



# The John Clare & Society

Newsletter no. 133

June 2018



# THE JOHN CLARE SOCIETY

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### **Notice of ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING**

Notice is hereby given that the Annual General Meeting of the John Clare Society will take place on Saturday 14 July 2018 at 10.15 am in St Botolph's Church, Helpston. All members and those attending the Festival are cordially invited.

### **EDITORIAL**

On Sunday 1 April, the theme for the BBC Radio 3 *Words and Music* programme was 'A Catalogue of Trees', and it will not come as a surprise to our readers that John Clare was featured three times – with 'The Sycamore', 'The Shepherd's Tree' and 'The Maple' – more than any other poet.

The theme for our Festival this year is 'The Wood is Sweet', and we shall no doubt hear much more about the importance of trees in Clare's life and poetry. We all have connections with trees, but few of us have the opportunity to plant them, or of seeing what our parents have planted come to fruition. They are symbols of longevity – a sapling planted in one generation may not grow to maturity until the next, or the generation after that. We trace our families using 'family trees', which are much more than lines on paper. So we use trees to Commemorate – two years ago, we planted three oak trees at Swaddywell to celebrate John Clare, Ronnie Blythe and Edmund Blunden – and they become for us indicators of stability and continuity.

One of the more intriguing aspects of modern education is the growth of 'Forest Schools'. in which children are encouraged to reconnect with Nature, to have adventures and to get muddy, wet and cold – to get away in fact from the protected and disciplined schooling of OFSTED and the National Curriculum.

Trees are enemies of pollution, balancers of ecology and eaters of Carbon Dioxide. London is a healthier place for its ranks of Plane trees absorbing pollution, and other cities benefit from trees planted along the roadside. Trees can still be contentious, as the attempt by Sheffield Council to remove up to 17,000 trees assessed as 'dead, dying or dangerous' has demonstrated. It involves a Private Finance Initiative which would allegedly involve millions of pounds in penalty payments if terminated, and there have been numerous arrests of those protesting against the work, which has at least been paused at the time of writing this.

It is possible to obtain Tree Preservation Orders, which give legal protection to trees or groups of trees. A TPO may be used to protect any tree, because of its setting, history or local interest. If you carry out unauthorised

work on a protected tree it is a criminal offence. If you live in or near an officially-designated conservation area you should know that trees in such areas (with a trunk diameter greater than 7 cms) have protection even if they do not have a TPO. You need to apply for permission to carry out work on such trees, at least six weeks in advance. Even if the tree is dead or dangerous, there is a procedure that needs to be followed.

England's green and pleasant land would, had it been left to itself, be entirely forested. Most of the trees have gone to make space for humans, but even so there are now more trees in England than there have been since 1914. They may not, however, be the right sort of trees; natives such as oak, beech and birch give a habitat for wildlife in a way that the ranked conifers of the Welsh hillsides simply do not. But we can adjust; the sycamore, although it is a foreigner, supports a surprisingly high number of native invertebrates, as Clare himself noted:

*Hark! how the insects hum around, and sing,  
Like happy Ariels, hid from heedless view—  
And merry bees, that feed, with eager wing,  
On the broad leaves, glazed o'er with honey dew.*

**Stephen Sullivan**



## **MEMBERSHIP**

We should like to welcome the following new members, who have joined the Society since the last issue of the Newsletter:

Nathan TeBokkel, Vancouver, Canada  
Michael Nicholson, Santa Ana, CA  
Moiria Flindall, Hertford  
Charles C Cade, Heathfield  
Mary Purdon, Helpston  
Tom Harding, Northampton  
Anthony Sturgeon, King's Lynn  
Susan Evans and D S Spencer, Sheffield

**Bob Heyes, Membership Secretary**

# **THE 2018 JOHN CLARE SOCIETY FESTIVAL**

## **Friday 13 – Sunday 15 July**

This year marks the 225th anniversary of John Clare's birth, and our theme is 'The Wood is Sweet' taken from his poem 'Recollections after a Ramble'. The children from John Clare Primary School use our theme to help them write their poems for the annual Poetry Competition – and very good the poems usually are. This year, as well as having a smart medal (donated by the late Peter Moyses) they will receive a short booklet of 'nonsense poems' as a prize in each age category. The prize-giving will take place after the Midsummer Cushions ceremony on **Friday 13 July starting at 1.30 pm.** at the church. This year we hope the Fenland Poet Laureate, Kate Arthur, will say a few words to the children.

In the evening there is the usual folk music session at the Bluebell pub starting about 8.30 pm. Do come along and enjoy an impromptu concert given by Mike Shaw and Mike Swingler amongst others.

### **Saturday 14 July**

Coffee and tea will be available at the Bluebell from **9.30 am** and in the Cottage from 10.00 am. Botolph's Barn will be open at 9.30 am with various stalls to include three book stalls, and an interesting John Clare archive will be on display upstairs in the Barn.

