



The John Clare & Society

Newsletter no. 134

October 2018



THE JOHN CLARE SOCIETY

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EDITORIAL

In this issue we feature the prizewinning poems from the John Clare School Poetry Competition, one of the key parts of the John Clare Festival. We also have two reports of the Festival, from different perspectives, so that those who were there can reminisce and enjoy things for a second time, and those who were not able to come can at least share the experience. The Festival is the highlight of the John Clare year, and Sue Holgate and her team are to be thanked for their efforts and congratulated on the outcome.

There are three new contributors to this edition of the Newsletter, and I should very much like to encourage further such contributions. Anything that is likely to be of interest to John Clare enthusiasts would be welcomed, and I should be pleased to discuss ideas or answer questions if prospective contributors get in touch. Photographs and artwork are especially welcome, although the printed newsletter is available only in black & white, which means that some pieces may not work so well as they do in colour.

All contributions should be sent to Stephen Sullivan at the published address or via e-mail. Please do not forget your own contact details. Clear handwriting is perfectly acceptable, but computer users should provide text in Word format, with photographs as separate .jpg files of about 1MB (and not embedded in the Word document). Please remember postage if you wish your photographs or USB sticks to be returned to you.

The Newsletter is of a fixed, standard length. It may therefore sometimes be necessary to abbreviate items or delay publication, or to split articles between two issues.

Publication is three times a year, on 1 February, June and October. Articles need to be with the editor a month before publication date – thus, contributions for the next Newsletter should reach me by 1 January 2019. Please do consider the possibilities.

It may still be possible to obtain tickets for the solo performance by Robin Hillman, *I am John Clare*, at the John Clare Cottage on Thursday 11 October at 7.30. Please telephone the Cottage (01733 253330).

Readers may observe that Mavis Leverington is now listed as 'Acting' Sales Officer. Mavis and her husband, Peter, expressed a wish to stand down from that role before the Festival, but unfortunately nobody has come forward. If you were wishing to make a greater contribution to the Society, in this role or some other, the Committee would be pleased to hear from you.

Please can I finally direct everyone's attention to the very important message from our Membership Secretary, which appears on the next page?

Stephen Sullivan

DATA PROTECTION REGULATIONS: A MESSAGE FROM THE MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY

I have to remind members that, in view of the new data protection regulations, it is essential that you should indicate that you are willing for the Society to hold personal information about you. If you have not yet done this, please return the enclosed form (p.27 of the e-mailed Newsletter) with the appropriate box ticked to give your consent. Alternatively you can send me an email signifying your consent.

If you are not sure whether you have already done this, please ask me, preferably by email.

Robert Heyes
Membership Secretary
bob.heyas@yahoo.co.uk

LOST PROPERTY

A black cardigan was found in the Village Hall at Helpston at the end of the Festival. If you think it may belong to you please phone Sue 01353 668438 or email sueholgate@hotmail.co.uk. She will gladly post it to you!

MEMBERSHIP

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

Terence Deadman, Hove
Anthony Bradley, Bristol
Nicola Dela-Croix, Helpston
Chris and Pam Harmer, Nailsworth
P. J. and Pauline Hammans, Eye, Suffolk
Colin Fletcher, York
David Stewart, Newcastle upon Tyne
Matt Simons, Peterborough
Primrose Lockwood, Sheffield
Arthur Chapman, Peterborough
Clair and Peter Wordsworth, Helpston
Nic Wilson, Hitchin
Jela and Barry Lilley, Northampton
Mary Elizabeth Stopper, Fishtoft, Boston
Polly Beasley, Peterborough
Isobelle Palmer, Queniborough, Leics
Gillian Bate, Hereford
Keith Ineson, Dromara, Co. Down
K. Clements, Broadstone, Dorset
Andrew Bramwell, Bloxwich, Walsall
Ruth Poulton, Needingworth, Cambs

Robert Heyes, Membership Secretary

THE JOHN CLARE SOCIETY BENCH

At the late Peter Moyse's funeral an amount of money was collected. It was agreed by the Committee that this should be spent on an oak bench in memory of Peter and Mary who were founder members and did so much for the Society.

The bench was successfully installed and dedicated at the Festival by Valerie Pedlar. It is positioned at the back of the churchyard, near Clare's grave and is in a very peaceful and sheltered spot. During the dedication Valerie read the following Clare poem, the last line of which is inscribed on the bench. Thank you to the PCC and Churchwarden of St Botolph's church for allowing us to place the bench in their churchyard.

Sue Holgate

A WOODLAND SEAT

Within this pleasant wood, beside the lane,
Let's sit, and rest us from the burning sun,
And hide us in the leaves, and entertain
An hour away; – to watch the wood-brook run
Through heaps of leaves, drop dribbling after drop,
Pining for freedom, till it climbs along
In eddying fury o'er the foamy top;
And then loud laughing sings its whimpering song,
Kissing the misty dewberry by its side,
With eager salutations, and in joy;
Making the flag-leaves dance in graceful pride,
Giving and finding joy. – Here we employ
An hour right profitably, thus to see
Life may meet joys where few intruders be.



A Personal View of the 2018 Clare Festival (1)

It was blisteringly hot when Ellis and I arrived in Helpston on Friday July 13, the anniversary of Clare's birthday, and we remembered that his mother gave birth to him and his twin sister, Bessy, during a similar heatwave in 1793. In her Presidential Address on Saturday morning, Carry Akroyd reminded us that keeping cool was enormously difficult for the poor in those days, so perhaps the heat was one of the reasons why Bessy died after a few days. There's always that sadness in remembering his birthday.



The traditional Midsummer Cushions, decorating John Clare's grave.

