The John Clare Society

Newsletter no. 135 February 2019

THE JOHN CLARE SOCIETY

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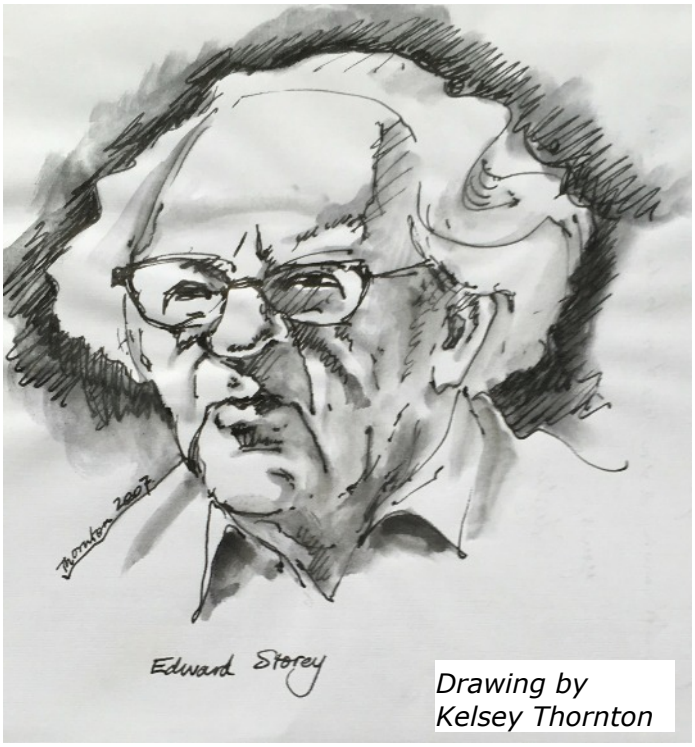
Edward Storey, 1930 – 2018
'Fen Boy First'

It is with great sadness that we announce the death of Edward Storey, Vice-President and co-founder of the John Clare Society, at his home in Discoed, near Presteigne, Powys, on Sunday morning, 18th November at the age of eighty-eight after a short illness.

Edward was born at Whittlesey, east of Peterborough, in the then Isle of Ely, Cambridgeshire, where his childhood in the surrounding fenland landscape was to have a powerful influence over him throughout his life. His stated ambition from an early age was to be a writer and, following National Service in the army and several temporary jobs, he eventually moved a step in that direction by being appointed to work for the Peterborough College of Adult Education, eventually becoming Registrar at the Brooke Street Centre.

Whilst here in 1964 Edward masterminded the Centenary Commemoration of the death of John Clare in a week-long celebration from the 9th to the 15th May consisting of lectures, recitals, folk song and exhibitions held variously in Peterborough Cathedral, Town Hall, Grammar School, and St Botolph's church, Helpston, culminating in a lecture by Professor Edmund Blunden. It was a magnificent achievement early in Edward's career that truly marked the beginning of the renaissance of John Clare studies, to which Edward dedicated so much of his life. Already the idea of writing Clare's biography was beginning to take shape whilst he was publishing books and poems about the Fens, having become a full-time writer in the 1970s.

Then, in 1980, the new Rector of Helpston, the Revd Brian Blade, attended a series of lectures on Clare given by Edward in the nearby village of Castor. After the final meeting over a pint in a local pub Brian and Edward, along with George Dixon, another life-long Clare devotee, took the decision to found a John Clare Society. Accordingly, in the following year, a meeting attended by over seventy people was held in Helpston village hall to inaugurate the Society. Brian Blade became chairman, Edward editor of the Newsletter and Journal, and George Dixon treasurer. Edward's biography of Clare, appropriately entitled *A Right to Song*, was published in 1982, bringing Clare now to a much wider audience. Edward



Drawing by Kelsey Thornton

continued to write and lecture on Clare, and many members will recall his numerous addresses at the Clare Festival, as well as annotated coach trips around Clare countryside, always accompanied with infectious enthusiasm and good humour.