Outside, the Langdyke Trust will have a display near the Monument and there will be a recorder group, some Morris Dancing and Folk Dancing during the lunch break. The Membership, Programme and Sales Stalls will all be in the church. We have produced a lovely souvenir programme with full details of the weekend and some very interesting extra articles.

The AGM will start at **10.15 am**, to be followed by our President's Address given by Carry Akroyd. Lunches are available at the Village Hall and the Bluebell, while the Annakinn Gallery will be open as usual.

In the afternoon our Annual Lecture will be given by Professor Fiona Stafford. In last year's Journal, she wrote an excellent piece entitled 'Clare and the Splendid Sycamore', so she may well talk to us on the influence trees had on our poet, hence our theme! We will have our poetry reading later on in the afternoon and in the early evening our concert will be an hour of folk music played by children from Leicester Grammar School. It will be lovely to welcome these very talented young people to the Festival. Tickets will be on sale at the Festival for £5.00

### **Sunday 15 July**

There will be a Clare-related church service starting at **11.00 am.** and it is hoped that some of the children will come and read their poems to us.

So it is a busy and interesting weekend – it would be lovely to see you there, especially if you have not been before. I am sure you will enjoy the festivities. Let's hope the sun shines on us!

**Sue Holgate, Festival Coordinator**

## **FRIENDS OF THE FESTIVAL, 2018**

We don't make an admission charge for the Festival; instead we run the Friends scheme as a way of defraying some of the expenses. This year Friends will get a 24-page programme containing interesting Clare-related articles and poems, a poetry pack, and those who also buy tickets for the concert (The Leicester Grammar School Folk Group, featuring fiddles, flutes, accordion and singers) will get priority booking and reserved seats. All this for just £10.00. Even if you are not able to come to the Festival, you might like to subscribe in order to receive the programme and poetry pack.

The support we receive via this scheme is greatly appreciated, and if you can Gift Aid it that is even better. Please consider subscribing, and we look forward to seeing you at the Festival.

The application form is included with this Newsletter.

**Valerie Pedlar**

## **FESTIVAL FOLK CONCERT** **with Leicester Grammar School Folk Group**

**14<sup>th</sup> July 2018 at 6pm**

**In St. Botolph's Church, Helpston**

**Tickets (£5) available from Annakinn Gallery,  
West Street, Helpston  
or from Sue Holgate 01353 668438**

**For more details e-mail: [johnclaresociety@mybtinternet.com](mailto:johnclaresociety@mybtinternet.com)**

## MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL: Important Notice

We enclose with this Newsletter a membership renewal form. **It is necessary for everyone to complete this**, even if you pay by standing order. This is because the new regulations regarding data protection, of which I am sure you are aware, require you to give your consent to the Society holding your personal information. If you don't tick the relevant box, then we will be unable to contact you or to send you Newsletters or the Journal.

Please also tick the appropriate box to indicate whether you wish to receive Newsletters by post or by email.

If you would like to receive a membership card, I'd be grateful if you would send a stamped self-addressed envelope with your renewal form.

**Robert Heyes**  
**Membership Secretary**

## JOHN CLARE SALES

We are pleased to be able to restore John Lucas's *For John Clare* to our list. It is an attractively-presented and moving anthology of contemporary and earlier poems inspired by and addressed to John Clare, which starts with the much-loved poems by Edmund Blunden, to whom we owe so much, and goes on to include work by an impressive collection of other poets. One for every Clare enthusiast's bookshelf, I think.

My husband, Peter, and I feel that after six years we would really like to step down and put the sales officer's post in a new pair of hands, something we believe every organisation should do regularly to encourage a fresh approach and thinking.

We have enjoyed doing this largely for the contact it has given us with so many interesting and delightful people. We have learned so much from notes and phone calls from people with whom it has been a delight to share our enjoyment and appreciation of John Clare's work.

Please don't hesitate to contact us if you would like to know more about what is involved, either by the phone and email details on the Newsletter cover or come and have a chat at the AGM.

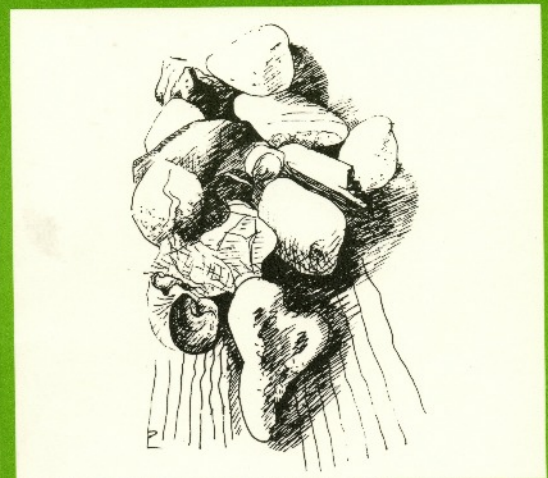
### For John Clare

an anthology of verse

selected and edited

by

John Lucas



The John Clare Society

**Mavis Leverington**

# JOHN CLARE IN WINTER

## Study day at Clare Cottage, Woodgate, Helpston

The 'John Clare in Winter' study day was organised by Carry Ackroyd in co-operation with David Dykes of the John Clare Trust, and was held at Clare Cottage (which the Trust runs) on 3 February 2018. Introducing the day, Carry Ackroyd (the Society's Chairman) said it was a great opportunity to work together and for Society members to support the Trust's important work in maintaining and developing the Cottage.