Malcolm had arrived earlier on Friday in time to see the children of John Clare Primary School enact the charming and moving Midsummer Cushion ceremony, which opens the John Clare Society Festival. As always, it took place in the churchyard of St Botolph's, with parents, friends and Society members in attendance. The children walked in procession from the school to the church, each carrying a midsummer cushion of grass decorated with flowers, which they placed, one by one, around Clare's grave to form a garland:

Our little gardens there we made
Of blossoms all a-row

From 'Childhood' in *The Midsummer Cushion*

Everyone then entered the church for the poetry competition awards. All the children had written a poem on the theme 'The Wood is Sweet', inspired by the woods and trees around the village. On behalf of the judges, Sue Young noted that the impact of logging and deforestation had been picked up by some of the older children, and that if Clare was alive today, he would have been an eco-warrior. She commended the children on their lovely handwriting and explained to them that Clare often made lots of changes to his poems, going back again and again till he got them how he wanted. She encouraged them to write, even on a phone: 'Don't let your mum throw out your poems. Keep them, and be proud of them in years to come.'

The children read out their poems. They then performed the song 'Rich Music' with words by John Clare, and the Reverend David Maylor told a story about a village in Africa where there was no longer a stream, waterfall, or trees. He concluded the presentations with a time of quiet reflection, and a prayer for trees to help our climate and provide shade.

John Clare's Birthday Music on Friday night was a highlight for the three of us. We bought our pints and settled down in the Poet's Bar to meet friends and have a splendid meal. The warm welcome from Lesley and her team makes the Bluebell home for the weekend. At eight Mike Stevens kicked off an evening of music and readings. First came 'The Battle of Prague' and 'Ashley's Ride' with

what a quick count suggested were three violins, Mike's viola, and three accordions. The magic of the evening, though, was in the scattering of musicians around the room, several of whom played more than one instrument – including



The Birthday music gets under way at the Bluebell.

a tenor banjo and several melodeons – which they changed when you weren't looking. During the best part of three hours' music, there were too many performances to mention, so with apologies to the majority, here's a selection. John Stafford read Clare's 'The Songs of Our Land', which made it, according to Mike, 'An intellectual evening, not just for riff-raff.' Tunes from Clare's manuscript of songs were played by Carry on her

grandfather's violin, and by Jake the concertina maker, on one of his own instruments. Ken and Linda sang the glorious lyric, 'What is beauty but a breath?' The Blackbush folk band, with violins, pipe and guitars, sang mostly Irish songs, including 'Galway Girl'. As a preview of the Peterborough Morris Dancers (on the programme for Saturday), Olly performed a Morris dance with kicks and leaps that were truly amazing in the confined space. And Pete Shaw faultlessly recited all 160 lines of Clare's ballad, 'By the old tavern door,' about a hogshead of stingo that had rolled from a dray and lay unopened – to tantalise thirsty villagers – on a hot day. It was a fitting end to an evening at the Bluebell, where a stanza of the poem is inscribed on the bar wall.

Back to the AGM on Saturday morning: Carry took us through memories of her own country childhood, pointing up comparisons with Clare's experience (and the experience of most of her audience, who grew up in towns). People did not seek suntans in those days: Clare wrote poems about the village girls, beautiful despite the brown skins that defined their class – though he liked their hidden 'white bosoms'. She focused on the layering of meaning in poetry and cryptic crosswords, and spoke of how words shift meaning through usage: how, starting with traffic warnings about lorries having 'shed their loads', the phrase elides over time into a 'shedload', as in 'shedloads of money'. Her own name, Akroyd, comes from two old Yorkshire words meaning 'oak' and 'a measure of land'. Language is rooted in place, defining our upbringing; so Margaret Thatcher roused laughter in Parliament when she said she wasn't 'frit', still a common word in Grantham; words develop local meanings – on a farm where Carry worked, scythes were called 'July's razors'; where Clare worked, billhooks were known as 'bills'.

Carry described the backbreaking work of potato picking: her fingers aching in the cold muddy fields, and feeling dizzy on raising her head after hours watching a conveyor belt for undersized potatoes. Physical work is hard, but your mind is free, so when you get home and rest, you quickly recover. She remembered walking six miles on a Friday to meet her love of the time and hiding her bag under a hedge (was he the leader of the Poolbrook chapter of

Hell's Angels? She didn't say); women waiting for men to come home; men expecting their care and attention ('three sugars, love'); tending the range in the days before electric kettles; having a small fire box to cook with sticks and faggots, smoke always coming out of the chimney. Country people developed a good sense of direction, recognizing trees, but fearing the unknown.

Carry gave her address in a wonderfully informal, apparently rambling style, but when she ended by singing Clare's 'The Wood-Cutter's Night Song' all the disparate themes came together: her address had been a perfect introduction, allowing us to savour all the details of Clare's poem. And thank you for singing to us, Carry. It has already become a tradition, and we love it.

THE WOOD-CUTTER'S NIGHT SONG

Welcome red and roundy sun
Dropping lowley in the west
Now my hard days work is done
I'm as happy as the best

Joyful are the thoughts of home
Now I'm ready for my chair
So till 'Morrow-morning's come
Bill and Mittins lye ye there [....]

All day long I love the Oaks
But a' nights yon little cot
Where I see the chimney smoaks
Is by far the prettiest spot

Wife and childern all are there
To revive with pleasent looks
Table ready set – and chair –
Supper hanging on the hooks

Soon as ever I get in
When my faggot down I fling
Little prattlers they begin
Teazing me to talk and Sing

'Welcome red and roundy sun
'Dropping lowley in the west
'Now my hard days Work is done
'I'm as happy as the best'

'Joyful are the thoughts of home
'Now I'm ready for my chair
'So till 'Morrow-morning's come
'Bill and Mittins lye ye there'

The Friends of the Festival Pack was excellent. The programme, entitled 'The Wood is Sweet' had an article by Eric Robinson and Roger Rowe which introduced the Festival's theme of Trees. It also contained three of Clare's tree

poems, including 'Burthorp Oak', and an article on the latter with a fine nineteenth-century engraving. The Candlestick Press pamphlet, 'Ten Poems about Clouds' is a delightful treasure to read and re-read.