To the surprise of many, in 1999 Edward and his wife Angela decided to begin a new life on the Welsh border in Discoed, near Presteigne, where they rapidly became involved in the local community, with Edward becoming President of the Friends of St Michael's, the church next to their home. New poems, this time inspired by a landscape very different from the fens, began to appear as Edward responded to fresh surroundings, demonstrating, as he always maintained, that writers and their landscapes were inseparable. How true this was of Edward, and how much pleasure, insight and understanding he gave to so many, not least in what he did in making the world more aware of the true greatness of John Clare. We extend our deepest sympathy and condolences to Angela.

Rodney Lines

Marcia Egar, 1925 – 2018

Marcia Egar, of Spalding, Lincolnshire, died last year at the age of 92. She was a life-long devotee of John Clare, and had been a member of the society for a very long time. Many members will recall a frail old lady, always sitting on the front row at Clare Festival AGMs, raising her arm to second many a motion, or chatting to Ronald Blythe, Kelsey Thornton or John Goodridge, or any of the Society's leading lights. Indeed, she loved just talking to people with her great enthusiasm, and even more, writing to them. At her funeral there was an exhibition of letters she had elicited from the great and the good over many years, including Prime Ministers, Archbishops of Canterbury, scholars, writers, musicians, politicians - the list seemed endless.

Our local M.P., John Hayes, spoke with great affection for her and recalled the many letters he had received from her and her many involvements in the community over the years. The church, the guides, the choir, the music society, WEA classes, charities – Marcia just got everywhere. She was a local institution, a true character, a remarkable person. She will be really missed. Thanks to her love for Clare, she generously bequeathed £1000 to the Society.

Rodney Lines

Membership

I have run out of printed copies of Newsletter no. 129 (February 2017). If anyone has a copy they don't want, could they please contact me at bob.heyes@yahoo.co.uk.

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

Elizabeth McShane, Belfast
Graham and Stephanie Bell, Barton Seagrave, Northants
Keely Mills, Stamford, Lincs
Margaret Watson, Sandbach, Cheshire
Norah Jane Hayball, London SE22
Rebecca Mayfield, Sleaford, Lincs
Benjamin Dye, Tilshead, Wiltshire
David Swinden, Ilford, Essex

Robert Heyes, Membership Secretary

Society Sales

The John Clare Society owes a great debt of gratitude to Mavis Leverington who, assisted by her husband, Peter, has been our Sales Officer for more than seven years. Mavis has now stood down from this post, and readers will notice that there is no sales insert in this edition of the Newsletter.

The Society confidently expects to be able to co-opt a new Sales Officer in the next few days, and members can be assured that the Sales Insert will re-appear in the June 2019 Newsletter. If we have your e-mail address, we will be able to send you details of the new arrangements before this.

Valerie Pedlar

Alliance of Literary Societies

The 2019 Weekend takes place 17 – 19 May in Nuneaton, hosted by the George Eliot Fellowship. It will be based at the Town Hall, with a trip to Arbury Hall planned for the Sunday. Everyone is welcome. The programme and booking form will appear on the ALS website (www.allianceofliterarysocieties.wordpress.com) around the middle of February – so look out for it!

Linda J Curry

Birds and Words

Friday 12th – Sunday 14th July

Helpston, near Peterborough

'Come we to the summer, to the summer we will come', wrote Clare in his poem named after that season, and now is the time to begin to look forward to one of the highlights of that season – the **John Clare Festival** which, for those who are unaware, is held each year in Helpston – Clare's birthplace village – on the weekend nearest to his birth date.

Plans for the Festival – whose theme this year is 'Birds and Words' – are well-advanced and the programme will be launched formally in late Spring.

The Festival Committee is seeking to build on the success of past festivals but is widening the range of activities over the weekend. As well as sessions for those with an existing knowledge and love of Clare's life and work, we are also running activities for those who are less familiar, with a particular emphasis on engaging people in the local area. For example, on Sunday morning, as well as the Church service, there will be a 'Beginner's Guide to John Clare' presentation, alongside guided walks in and around Helpston in the afternoon which are open to all.