The first speaker was Dr Paul Chirico, Senior Tutor at Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge, and past Chairman of the Society, who is also a Co-Director of the University's Centre for John Clare Studies and a Trustee of the John Clare Cottage. He focused initially on John Taylor's introduction to *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* which, whilst praising the 'intrinsic merits' of Clare's poetry, also invited readers to give attention to the 'circumstances' under which it was written. Paul Chirico said that Clare was not the first 'rural prodigy' and highlighted the relative indifference there had been to other rustic poets. He indicated that Clare took pride in the attention he received and imagined people in the future reading his work. Indeed, in one essay, Chirico has noted that Clare 'hankers after Eternity's impartial judgement'. By contrast, he commented that one of the features that was most praised in *Poems Descriptive* at the time was the glossary of terms that Clare provided with necessary information about 'the unwritten language of England' that he used. He reminded his audience that Clare spoke with a strong dialect and, like a painter with a palette, mixed and blended words necessitating a glossary as part of a way of translating 'one culture into another'.

Chirico indicated that the poetry linked closely with other poems and writings that Clare had read (for example, *The Seasons* by the Scottish poet James Thomson, first published between 1726 and 1730). Clare was, Chirico said, an avid reader with an affectionate and intimate knowledge of rural life, including the seasonal cycle. Through some of Clare's poems (including 'Emmonsails Heath in Winter'), Chirico explored Clare's views of 'surly winter'. He contrasted the 'companionable enjoyment' provided round a warming fire, with the day-to-day realities and culture that was born out of living in such harsh conditions. He compared too the different ways that Winter can be seen in Clare's work. He argued that – particularly in later life – Clare could be said to feel in a state of 'perpetual winter' and quoted the lines from his poem 'Remembrances': 'Till vanished was the morning spring and set that summer sun, / And winter fought her battle strife and won'. He contrasted this bleak message with the sentiment in Percy Bysshe Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind': 'The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind, / If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?'

The question of Clare's view of winter was left hanging whilst the 25 attendees had the opportunity both to tour the Cottage and enjoy an excellent buffet lunch provided by the Trust's volunteer team. Opening the afternoon sessions, Dr Stephen Sullivan engaged us in a textual examination of three of Clare's poems – 'The Gipsy Camp', 'The Foddering Boy' and 'The Hoar Frost Lodges on Every Tree'. We were encouraged to see that Clare was not only able expertly to describe and convey his love of nature, but also to use skilfully different rhymes, rhythms and metres to achieve desired effects.

Richard Astle (Co-ordinator of the Langdyke Countryside Trust, who writes in this Newsletter and the previous one) said that, for him, Clare is a 'naturalist who expresses himself through poetry'. He explored what Clare would have recognised –

and what would be highly unfamiliar to him – as he imagined him walking through the countryside around Helpston today. He indicated that some birds, such as collared doves, would have been unknown to him and that Clare would have been surprised to see once numerous red squirrels replaced by a larger grey variety. Astle reflected that, alongside physical changes in the villages he knew and modern inventions such as cars, that the two biggest differences Clare might have noted relate to the reduction of the number of people in the once-busy countryside and of the number of birds and animals he would have seen. He highlighted statistics indicating the alarming decline in the numbers of many native species, which has been accelerating in recent years.

Chris Hunt from the Stamford History Society introduced us to a custom in the local town of Stamford (some seven miles from Helpston) that Clare would have been aware of and, in all likelihood, would have witnessed. Hunt told us that each November 13th, on the Feast of St. Brice (a fifth-century Bishop of Tours), the custom was to release a bull into certain blocked-off streets. He added that, despite attempts to suppress the practice, this used to attract considerable crowds of townsfolk and people from the surrounding area. He indicated that Clare referred to the custom in his autobiographical writings and that the local paper carried a story about it in an edition in which two of his poems were printed.

Carry Ackroyd (in her role as a painter and printmaker who has illustrated books of Clare's works), finished the day by sharing her work. She indicated her linocut and hand drawn lithographs aim to 'speak to us in our time', rather than providing historic representations. She encouraged us too to see some of the gentler aspects of Clare's Winter poetry, for example 'Winter Evening', which concludes:

Over the stable-ridge in crowds, the crow,  
With jackdaws intermixed, known by their noise,  
To the warm woods behind the village go;  
And whistling home for bed go weary boys.

Like the 'weary boys' at the end of this poem, we set off, fortified by tea and cakes, after what had been a thoroughly enjoyable and stimulating day. All our grateful thanks need to go to those who organised or spoke at the event, or otherwise contributed to its success.