These two booklets made a good introduction to our conference speaker, Professor Fiona Stafford, who spoke from her book, *The Long, Long Life of Trees*, and her Radio 3 series, *The Meaning of Trees*. Simon Kövesi introduced her as a specialist in Romantic literature and trees – an intriguing combination. She explored how Clare's knowledge of self was linked to his understanding of trees; the importance to him of willows (sallows); and how his two accounts of brushing with death as a child relate to nearly falling – and actually falling –



Guest speaker, Fiona Stafford.

from trees. She drew a parallel between the leaves of a book of poems and the leaves of a tree, and spoke of the intense pleasure Clare reveals in his poems about trees. Clare draws a connection between a tree's new growth and poetic inspiration; and he celebrates the defiance of trees against the axe – 'yet one gay bush'.

Fiona's Stafford's talk took place in St Botolph's Church and, afterwards,

everyone went out into the

churtyard for the ceremony in memory of Peter and Mary Moyse. Valerie Pedlar explained that, with the permission of the vicar and the PCC, a fine wooden bench has been placed by the trees behind Clare's grave, from where there will always be a good view of the Midsummer Cushions ceremony. (Malcolm saw it used for exactly that purpose the previous day.) Peter had asked that no names should be engraved, so instead there is a quotation from Clare's sonnet, 'A Woodland Seat', about the pleasures of resting in the shade on a hot day, beside a brook: 'Life may meet joys where few intruders be'. Valerie read the poem most beautifully and declared: 'With pride and humility I dedicate this bench to the memory of Peter and Mary Moyse.'

Across the road in Botolph's Barn there was a fine collection of specialist publications on Clare for sale. Upstairs, John Goodridge had set out a selection of Greg Crossan's scrapbooks and photographs from his literary pilgrimages to places associated with Clare and other English Romantic poets. They were donated to the Society by his son, Gabriel. We never knew Greg, but it gave us an intriguing insight into how Clare inspires devotees – like ourselves.

The poetry reading, at which all comers can book a slot to read a poem by Clare, was particularly wide-ranging this year, showcasing his political satire as well as poems on daily life in Helpston, the experiences of children, and the hardships of the poor. It was hosted by Mike Mecham. Peter Cox, who has hosted it in recent years, was there to read a poem himself.

We all returned to St Botolph's in the evening for the Festival Concert, which was given this year by the Leicester Grammar School Folk Group: two teachers and nine students playing violins, violas, flutes, and (in the absence of their accordionist, who was on holiday) a keyboard. They delighted the audience with superb performances of jigs and reels that Clare had 'pricked down', and



Leicester Grammar School Folk Group

played hauntingly beautiful airs, some of which were composed as recently as the 1980s. Their leader reminded us how Hessey warned Clare not to spend too much time playing music. Luckily, he seems to have ignored that advice.

Text & Photos: **Bridget Somekh, Malcolm Bailey and Ellis Hall**

THE JOHN CLARE SCHOOL POETRY COMPETITION 2018

I AM A TREE

I am a tree
 A very tall tree
 I let people climb me.
 When it is dark
 I look at the stars.
 When it is light
 I look down at the cars.

I am a tree
 A very tall tree
 I like it when birds land on me.
 When I am happy
 I open my leaves
 And secretly smile.

by Evalynne Wilson-Bailey
 Buttercross (winner)

I AM A TREE

I am a tree.
 I can see the boats
 Bobbing on the sea.
 I can see a school
 Children on the slide.
 Oh no! Here comes the axeman.
 Timber!
 I am a fallen down tree.
 Can't you put me
 back together?
 Please me!

by Hugo Stephens-Dunn
 Buttercross (commended)

BEAUTIFUL TREES

Beautiful trees,
 They give us oxygen, wood and paper.
 All sizes and shapes,
 Fat, wide, tall and small.
 Dark green, lime green, shades in
 between,
 What a lovely sight,
 Swaying in the cool breeze.

By Finn Anderson
 Woodgate (commended)

BEAUTIFUL TREES

Trees swing like a waving wind,
 Like happy people waving long arms.
 Blowing, swaying, fluttering in the air.
 The oldest is almost 3,000 years old,
 The youngest is just a tiny shoot.
 So many different kinds.
 All colours, all different, all beautiful,
 Green, red and brown,
 Giving us oxygen to breathe.

By JD McCloskey
 Woodgate (winner)

SUMMER TREES

Hello tree, hello friend,
We've got a relationship
that will never end.

Proud like a statue,
been here forever, as
girls and boys have
fun together

Your leaves and branches
are as gold as the
Sun; happiness comes
in a big bag of fun.

Mint green leaves, and
chocolate brown bark,
Hard to see in the dark.

Your branches are long
and wide I see; summer
days are as happy
as can be.

by Annbabelle Peat
Broadwheel (commended)

SUMMER TREES

Glossy green, glistening with glee,
Majestical marks move silently,
Brightly beaming brilliantly,
Breeze blowing backwards.

Your leaves are blowing in the breeze,
You stand out from the other trees,
Trembling tall and almost tumbling,
From the distance I hear you mumbling.

You make things look precise.
Does anything live in you?
Maybe mice?

You sway elegantly in the sun,
Your bark as rough as rocky Mars's
surface,
Buds bloom from your grand, ambitious
branches.

Delicate trees like a wink of sparkle in
the sky,
Roots swerving underground, trying hard
not to make a sound.

by Isla Docherty
Broadwheel (winner)

LEAVE ME!

I am a tree,
Look at me.
I am a rain forest tree
Save me!

I am a tree,
Do not cut me.
I am a rain forest tree,
For all to see.

I am a tree,
I give oxygen free.
I am a tree,
You need me.

I am a tree,
They try to burn me.
I am a tree,
So let me be!

I am a tree,
A swing for a chimpanzee.
I am a tree,
Don't swing your axe at me.