Overall, a very varied programme is planned. The keynote speaker this year is Dr Mina Gorji, who is a Senior Lecturer in English and Deputy Director of the Centre for John Clare Studies at the University of Cambridge. Mina will speak on the way birds soar through Clare's poetry and how he movingly captures them in his work, with a depth of knowledge that was only achievable by painstaking observation of their behaviours through the seasons. During the day on Saturday, there will be a range of indoor and outdoor displays and performances and in the evening, 'Pennyless', the very popular folk group, will entertain us.

To help market and promote the Festival, a considerable amount of effort is being put into promoting it locally, including through broadcast, social and other media and contact with local organisations.

The popular 'Friends of the John Clare Society Festival' scheme will be run again this year enabling those interested to receive a programme and to have 'early bird' booking opportunities. Details will be sent to members.

Please do make a note of the Festival dates (12th – 14th July) in your diaries and we very much look forward to welcoming you if you've been coming for many years, or if this would be your first time.

If you need any further information, please do not hesitate to contact Simon Bysshe, who is Chair of the John Clare Festival Committee (2019) by email on sby121@btinternet.com or by phone: 01733-253164.

'TWO ROADS CONVERGE'
A JOINT STUDY DAY WITH THE EDWARD THOMAS FELLOWSHIP

We are pleased to announce that a joint study day between the John Clare Society and the Edward Thomas Fellowship will take place on **Saturday 21st September 2019** in Clare's home village of Helpston near Peterborough.

As members will recognise, the title for the day 'Two Roads Converge' is an inversion of the first three lines of Robert Frost's poem 'The Road Not Taken'. During the day we want to explore points of convergence in the lives, concerns and work of two of Britain's best-loved poets.

The programme for the day (see below) will include three excellent speakers as well as an opportunity for members of both societies to share their experience of and enthusiasm for our two poets. There will also be an opportunity for those attending to visit the John Clare Centre and the Cottage as well as his grave nearby.

Our hope is that at the end of the day members of the John Clare Society will leave with a desire to explore Edward Thomas' life and work further and that members of the Edward Thomas Fellowship will feel similarly about John Clare.

9.30-10.00 am	Arrival, registration.
10.00 - 10.15 am	Introduction to the day.
10.15 – 11.15 am	Dr. Sam Ward of Nottingham Trent University on the biographies (life journeys) of John Clare and Edward Thomas.
11.15 – 11.30 am	Break. Tea and biscuits.
11.30 – 12.30 pm	Dr. Erica McAlpine of Oxford University on the relationship between poets and landscape (landscape journeys).
12.30 – 2.00 pm	Lunch – the local pub The Bluebell can accommodate up to 60 guests for lunch.
2.00 – 3.00 pm	Audience engagement session.
3.00 – 4.00 pm	Dr. Jamie Castel of Cardiff University comparing the poetry of John Clare and Edward Thomas (literary journeys).
4.00 – 4.15 pm	Thanks and departure.
4.15 – 6.00 pm	Extended opening of John Clare Centre and cottage for those who wish to visit.

If you would like to attend, please complete the application form included in this newsletter, or a photocopy, and return it to the address shown on the form as soon as you are able.

We can accept a total of 80 persons. Initially, 40 places will be allocated to members of the John Clare Society and 40 to members of the Edward Thomas Fellowship. If any places remain unfilled after April 30th 2019 they will be made available to members of either society. Any unfilled places after June 30th 2019 will be made available to non-members.

Further information will be sent out to those confirmed as attending in due course.

We hope that many of you will wish to join us for what should be an interesting and enjoyable day.

‘TWO ROADS CONVERGE’

A John Clare/Edward Thomas Study Day.
The Village Hall, Helpston, Nr.Stamford.
Saturday, Sept.21st. 10.00am. – 4.30pm.
Attendance charge – £20 per person.

BOOKING FORM

Name of applicant/s: _____

_____

Address:

_____

_____

_____

_____

Cost of attendance @ £20 person: _____

Please tick appropriate box if you are a member of:

The John Clare Society ☐
The Edward Thomas Society ☐

Cheques payable to The John Clare Society

Please send application and payment to:
Linda Curry, 59 Bryony Road, Birmingham, B29 4BY.