**Simon Bysse**

## **THE ROBERT BLOOMFIELD SOCIETY**

I am sorry to inform you that the Robert Bloomfield Society is no longer able to function so has closed. After eighteen years our membership is dropping rapidly and we can find no replacement for Newsletter editor, who in many ways is the kingpin of our small society. All our material will be archived and eventually digitally accessible, so we have not laboured in vain.

**Rodney Lines**

## LINES ON VISITING JOHN CLARE

*The following poem appeared in the Bolton Chronicle of 15 July 1854:*

Lines on visiting John Clare, the Northamptonshire peasant poet, now an inmate of the asylum of that county.

With downcast eye and pensive mien  
Comes slowly pacing down the green,  
    The wreck of mind!  
But though the reasoning power hath fled  
Yet there are cords that are not dead,  
    Stirr'd by Eolian wind.  
The muse breathes on him and his lay  
Falls o'er us like a heavenly ray  
    Of golden times returning.  
Poor shatter'd mind, time has gone  
For thee when contumely and scorn  
    Produced thy first heartburning.  
Oh! Sure 'twas kind in Him above  
To wrest thy reason – leave thee love;  
    For some time live on.  
That, not like thee of care bereft,  
Have full perception; nought is left.  
    Each tie hath gone.  
Then strike the lyre, and let thy strain  
Of poesy not breathe of pain  
    But praise of Him  
Who, taking mind, hath shrouded care –  
Still left the glorious genius there,  
    Without the power to sin.

C.L.

*I have been unable to discover the identity of C.L., and I wonder if any of our readers have suggestions.*

**Noel Crack**



## TRESPASS

Life is full of surprises. I'd put up Sean, friend of a friend, who'd travelled down from Norwich to rendezvous with his former work colleague Mark, just returned from Saudi Arabia where he teaches English to their Officer class. My role: to provide bed and breakfast.

A week later a surprise package arrived by post – rectangular in shape. Sean's mother, having been told about my interest in John Clare, has sent me Paul Farley's selection of John Clare poems (the Faber edition).

Another surprise. I've amassed quite a collection of Clare's published works and to my surprise and delight I discovered on page 105 a sonnet I'd never seen before about a subject I'm seriously interested in – 'Trespass'. (It's in volume 5 of *Poems of the Middle Period, 1822–1837*, p. 288, and also in Kelsey Thornton's Everyman edition). I describe myself as a professional trespasser; Ordnance Survey maps are my guides. This poem, like so many others, illustrated Clare's anger and despair regarding the loss of long-enjoyed commoners' rights by the dreaded Enclosures – Acts of Parliament that 'stole' the commons from the rural poor. Fences were erected and hedges planted and local landlords and gentry counted their extra lucre, largely disregarding the impoverishment they'd created in their communities.

### **The surprise poem that so excited me – 'Trespass'**

I dreaded walking where there was no path  
And pressed with cautious tread the meadow swath  
And always turned to look with wary eye  
And always feared the owner coming by.  
Yet everything about where I had gone  
Appeared so beautiful I ventured on  
And when I gained the road where all are free  
I fancied every stranger frowned at me  
And every kinder look appeared to say  
'You've been on trespass in your walk today.'  
I've often thought, the day appeared so fine,  
How beautiful if such a place were mine.  
But, having naught I never feel alone  
And cannot use another's as my own.

Clare wrote this sonnet some 200 years ago – it still rings true today. Do we really have the Right to Roam? I'm reminded of the immortal words, 'This land is our land, this land is your land' from the songbook of Woody Guthrie – another tribune like John Clare, forever mindful of how the rich and powerful ride roughshod over the commoners.

'Trespassers will be Prosecuted' were the 'welcome' signs put up to thwart the explorative instincts of healthy, active 'citizens' planning to enjoy their local countryside. This supposedly 'legal' notice was and is somewhat nebulous and doesn't explain the detailed legal actuality. We apparently had the Right to Trespass – that is, to walk the countryside – provided we did not break actual laws and by-laws on the statute book. For example, it would be:

Illegal to trespass in pursuit of game

Illegal to disturb and harm farm animals e.g. by uncontrolled dogs

Illegal to walk on and damage growing crops

The above and more was a common-sense definition of what you could or shouldn't do and generally accepted by country folk. However, the law has been changed somewhat and apparently it's now more difficult to legally practise the Right to Roam (i.e. to trespass).

To the Reference Library for exact and definite up to date detail regarding 'trespass' and how it's treated today.

'Trespass is a tort but not normally a crime' (ambiguous). 'The notice, Trespassers will be Prosecuted, is therefore usually misleading' (another ambiguity).

Perhaps we in the John Clare Society and country-lovers generally should seek a positive re-evaluation of this particular legal predicament. No doubt, John Clare is spinning in his grave regarding this matter. I quote lines from a poem I wrote when suddenly enraged as Clare was when he wrote 'Trespass'.