I am a tree,
Tall as can be.
I am a tree,
My head is in the canopy.

I am a tree,
You really need me.
I am a tree,
So let me be!

LEAVE ME!!

By Jack Ray
Torpel (commended)

THE KAPOK TREE

I wake up to the most beautiful place,
Where the sounds of the animals leave a trace.
My seedling branches stretch away from me;
I am a little kapok tree.

After a few years, I see my first sight
Of a fully grown human, who steps into the light.
He carries an axe and a knife near his knee;
I am now a worried kapok tree.

The logger cuts down the great fig tree
But, fortunately, he just walks past me.
Off he goes, leaving a scared branched sea;
I am a devastated kapok tree.

Animals begin to climb me very high,
They make a home as I am safe and dry.
I come to everyone's safety;
I am now the great kapok tree.

Money is all that the loggers see,
They just kill every single tree.
I save all the animals but the logger chops me –
I am the great, gone kapok tree.

By Harrie Metcalfe
Torpel (winner)

The John Clare Society Festival 2018 (2): How Helpston Stole My Heart Away Complete

September 2016, was the first time I heard the name 'John Clare'. Sat in a lecture theatre at the University of Greenwich, my interest was piqued as I learned that – would you believe? – Byron, Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth and Coleridge were *not* the only Romantic Poets. Clare was introduced to us as a talented poet who was sadly forgotten about, and after reading a handful of his poems, I was enthralled. My final year at university sprung upon me. Suddenly the daunting 10,000 word task called 'dissertation' was not something that I had to worry about in three years' time, but rather something I had to plan, extensively research, write, re-write, and complete in about six months, alongside three other modules. I decided that in order to make my dissertation as stress-free as possible, I would have to write about something I would enjoy researching, and there seemed no better choice to me than John Clare. In November 2017, I travelled to Helpston to begin my research. I stayed at The Bluebell, where Clare once worked as pot boy, explored John Clare's cottage, and visited the archives in the Peterborough Museum; I was enchanted by the vast amount of Clare's manuscripts and letters, alongside the Clare-oriented writings of academics. I obtained a First for my

dissertation: 'John Clare: The Revival of Interest in the Northamptonshire Peasant Poet', but more important than the grade was the knowledge I had gained and the friends I made along the way. I joined the John Clare Society shortly after my stay in Helpston, and I decided then that I would return for the John Clare Festival in July 2018 to meet the people who had helped me via email correspondence and enjoy the festivities in celebration of John Clare's life.

Roger Rowe (Arborfield) has been interested in Clare for over 40 years and has produced a number of innovative works on him. I contacted Roger in November 2017 with a list of questions about Clare, which he graciously answered, and he continued to provide me with invaluable help during my dissertation writing process. I arrived in Helpston on the day before the festival began and Christian (my fiancé) and I were kindly invited to dinner at The Bluebell by Roger and his wife, Mary. We had only been talking for ten minutes, but it felt like we had been friends for ten years. The following day – John Clare's 225th birthday – Roger and Mary took us to Langley Bush, Marholm Manor Farm and Swaddywell Nature Reserve. Though much has changed in the landscape since Clare's time, I still felt a resounding sense of peacefulness. The hot, dry summer had taken its toll on the long grasses, the thistles were dry, but the ragwort – 'thy humble flower with tattered leaves' – was thriving. We walked and talked as we explored the places that Clare was so fond of, stopping every now and then to admire our surroundings and reflect on our own thoughts. I thought of Clare rapt in his beloved solitude, and tried to observe the landscape through his eyes. Although my thoughts were with solitude, I was aware that I wasn't alone. I was glad to be sharing these quiet moments with my partner and our new friends.

Later that day, the Midsummer Cushions Ceremony took place – the event I was most looking forward to. Children from the John Clare Primary School came to place their carefully-prepared Midsummer cushions at the grave of John Clare. Following the laying of the cushions, we were invited inside the church to observe the results of the primary school's poetry competition. When the winners read out their poems I was pleasantly surprised at the high standard of their work. As I looked around at the children, their parents, friends, and people who had travelled from all over the country to be there in that moment, I was overwhelmed with emotion. John Clare was afraid of being forgotten about, but there, in St. Botolph's church, it was clear he was far from forgotten.

Friday evening, the Bluebell hosted their annual folk evening. I had been told that the event was popular and sure enough, the Bluebell was busier than a beehive. The room was filled: feet stomping on the wooden floor, hands slapping tables – and the drinks were flowing almost as fast as the fingers of the fiddlers! With every song that was announced, the same looks were shared across tables, some hearty nods of recognition, some blank faces and vague shake of the head. Nevertheless, by the end of each song, *everyone* had at least picked up the chorus, and the sound of confident voices singing in unison was just as warming as the sun that beat down on us over the weekend.

Despite the festivities of the night before, everyone seemed to be fresh-faced the following morning at St. Botolph's church for the Society's Annual General Meeting – either I underestimated their drinking abilities, or years of

experience had made them very adept at hiding the effects! Either way, the meeting ran smoothly. Carry Akroyd's rousing address set the tone for a weekend that had already begun to establish itself as educational, inspirational and all-together fun! Following the welcome, we were invited to be present at the unveiling of a new bench in the church grounds. The bench overlooks Clare's grave and was dedicated to the memory of Peter and Mary Moyse. Although I was not fortunate enough to have known them, Roger had told me some wonderful stories about Peter and Mary and their work, and as I looked around at the smiling faces in the grounds of St Botolph's, it was clear that their legacy was admired and celebrated.

Even though the temperature rose to thirty degrees with no breeze to be felt, Roger's village walk still drew in a crowd. With points of interest such as the Exeter Arms, converted houses that were once pubs, and Woodgate Farm, Roger's walk was insightful and entertaining. Unfortunately, the heat was a little too much for me, and I was unable to make it to the poetry reading at the church after the walk, but I took the time to recuperate so I was ready for the Leicester Grammar School folk concert later that evening.

