), and one of his five *Flower Songs* (1950) is a setting of 'The Evening Primrose'. But as well as this, Arnold, like Clare, was a native of Northamptonshire, and even spent some time in the asylum (St Andrew's, Northampton) where Clare had lived the last 22 years of his life.

*The John Clare Cantata* has five movements and an epilogue, following the cycle of the seasons. In the first, 'Winter Snow Storm', the opening arpeggio figures played pianissimo on the piano hint at the swirling snow, while the voices in mostly syllabic writing get through the fourteen lines of the sonnet. Arnold doesn't hang about; here, as in the other movements, the vocal lines have little melisma and the only repetition is when the voices enter imitatively. In eleven minutes (the approximate running time) the music covers three sonnets, one three-stanza poem, twelve lines of another poem and the five lines of the epilogue. This is one test for the singers: communicating a lot of text, getting their tongues round Clare's rich and evocative descriptions of rural scenes. A lot of the vocal writing is homophonic, which makes it easier to hear the words, and in this performance the choir's diction was satisfyingly clear. The singers were also admirably nimble in their accomplishment of Arnold's rhythms.

The second movement, 'March', about the insects beginning to wake after their winter sleep, has a piano duet introduction imitative of insects hopping and buzzing. By contrast the third movement, 'Spring', is lyrical and flowing, as the choir sing about the gentle beauties of that loveliest of seasons in a beautiful unison melody with the simplest accompaniment. With the fourth movement we are brought back to insects ('These tiny loiterers on the barley's beard') and the piano duo recapitulates the contrasting motifs of cheeky hopping and humming. But this time Arnold writes vocal lines that are more playful, with contrasting sections for upper and lower voices, imitative entries and more contrapuntal movement. The music works to a climax with the words 'whose sun may bring them golden wine', before dying away as the insects go to sleep at the end of day.

After all this activity the fifth movement, 'Autumn', provides a tranquil interlude as the choir sings unaccompanied. The mood here is very different from that of Keats's poem 'To Autumn'; where he sees richness and plenty, and hears music in the sounds of nature, Clare bewails the loss of 'the sweets of

Spring' and concludes that 'The joys of this world are but born to die'. The prevailing melancholy is emphasised towards the end of the movement as unison singing gives prominence to the words, 'There hangs a dreariness about the scene / A present shadow of a bright has been', and imitative entries emphasise the words 'Flowers dry to seed' and then 'Flown is the bird'. Arnold, however, does not allow his cantata to end on this depressing note. The Epilogue returns us to the words and music with which the piece started ('Winter is come in earnest') – but only for a couple of lines of the sonnet. The choir dies away as it sings of the snow spreading 'a world of calm' and the sopranos are left to sing alone: 'Yet 'neath the blackest cloud a sunbeam flings / Its cheering praise of returning Spring'. This is the concluding couplet of another sonnet about winter, and by choosing these words Arnold emphasises the more positive aspect of nature's cycle.

The performance by the William Byrd Singers was most accomplished; the unaccompanied singing was beautiful and there were good dynamic contrasts. Articulating the words, often at speed, must have been something of a challenge, and I am inclined to blame Arnold, rather than the singers, that I couldn't catch all of them.

An unusual feature of Arnold's cantata is that the choir is accompanied by piano duo. It was no surprise, then, to find that the William Byrd Singer's concert included Brahms glorious *Liebesliederwalzer* in a beautifully nuanced performance by the choir, accompanied by the piano duo with elegance and verve. Although there are several references to birds, the name theme of the *Liebeslieder*, as the title implies, is love. But wind, rain and sun, the title of the concert, came to the fore in the final piece, *The Stone of Arthur* by the contemporary composer, Edwin Roxburgh. The text by Julie Roxburgh refers to characters from the Arthurian legend – Morgan le Faye, Vivienne, Merlin – but they are thoroughly incorporated into poems that start from the dread that 'Greed has taken all...and the Earth will not hold', moving on to explore the regenerative power of nature: 'And Gaia will return with wind, and rain and sun'.

In addition to these three choral works the programme included solos sung by members of the choir, and piano solos played by James Pelham. The concert started with two pieces by Elgar for unaccompanied choir, 'As torrents in summer' and 'O wild west wind'. These are good show pieces and give a good idea of what a choir is capable of. In this instance it was obvious from the first few bars that we were going to enjoy listening to a choir who sang with feeling, articulated well and made a lovely sound. Keith Orwell conducted the singers with passion and sensitivity, and it was a delight to see how well the choir followed him.

Listening to this music in an urban church I found myself reflecting on the power of music as well as words to transport us from our immediate surroundings into the changing scenes of nature. But perhaps more importantly, the Roxburgh poems of the final work reminded us, as does Clare, that though we may have to endure the hardships of nature, we can enjoy its pleasures. But there is danger if its bounty is unthinkingly exploited and the balance between humankind and the natural world is upset.

**Valerie Pedlar**

# THE JOHN CLARE SOCIETY

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OCTOBER 2017



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Please note that Subscriptions for 2017-18 were due on 15 July. Please check that your Subscription is current (contact the Membership Secretary if you are not sure) in order to continue receiving this Newsletter by e-mail.