### **Forgive them their Trespasses**

A 'Christian' bought the farmer's fields,  
No more cows – no more milk yields.  
He grew a fence some seven feet tall,  
Topped with barbed wire, like the Berlin Wall.  
The common folk were denied entry,  
This Land is Private and not free.

The moocher meanders overjoyed  
Across flowered meadow, bees busily employed.  
A horde of Painted Ladies decorate the clover,  
Their beauty recently arrived – this global rover.  
Now a buzzard soars, high in the summers skies,  
It hovers o'er its prey – denied – away it flies.  
A heron squawks annoyance – 'man's around'.  
A 'pecker laughs, a nightingale makes music sound.  
All is at peace. The distant traffic is a hum.  
Here is Heaven, away from Hellish Bedlam.

The drama now unfolds – the moocher's been observed.  
The Christian's gardener, now, a threat will serve.  
'These fields are all now Private – you are Trespassing!'  
'But I'm a country walker, I'm not committing sin  
And I've walked these fields both man and boy'.

And that was my unfortunate experience of 'Trespass' recently. In my latest poetry publication, *Peace and Green Socialism*, I emphasised that, 'Publicly accessible Open Green Spaces are essential for healthy outdoor activities. If necessary, Trespass, Explore and Adventure. Insist on your Right to Roam!' Copies £4 including postage from me at 61A The Broadway, Loughton IG10 3SX.

**Pete Relph**

## TREES: PERFECTION BY WAY OF IMPERFECTION

To the edge of the horizon, John Clare's boyhood was full of trees, from the elm whose branches hung over his cottage, to the hollow oak and old willows that grew along the banks of Round Oak stream. He loved too the open fen where rain and wind, crows and starnels (starlings), and his beloved willows and dotterels marked a landscape which had a beauty of its own.

Trees were his signposts, his familiars and his friends. Indeed from time to time they became his refuge from the weather and his place of retreat from disapproving eyes. The tree was the anchor to Clare's experience. The elm by that particular house, that oak growing by the willows near the spring, that chestnut that lit the wood with candles every spring:

O how I delight to be  
Wandering in the wild wild wood  
Pausing on Grey mossy tree  
Oaks that have for ages stood

(*'Spirit of the Woods awake'* lines 45–48)

When enclosures ripped the physical landscape apart and in the process tore down many of his much loved trees, he felt their loss as keenly as he did the loss of Mary, his first love. So Clare knew how the tree, like love, is both enduring and transient, both hard and soft, both solid yet ephemeral:

I saw the girl just to my mind  
I dreamd of joy & wakd in woe  
She gaind my heart but she provd unkind  
I hopd a friend & found a foe  
The storm that rent the statly oak  
I thought it was a trusty tree  
But first it bowd & then it broke—  
& so my love deceived me

(*'I saw the girl just to my mind'* lines 1–8)

For Clare it was as if the trees that were his street signs, the landmarks of his neighborhood, were no more:

The Cow boy with his Green is gone  
& every Bush & tree  
Dire nakedness oer all prevails  
Yon fallows bare and brown  
Theres scarce a greensward spot remains  
& scarce a single tree  
All naked are thy native plains  
& yet they're dear to thee

(*'The Lamentations of Round-Oak waters'* lines 95–98 / 121–124)

Trees were expressions of perfect symmetry and order, yet Clare knew that the tree has to adjust itself to the circumstances that befall it – the winds, the

insects, the variable compositions of the soils, the random forces that prevent it from achieving perfect harmony and symmetry, moulded by the quirks of fate, the unexpected things. There are knots here, and there are dimples there, and there are pieces where the bark was ripped off or branches lost, and the tree seals the scar and continues to thrive. However, the process lends to the tree that sense of perfection by way of imperfection.

The tree is like Clare. He had hopes, visions, and ambitions. He worked towards those goals, and in the process he was molded by the quirks of fate, the unexpected things that he had to either yield to or overcome:

I look on the past & I dread dark tomorrow  
My life grows a burthen Id wish to lay down  
Time meets me wi nought but new tidings of sorrow  
& care tans the blown of my summer leaf brown  
If life owns a joy it near fell to my portion  
If pleasures a substance the shadow was mine  
A skiff on the waves of a wild tossing ocean  
Where no rocks befriend me such fate to resign

Springs done wi me & my summer is waining  
Times out of call wi my best younger day  
Hopes only prop of support now remaining  
Is autumn attird in her mourning array  
Anxious I look for the winters encroaching  
& feel the leaves pat my bald head from the tree  
It gives consolation of slumbers approaching  
When death does the same to my sorrows & me

(Song 'I look on the past...' strangely written in Clare's youth)

Here is a man with major imperfections who could perfectly capture a scene, a sound, a love, in a few inspired words.

**Roger Rowe**

## **JOHN CLARE'S BIRTHDAY MUSIC & OCCASIONAL SONG SESSION**

**FRIDAY 13<sup>th</sup> JULY 2018**

In the Bluebell pub, Woodgate, Helpston from 8.30 pm.  
Free Entry.