Yet again, I found myself amazed at the sheer amount of talent on display. The band consisted mostly of students all under the age of eighteen, along with two members of staff; but with eyes closed, you would be forgiven for thinking you were at Folk Night at the BBC Proms! The band played a mixture of traditional and modern folk songs, as well as a handful of Clare's own compositions. The rise and fall of the bow-tips along with the resonating music, created a hypnotic, magical atmosphere that will not be forgotten any time soon.

Christian and I returned to the church the following morning, after bidding Roger and Mary farewell. The Sunday morning communion service commemorated the birth of John Clare, and we were encouraged to appreciate the beauty of our world, just as Clare did. The service at the church was a wonderful opportunity to meet some of the residents of Helpston, many of whom were interested to know how I became so fond of their local hero, and my heart was warmed to hear just how much Clare was a part of their lives.

On the Sunday afternoon, there was another organised walk around the village, this one much longer than that of the day before; but after feeling the heat during the first walk, I was too chicken to embark on the five mile trek, even with the tempting lure of afternoon tea at John Clare's cottage to finish with! Instead, I decided to take Christian around the cottage and its gardens. With its charming character and the gardens in full bloom, it would have been sad to go home without seeing it again.

To summarise, my first experience of the John Clare Festival was more than I could have hoped for. I think I would not be alone in wishing to thank the John Clare Society and Festival Planning Committee for organising such a wonderful event, where old and new friends can meet and share in celebration of the poet that unites us. Helpston has captivated me with its landscape, its history, its welcoming people, and without a shadow of a doubt I will be returning next year.

Rachel Sackman

News from the Alliance of Literary Societies

The 2018 AGM weekend in Birmingham was a great success, with talks on Tolkien, Jerome K Jerome, Housman and Francis Brett Young – along with a private guided tour of the Pre-Raphaelite collection in the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. There is a fuller report at the website <https://allianceofliterarysocieties.wordpress.com>.

The latest edition of the ALS journal, *ALSo*, is available on the ALS website, on the subject of Unreliable Narrators, along with an invitation for articles for the 2019 edition.

The 2019 weekend will be held 17–19 May and hosted by the George Eliot Society in Nuneaton. Further details will appear in the next Newsletter.

The John Clare Society is a member of the Alliance of Literary Societies, and JCS members are therefore welcome to take part in their activities

Linda J Curry

REFLECTION

Recent rain has greened the moss on
Winter's stark and naked willow boughs
hung across the river.

Banks of blackened treacherous mud
keep walkers back along the narrow path
where alder catkins quiver.

Each shape is mirrored in the stream
to break the optical illusion that
the roots stand at the base.

Instead, each tree is half the whole,
the roots upended, the crown is now below,
the feet above the face.

Every image multiplied in
planes of broken, pixellated light
on surface water's skin.

Its membrane stretches at the touch
of unseen breath of passing, cleansing breeze –
and dimples form within.

The straight dark trunks of lofty pine
become huge corkscrews, oil drills
that twist toward the bank,

Cezanne-like oblong slabs of tint,
palette-knifed parallels of paint
scraped on before they sank.

Folds of a Gainsborough lady's dress,
ripples like unravelled bolts of taffeta cloth
gyrate in playful sport,

'til still once more, the mirror settles
and diamond-cutter's clarity returns –
the river's skin is taut.

Each doubled image, absolute and clear,
externalised, inverted and reversed –
reflection of a kind –

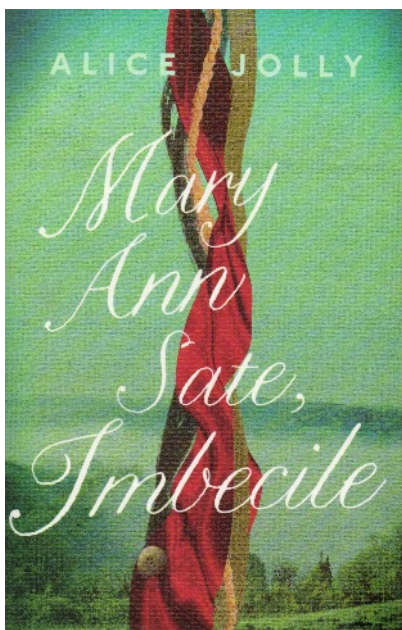
is opposite to inward thought
which questions mood and motive, when and why,
and dwells within the mind.

Ginnie Cox February 2 2018

I am a professional musician, teaching classical singing and piano, but have recently adopted a second profession, leading nature walks in my own locality in South Devon. I have written poetry off and on for many years, always inspired by the natural world. I finally got together sufficient that I was pleased with and had them printed as a self-published collection with the Choir Press. The first collection is called Wild Words and is available only through me at a price of £7 (incl. postage). For a copy, please e-mail me at ginniemusic@yahoo.com. Most of the poems have one of my own black and white illustrations to accompany them. I fully intend to make a second collection in a similar way, though the muse is resting over the summer! It was through a doctor friend of mine, who was already a member of the JCS and said that my work had echoes of John Clare, that I came to join the Society myself.

MARY ANN SATE, IMBECILE by Alice Jolly

Unbound Publishing 2018. ISBN 978-1783525492



This extraordinary book deserves more attention than I have room for here, and is likely to fascinate many John Clare enthusiasts.

It is a fictional 'found narrative' (like *The Castle of Otranto* or *The Handmaid's Tale*) in which the maidservant Mary Ann Sate narrates – or more accurately, writes down – the harrowing story of her childhood and relationship with her 'masters'. She writes without any punctuation and in a strongly rhythmical way, in non-standard English with a Gloucestershire dialect. In short, she writes as we would expect a woman of her time to write, and once we are accustomed to the style, it becomes haunting and lyrical, even liberating to be freed from the tyrannies of punctuation and Standard English grammar.