For details please e-mail [MikeStevensPE11@aol.com](mailto:MikeStevensPE11@aol.com)  
Phone: 01775 766923



Further information: Peterborough & South Lincs Folk Diary  
[www.peterboroughfolkdiary.co.uk](http://www.peterboroughfolkdiary.co.uk)

## THE RAVENS OF MEMORY

Clare is full of surprises. He always has something new, something unexpected to offer. For many years, I considered the wonderful 'Nightingale's Nest' to be a kind of template for all of the birds' nest poems. Beautifully precise descriptions of the nest's location and construction; reflections on these observations and on the bird's behaviour; wary references to 'rude boys' and others who might find and disturb the nest – these concerns are reflected in many other poems, such as those on the bumbarrel and the pettichap. Recently, though, I found 'The Raven's Nest' in an anthology, *The Poetry of Birds*, edited by Simon Armitage and Tim Dee (Penguin, 2011, pp. 239-40). Here is a poem with a significantly different approach to the subject of a bird's nest.

The nightingale nests in a secret place in the depths of a wood. Clare's raven's nest, though equally difficult of access, is a well-known local landmark:

Upon the collar of a huge old oak  
Year after year boys mark a curious nest  
Of twigs made up a faggot near in size....

There is no further description of the nest; Clare is much more interested in its visibility, its fame and the challenge that it represents. The village boys try to 'swarm the massy bulk' of the oak, but 'down they sluther soon as ere they try.' Their efforts stir the memories of the old men who 'tell the ways / They had when boys to climb that very tree.' Not only has the nest survived for many years, but – so the village elders like to think – the ravens themselves are the same – 'the wood's patriarchs / Old as the oldest men.'

The venerable age of the nest and its tenants does not prevent villagers from trying to reach it, some with 'iron claums and bands', others using ropes and stirrups. However, only one successful attempt is preserved in 'memories of the oldest men', a feat that 'wonder treasured for surprise / By every cottage hearth.' We are not told whether the successful climber raided the nest: his achievement takes its place in village tradition, along with the feats of those who have climbed the church steeple and tied their kerchiefs to the weathercock.

In most of his other bird's nest poems, Clare is an active participant, interrupting his walk to observe the nest, leading the reader on, offering observations and reflections. In 'The Raven's Nest', he is much more detached, a representative of the village who stands somewhere between the boisterous boys and the reflective elders. In the final lines, he seems to accept the tradition that the ravens are indeed 'ancient birds'

at their old task  
Repairing the huge nest – where they still live  
Through changes winds and storms and are secure  
And like a landmark in the chronicles  
Of village memories treasured up yet lives  
The huge old oak that wears the ravens nest.

We now know how important landmarks were to Clare: so many of them were swept away or rendered inaccessible by enclosure. The raven's nest is a landmark in time as well as in space. Endurance and visibility are the qualities which give it a prominent place 'in the chronicle of village memories', reaching across the generations and defying the power of change.

**David Stokes**

## Waiting for the Echo

The clock that sits in the corner  
listening to bits of conversations  
through time where shades combine  
with sunny laugh and beautiful voices.

The clock in its case, with diffident tock  
and fine-lined face, rudely awakened  
with its chain pulled tight,  
that once stood astride the plain stone blocks,  
now listens with dusty lungs  
in the glare of the light.

That room,  
where the ceiling beamed and bowed  
and the voices drifted through while music  
shook the air, the very notes vibrating,  
has seen two hundred years of fiddle and drum  
turn and turn about.  
The table, once a bier to lay him on becomes a board  
of plenty now.

By his tomb, the cushions laid all about;  
the applause, for him, too late.

*Writing a poem. It turned, accidentally, into a backhanded reminder that John Clare was born 225 years ago, 13th July. Don't look for pure accuracy though, please.*

**J. Johnson Smith**



## JOHN CLARE'S COUNTRYSIDE: Swaddywell Pit

There can be no doubt of how special a place Swordy Well pit was to John Clare:

I've loved thee Swordy Well and love thee still  
Long was I with thee tending sheep and cow  
In boyhood ramping up each steepy hill  
To play at 'roly poly' down – and now  
A man I trifle o'er thee cares to kill  
Haunting thy mossy steeps to botanize  
And hunt the orchis tribes where nature's skill  
Doth like my thoughts run into phantasys

And he also used Swordy Well as a symbol of all that had gone wrong in the countryside, writing in 'The Lament of Swordy Well':

I'm Swordy Well a piece of land  
That's fell upon the town  
Who worked me till I couldn't stand  
And crush me now I'm down  
The silver springs grown naked dykes  
Scarce own a bunch of rushes  
When grain got high the tasteless tykes  
Grubbed up trees, banks, and bushes  
And me, they turned me inside out  
For sand and grit and stones  
And turned my old green hills about  
And pickt my very bones

But Swordy Well's troubled story didn't end there. Long after John Clare's death, it became one of the very first nature reserves in the country, leased by Lord Charles Rothschild and featuring as one of the key sites for nature in the country in Rothschild's famous 1912 list and managed by the National Trust between 1915 and 1924. After that brief interlude of natural peace, it reverted to agriculture and disappeared beneath the plough and the quarry face before emerging in the 1980s as a rubbish tip, filled up with years of Peterborough's household waste! And that wasn't all; in 1997 Clare's former 'roly-poly' ups and downs became a national VW racetrack and paint-ball centre, hosting thousands on a warm August bank holiday, with camper vans, fireworks and drag-racing.



*Grizzled Skipper at Swaddy Well.*

But now Swaddywell, as it is called, is a well-established and flourishing nature reserve and a place that any lover of John Clare must visit if they are coming to Helpston. Located just two miles up the road from the Cottage, the reserve has been owned and managed by the Langdyke Countryside Trust since 2005 when the VW racetrack came to an end.

And it is well worth the visit – a testament to the recuperative powers of nature! In June and July the top field is covered in bee and pyramidal orchids, while the pit itself is home to over 1,200 species of invertebrate, including several nationally scarce species, such as the beautiful grizzled skipper butterfly. Species that Clare would have known, such as the red kite, skylark and weasel can be seen or heard throughout the year, while other recent arrivals such as collared dove, Roesel’s bush-cricket and muntjac deer would surprise him greatly!

The reserve is open to the public at all times, but please do keep your dog on a lead as the Langdyke sheep are usually in place doing the hard work, as Clare would have hoped:

And if I could but find a friend  
With no deceit to sham  
Who’d send me some few sheep to tend  
And leave me as I am  
To keep my hills from cart and plough  
And strife of mongrel men  
And as a spring found me find me now  
I should look up agen

*If you’d like to know more about the work of the Langdyke Countryside Trust, please visit our website [www.langdyke.org.uk](http://www.langdyke.org.uk) or our Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/groups/langdyketrust/>*

***Text & Photos: Richard Astle***



## **COPSE**

Our trees by the Battlefield Line  
are soon to be culled, a lush swathe of  
green will no longer provide home to  
burgeoning wildlife, its pond customised.

A barely landscaped town-house estate  
will rear its redbrickgreyslate overview  
after convoys of lorries have duly come  
and gone amidst careless excavations.

Daily, weekly, months on end, they will  
establish inroads of faceless tarmac  
between haughty orange glow street  
lamps seeing off tall waving conifers.

Creatures like our July vixen, January's  
Great Spotted Woodpecker, driven  
away, probably forever, certainly not for  
theirs, ours, or anyone else's benefit.

And when all of our shared, rich, local  
natural surroundings vanish, without  
trace, will anyone around us even ask  
that one still pertinent question, Why?

With wild woodland gone, stream  
bed dry, a micro climate urbanised  
and abused, will no one left behind  
step forward to remark, 'Life's uglier  
and local nature's loss is everyone's.'

Mindful that even after one and a half  
centuries of steam driven passage,  
preserving its own life here, we still  
accept that survival itself's a Battlefield.

**Bob Tristram**



## BOOK SALE

We should like to thank those who have purchased books from, or expressed interest in, the sale of these books donated to the Society. A few titles still remain, and we list the details below, together with the arrangements should you wish to purchase or enquire.

### CONDITIONS OF SALE:

1. **Those wishing to purchase at the listed sale price, one or more of these 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. 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.
4. 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.
5. The listed prices do not include postage & packing. To pay towards this an additional cost of £2 will be added to each order (irrespective of the number of books ordered)

**Stephen Sullivan, 3 Primrose Hill, Little Gransden,  
Sandy, Beds. SG19 3DP e-mail: ssullonly@aol.com**

### MISCELLANEOUS

	<b>£</b>
1.7 A NORTHAMPTONSHIRE GARLAND Trevor Hold 1989 Northamptonshire Libraries	5
1.8 FOR JOHN CLARE John Lucas 1997 John Clare Society PB	4
1.D THOMAS GRAY Writers & their Work 104. British Council pamphlet 1958	1
1.E A WRITER'S DAY BOOK Ronald Blythe 2006 Trent Editions PB signed	10

### BIOGRAPHY AND CRITICISM

2.2 JOHN CLARE His Life in Poetry Patricia Barnard 2007 Pipers Ash PB signed	5
2.B JOHN CLARE & THE FOLK TRADITION George Deacon 1983 Sinclair Browne	10
2.23 THE POETRY OF JOHN CLARE Mark Storey 1974 Macmillan	5
2.A A REAL WORLD & A DOUBTING MIND Tim Chilcott 1985 Hull UP PB	15
2.E John CLARE THE CRITICAL HERITAGE. Mark Storey 1973 Routledge PB Signed	15
2.F THE INDEPENDENT SPIRIT John Goodridge 1994 John Clare Society PB	5
2.G JOHN CLARE A Biography Jonathan Bate 2005 Picador	10