The setting is nineteenth century Gloucestershire, a period of remarkable change in

politics and industrialisation, all seen from the perspective of an intelligent but poor and not well-educated woman.

One of the most striking features, and again one which will seem familiar to students of John Clare, is Mary Ann's response to books, ranging from the fearful rapture with which, in the early part of the narrative, she explores the book (an astronomy guide?) that has been left out on the table, to *The Pilgrim's Progress*, *Robinson Crusoe* and Ann Radcliffe (whose theories about the liberation of women 'interest me less than the stories'). Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* is a book that is best kept 'hid'. 'Mr John Clare', we notice, receives an honourable mention.

The book was published by direct funding through the 'Unbound' website, where it is now sold out, but it is available from Amazon and other booksellers.

Stephen Sullivan

TORPEL MANOR: THE BIOGRAPHY OF A LANDSCAPE

By FRIEDA GOSLING, STEVEN P. ASHBY and ALEKSANDRA McCLAIN

Langdyke History & Archaeology Group, 2017. ISBN 978 1 9997880 0 1

As you will see, we have added this book to our sales list.

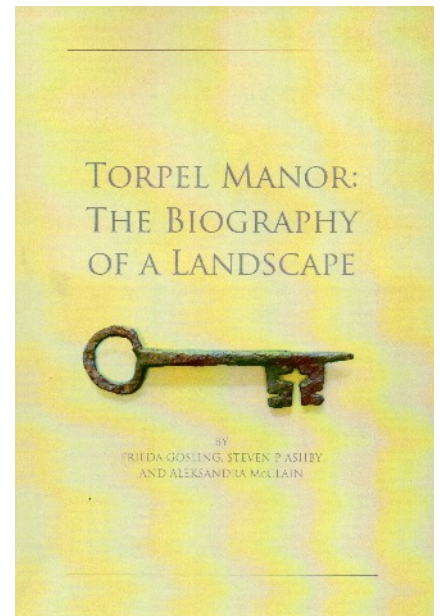
Torpel Manor field stands immediately opposite the junction of Helpston's West Street with King Street. As John Clare made his way along what is now Torpel Way to visit his friends in Ashton, he would have passed through the field where some of the remains of the Manor were still visible, a favourite place to find materials for village building and repairs.

Bessie Garfoot Gardner, writing in 1949, mentions remaining walls 4ft in height, hidden amongst blackthorn scrub. Now all we can see above ground is, in Frieda Gosling's words, 'a striking and distinctive array of earth works in the visible humps and bumps that are the tell tale indicators of past fortification, routeways and buildings, built up over centuries'.

Torpel Manor field is now owned and managed by the Langdyke Countryside Trust. Their History and Archaeology group (HAGS) has worked with the University of York to survey and research the hidden history of the field. This book presents the results of the collaborative project of documentary research and archaeological survey that they have been undertaking since 2012. Their research has revealed a long history of occupation and habitation here over the past 2000 years, from pre-history through Roman times and the Middle Ages to the origins of the Torpel Estate and the village that once adjoined it, through to the changing landscapes of modern times and its demise.

It is an immaculately-presented work, clearly laid out and much enhanced by its artwork, full of colour with Ivan Cumberbatch's beautifully detailed illustrations and with good clear colour photographs and Peter Leverington's detailed mapwork. Though replete with in-depth historical detail, it is still readable in a way that will capture the interested layman.

Mavis Leverington



THE STORY OF A THOUSAND YEARS

Close by a lonely place that seems so lone
There stands a house nobody seems to own
Yet there a pleasant man with much to say
Lives and time passes pleasantly away
The stranger often passes where he dwells
And stops his horse and hears the tale he tells
For in his garden which he calls his own
There leans an ancient and a curious stone
The children sit upon the stone and play
He tells his tale and never asks for pay
He calls the stone St Guthlacs now unknown
And cannot tell the letters on the stone
The stranger stands and wonders when he hears
And reads the story of a thousand years.

Northborough Sonnets, p.97

This little-known sonnet by Clare has no title, but 'St Guthlac's Stone' would seem appropriate. It is an interesting if unremarkable poem.

In July this year I visited Crowland Abbey to see 'the shattered pile of this old abbey struggling still with time'. In his sonnet (*Midsummer Cushion*, p.394) Clare sees the ruins by moonlight and builds up an atmospheric picture of 'the wrecks of ornamented stones' and 'the lapse of age and mystery profound'. As far as I can discover there is, apart from these two sonnets, no other record of Clare visiting Crowland. Additionally, in his 'Journal' (6 March 1825) he comments on a report in the *Stamford Mercury*:

certain surveyors have lately dug up several foundation stones of the Abbey and also a great quantity of stone coffins for the purpose of repairing the parish roads.

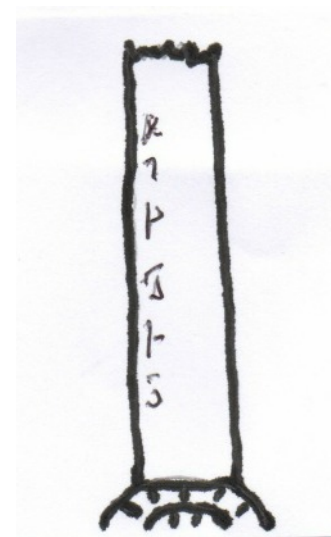
Parish officers, Clare says, are 'modern savages', an early example perhaps of condemnation of environmental vandalism, prompted by Clare's lifelong and intense emotional identification with his local and historical past. Perhaps his friendship with Edmund Artis fostered this interest in 'the story of a thousand years'.