### CARCANET PAPERBACKS

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5.A BY HIMSELF Robinson & Powell 1996 Carcanet PB	10
5.5 THE SHEPHERDS CALENDAR Tim Chilcott 2006 Carcanet PB	5
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5.C NORTHBOROUGH SONNETS Robinson & Powell 1995 Carcanet PB	5
5.D COTTAGE TALES Robinson & Powell 1993 Carcanet PB some wear	5

## JOHN CLARE BOOKS for a good home

Born 1945, I couldn't get higher education due to poor mental health in my teens and early twenties. I started with the Open University in 1982, and in 1984 a full-time degree, reading Cambridge College of Art and Technology's Joint Hons. English and European Thought and Literature. My sister suggested a dissertation on local poet John Clare. She knew there were MSS in Peterborough Museum near home. I joined the JCS straight away. My 1986 'recce' visit to Peterborough Museum's collection of MSS discovered Eric Robinson working there on the OUP editions. He was a great, if at first somewhat formidable, help! We quickly became friends and he stayed with me many times during his summer MSS work.

I had no idea what I was undertaking! My eventual handwritten (special permission) dissertation *To the Rural Muse, a textual criticism and commentary* was an en face transcription of all known MSS, including crossings out and emendations, and eventually completed while coach driving in France! I spent the years 1985–1996 much involved on the JCS committee. After standing down as chairman in 1996 I've since devoted myself to the Society of Friends. I now have little use for my many Clare books and would like to see them go to someone who *would* use them.

OUP 9 vols. of Eric Robinson's *Complete Poems of John Clare*; the 4 vols. of the early and later periods are signed to me by Eric. All in excellent *condition*.

£600

Offers invited for:

*Natural History Prose Writings*, Margaret Grainger

*Letters*, Mark Storey

*A Right to Song*, Edward Storey

*John Clare*, Tibbles

*The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place*, John Barrell

*Life of John Clare*, Frederick Martin

*A Real World & Doubting Mind*, Tim Chilcott

*John Clare in Context*, ed. Haughton, Phillips & Summerfield

*John Clare and the Bounds of Circumstance*, Johanne Clare

*The Rural Muse*, Kelsey Thornton

*My Life*, Folio edn. of Bewick

*John Clare's Birds*, ed. Robinson and Fitter

This sale will open on June 6. Please do not contact me before this date. I am at 23 Somes Close, Uffington, Lincs. PE9 4UE (Tel: 01780 752390, e-mail [noel.staples@btinternet.com](mailto:noel.staples@btinternet.com))

**Noel Staples**



*St Botolph's Church, Helpston. (2009)*

*Stephen Sullivan*

# THE JOHN CLARE SOCIETY

## SALES ORDER FORM

**JUNE 2018**



*The John Clare Society, founded in 1981, publishes books, CDs, DVDs, pamphlets and postcards, an annual Journal and a member's newsletter every four months.*

*Please support our activities by purchasing from this catalogue. Each sale helps the society to continue our work.*

## BOOKS

CODE	ITEM	PRICE	WEIGHT
B20023	<i>John Clare: New Approaches</i> Eds. J Goodridge and S Kovesi (p/b essays).	£2.50	400g
B20028	<i>John Clare, the Northamptonshire Poet</i> ed. J L Carr (p/b pocket sized poetry book).	£1	20g
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B20113	<i>John Clare, The Trespasser</i> by John Goodridge & R.K.R. Thornton	£6.99	75g
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## JOHN CLARE SOCIETY YEAR JOURNALS

1982 - 2016	£4 for each year inc p&p
Journal Index (1982-2011)	£0.50 inc p&p

### MISCELLANEOUS

<b>M20071</b>	<i>In Clare's Footsteps</i> . Coloured map of Helpston with notes. Unlaminated folded A5	£0.30	5g
<b>M20092</b>	John Clare leather bookmark, gold on dark green.	£2	10g
<b>M20031</b>	JCS gummed labels 100 labels in pack.	£1	150g
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<b>M20060</b>	CD 8 songs by Terence Deadman with Clare poetry read by Peter Moyses, Rodney Lines & Norma Weller.	£5	200g
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Please complete as applicable:

<b>Please tick</b>	<b>Item</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>Cost</b>
	Friend of 2018 Festival (£10.00 per person), to include free programme and poetry pack		
	Priority booking and reserved seat for the Concert starting at 6pm in St Botolph's Church (£5.00 per person)		
<b>TOTAL AMOUNT ENCLOSED</b>			

I understand that my programme, poetry pack, and any tickets I have ordered, will be posted to me in advance of the festival.

**(If applicable)**

I am a UK taxpayer and I agree to the Society reclaiming Gift Aid on my Friend of 2018 Festival contribution.

Signed .....

**This completed form, along with a cheque made payable to the John Clare Society, should be returned to Sue Holgate, 9 The Chase, Ely CB6 3DR, by 30 June 2018.**

**THE JOHN CLARE SOCIETY - RENEWAL OF MEMBERSHIP 2018-19**  
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