During my visit to Crowland I hoped to find the ancient and curious stone which Clare saw and described in his sonnet. With the help of an abbey steward and an old shepherd of the Welland Washes I was successful. The steward showed me photocopied pages from *Ancient Charters and Crosses of Crowland*, a pamphlet by AS Cranham, published in Peterborough in 1893. From this I learnt that in 793 King Offa of Mercia granted privileges to the Abbey of Crowland and clearly defined the limits of its lands. There were six boundary stones, all still surviving in 1893; the one Clare saw was the northernmost, at Brotherhouse, midway between Crowland and Cowbit. The name Brotherhouse, still to be found on maps, suggests that there might at one time have been a monastic building near the boundary stone.

I drove along a narrow road, a field or two from the River Welland. When I thought I must be near I stopped and asked a shepherd who was feeding his flock in a field by the road, if he knew the stone. He did, and took me to it.

Guthlac's stone is a simple pillar, about four foot high, which may originally have had a cross at the top. When Clare saw it, it must have been flat on the ground for children to sit on it. Cranham says that it was inscribed:

Alo
hanc
petram
Guthlacus
habet
sibi metam
(‘Guthlac set this stone as a boundary’)



The letters are now hardly decipherable. Cranham suggested that the inscription may have been re-cut in the nineteenth century, and the base into which the stone is now set is modern. There is no explanatory notice on or near the stone. My shepherd guide was a septuagenarian who had been farming hereabouts for many decades and claimed that his family has lived in the locality since the seventeenth century.

He remembered a few old cottages once standing near the stone, which agrees with Clare's description that it was in a garden. It is a lonely spot, and the only building there now is 100 yards away and labelled on the OS map as Brotherhouse Bar. I assumed this meant 'bar' as *gateway*. But my guide had known it as a public house, serving the many Irish labourers who once worked in these fields. They have gone and Brotherhouse Bar no longer provides any refreshment.

St Guthlac was a youth of the royal house of Mercia. After a short career as a soldier, he became a religious. Seeking to be a hermit, he came to Crowland in AD 699 by boat – it was then an island in the fens. He established his cell, and a reputation for holiness, wisdom and miracles. He died in 714. A generation later Felix, a monk, wrote his Life. Crowland (or Croyland) Abbey was founded near Guthlac's cell before the Conquest, though the church and ruins there now are later. St Pega's church at Peakirk, a few miles away, is named after Guthlac's sister.

Peter Cox.

WHY DO I LIKE JOHN CLARE?

Early one morning in March, 2017, I was sitting by our open back door, wondering.... I was reading John Clare's 'March' in *The Shepherd's Calendar*, and, finding myself in the company of an 'old dame' at her 'burring wheel', I pondered the question – *Why Do I Like John Clare?*

No simple answer, but I was aware of how deeply I was drawn into John Clare's and the old dame's world as she surfaces from her spinning, 'potters to the door', and wanders into and around the garden:

To see the spring flowers pricking out their heads
And from her apron strings she'll often pull
Her sissars out an early bunch to cull...

It's the 'old hour glass', spinning 'its thread of sand', which clinches it for me, reminder of how time collapses when there are no clocks, and we are in a state of deep concentration, the old dame brought back to the 'surface' when:

the bright sun will thro the window steal
and gleam upon her face

I thought I would try to set some thoughts down on paper. But how to start? I decided to visit the old dame's cottage poetically, soon broadening my visit to the whole poem.

I ended up with twelve monthly visits to John Clare's world – and a book, *Why Do I Like John Clare?* I've collected and self-published my own poems over many years, but this took me way out of my comfort zone, especially when I realised that there may be readers who have spent a life-time in the company of John Clare.

But I also knew that a lot of my friends and local residents in our small East Yorkshire town of Howden might well enjoy meeting John Clare – 'Never heard of him!' – and so I incorporated many of his words, phrases, lines and even verses in my monthly poem visits, denoting his language in blue text and mine in black. It seems to work well, and the mixed colours appear not to halt the reader's flow.

I have been very conscious of not wanting to trivialise John Clare's poetry,

but many who have bought my book locally are not, as they say, 'poetry readers': nor was I until I read John Clare. I had given up! I'm delighted now when people stop me and say they intend to read more John Clare.

It seemed right to include several poems by John Clare, a brief biography, and much else. I have, of course, included my several responses to the question *Why Do I Like John Clare?* No space to share them here, save that John Clare imbues in me a sense of specialness and wonder in the ordinary....

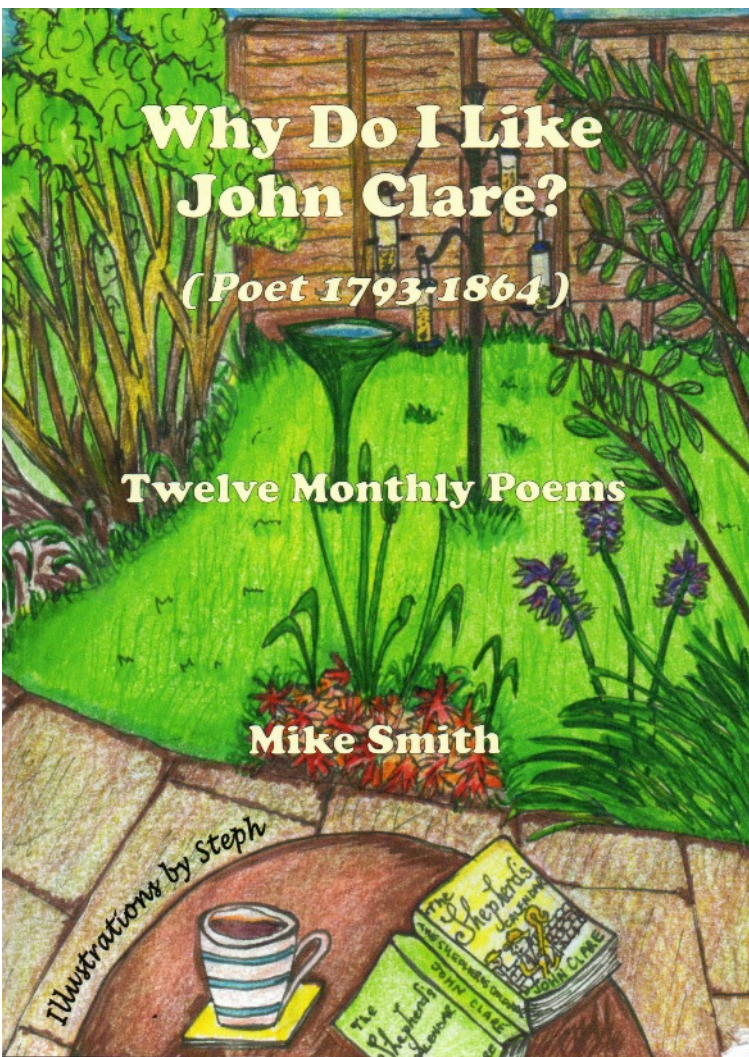
A word about the colourful illustrations prefacing each month. Steph, our daughter-in-law, did them. She has no experience of drawing/painting/illustrating beyond 'A' Level Art at school, but I asked her if she would like to have a go. I think what Steph has done is great: a warm, cartoony, non-literary style – so right!

We had a Howden book

launch in July, since when I have sold about sixty copies. Step by step towards breaking even! Be that as it may, putting this book together was – throughout – a joy.

Mike Smith

Why Do I Like John Clare? (£8 + £1 p&p)) is self-published.
mike@ordinarilyspeaking.co.uk www.mikesmithuk.com



Eric Robinson: John Clare's *Clouds* Brighten Day

Hello Roger,

I just want to thank you for your latest chapbook of Clare's Cloud poems. Since receiving our copy, the book has travelled with Eric and me on a 9-day cruise up to New England & Eastern Canada (St. John's & Halifax.)

One beautiful sunset evening, we sat on our private balcony – away from the noisy chaos of a full ship of 2400 passengers & 800 crew – just watching the clouds & the ocean drift by, while Eric read aloud from *Clouds* to me. It had been a little overcast that day, but hearing Eric 'proclaim' Clare's poetry brightened the moment (gin & tonics afterward also helped!)

The Robinsons travelled with six other couples where one partner wrestles with cognitive impairment-dementia-Alzheimers. Three staffers from a non-profit local daycare program called the Insight Memory Care Center organized the trip. They also provided the caregiver-wives with several hours of 'respite care' during which Eric got to read Clare's poetry again. Eric loved doing that; the group liked the introduction to Clare. The Insight staffer even used Clare's words to prompt participants to talk about/write about other signs of nature – in the sky, on land, or water. Instant 'activities therapy'. :-)

Sad as it is that Eric can no longer lecture about Clare's life, nor do literary analysis, his ability to READ Clare's poetry still remains, thank God. After 70+ years, that material is in Eric's heart & soul. A gift, for now. I do believe that poetry, like music, 'gets through' even when other memories and competencies are gone.

Best wishes from us both,
Victoria

The sun those mornings used to find
Its clouds were other-country mountains
& heaven looked downward on the mind
Those heavens are gone the mountains grey
Turned mist – the sun a homeless ranger
Pursues alone his naked way
Unnoticed like a very stranger.

(^Decay' – lines 31-38)

A note from Roger...

It is humbling to consider how the words of a long-dead poet can speak clearly even through the 'mountains grey turned mist' of Alzheimers. Little did I know when I started to research *Clouds* that it would be put such such a wonderful use.

Clouds is still available from me of course at £6.50 + £1.00 P&P. Email me on arborfield@gmail.com or leave me a message on the 'John Clare Poet' facebook page.

Roger Rowe

A SECOND VISIT TO PATTY BY C MARTER

In the February issue of this Newsletter, we published a letter by a C Marter of Market Deeping, in which he describes a visit that he made to John Clare's wife Patty at Northborough in 1863. I have recently come across another letter by this person, describing a later meeting. The following appeared in the London Daily News of Thursday October 27, 1864:

A correspondent of the Bury and Norwich Post, Mr C Marter, writes: 'Since the publication of poor John Clare's death I have had an interview with his disconsolate widow, at Northborough. She wept as she spoke of the many good qualities of her dear departed husband and of the ardent love he had always shown for her, ere he was mentally afflicted. She stated that she received a communication from the secretary of the Northampton Asylum, relative to her poor husband's illness, which was of a paralytic nature, some few days before his death and the intelligence of his dissolution only reached her the day before the corpse arrived at Helpston, the letter having miscarried. It was entirely owing to the exertions of Mr Spencer of Woodcroft Castle that the body was brought to Helpston.

'The poet's widow and all the children (with the exception of one son, who was a long distance from home) and the principal inhabitants of Helpston and some persons from the surrounding villages, followed the corpse to the grave. The service was impressively read by the Rev Edward Pengelly, vicar of Ginton (the vicar of Helpston being from home). It was the wish of poor Clare to be interred in his native place and how touchingly he expresses it. He says –

Be where I may when death brings in his bill
 Demanding payment for life's lingering debt
Or in my native village nestling still,
 Or tracing scenes I've never known as yet.
O let one wish, go where I will, be mine –
 To turn me back and wander home to die
'Mong nearest friends my latest breath resign,
 And in the churchyard with my kindred lie
'Neath the thick shaded sycamore's decay,
 It's broad leaves trembling to the breeze of day:
To see its shadow o'er my ashes wave,
 How soothing it will be, while hovering near,
My unseen spirit haunts its daisied grave,
 Passing on scenes in life once loved so dear.

'The poet's wish could only partly be complied with, for although he was buried in the churchyard, he could not be placed under the sycamore, that spot was occupied. A fund is being raised to erect a monument to his memory, and when this is done probably a sycamore, or some other appropriate tree, will be placed over his grave.'

The sonnet was first published in The Village Minstrel and was entitled 'The Wish'.

Noel Crack

THE JOHN CLARE SOCIETY

SALES ORDER FORM

OCTOBER 2018



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

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

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