Catering will be available in the form of a light meal at the Blue Bell public house and restaurant, where accommodation is also available. To book either please contact: (email): lesley@bluebellhelpston.co.uk or (telephone) 01733 252394. Also, at the Clare Cottage, refreshments including soup and a roll with cakes may be obtained. Visitors who bring their own lunches may eat them at the Village Hall.
Accommodation is also available at the Travelodge Hotel, at Eye near Peterborough, not far away.

We will send full details of the day’s programme and the audience participation section with your tickets.

I can hear the colours: John Clare and sensory perception

Clare wrote with the eye of a painter and ear of a musician. It is this heightened sensory perception which marks him out, but it also raises an intriguing possibility. Could he really sense the environment in a different way? Were his senses so finely tuned that they burst into his brain and onto the page, a storm of images, recollections, observations? Could it be possible that he was synaesthetic? While it cannot be proven, it would explain in part the near-mystical way in which he experienced the natural environment.

To clarify: synaesthesia in a rare neurological condition where two or more senses entwine. A particular form is *a chromesthesia.* Here there exists an association of everyday sounds with colours and colours with sounds.

Cytowic (2009) puts it like this: 'Chromesthesia is something like fireworks, voice music and assorted environmental sounds such as clattering dishes and firework shapes that arise, move around and then fade when the sound fades'.

Among famous synesthetes are the painter Kandinsky, the composer Messiaen, and the physicist Feynman – and perhaps the poet John Clare?

Clare's synaesthesia is not the synesthesia of literary figurative language, as used by the French symbolist poets such as Baudelaire or Rimbaud, but rather an amalgam of internal sensory experiences where colours sing, and sounds fly into colours and shades. It is a very personal internalisation of the outside world.

There can, of course, be no proof for a condition not recognised at the time, but if it were the case that Clare was synaesthetic, it would shed new light on the creative process of his poetry – open, absorbing insights into the use of description, metaphor.

This fascination with colour, his painter's eye, was certainly observed and commented on by Winterson (2015) in a paper given at a John Clare conference in 2014. She talks about his descriptions of light, giving as an example 'November' in *The Shepherds Calendar*:

> The Owlet leaves her hiding place at noon
> And flaps her grey wings in the doubling light. (lines 19–20)

'The image of "doubling light" is incredibly evocative. One is not sure if the light is intensifying or depleting. It could be either or simultaneously both – or it is in a twilight zone, leading us to new worlds? "Doubling" at the very least suggests folding back on itself, veiling and layering.'

This fascination with light reveals itself repeatedly. In 'Rural Morning' for example:

> Soon the twilight through the distant mist
> In silver hemming skirts the purple east
> Ere yet the sun unveils his smiles to view. (lines 1–3)

Again, in 'Rural Evening':

> The sun now sinks behind the woodland green
> And twittering spangles go the leaves between. (lines 1–2)

If Clare experienced chromesthesia, the visual and auditory inputs would have resembled an assault on the senses – a double assault with both sound and vision modulating and merging. The poet is forced to grasp bursts of stimuli and weave them together. Could he hear 'the twilight through the distant mist'? Was the sound of twittering spangles a xylophone, a glockenspiel?

The dangers are of course over-stimulation, bursts of euphoria; the rewards a consummation of the fantastic. How do you communicate these feelings to

others who understand differently? This was his dilemma. Yet it might explain Clare's passion for the details of colour, his delicacy of observation: he just saw and heard things differently. He was also unafraid in his attempts to communicate.

Fiona Stafford (2015) explores this in 'The wind blows happily on everything':

I love the luscious green before the bloom
The leaves and grass and even beds of moss
When leaves gin bud and spring prepares to come
The ivys evergreen the brown green gorse
Plots of green weeds that barest roads engross
In fact I love the youth of each green thing
The grass the bushes and the moss
That pleases little birds and makes them sing
I love the green before the blooms of spring. (lines 10–18)

She makes the point:

> 'Not every poet would risk the same, simple word six times in a nine-line stanza, but here "green" seems to grow in intensity with every new instance linking the line acoustically, visually and imaginatively'.

Here the senses meld and are unfolded as words. 'Green' is not one colour but many shades, fizzing in reflected light and vibrating with sound. Stafford's use of the word 'intensity' is particularly apt.

It was not just the mesmerising qualities of light that held Clare's attention. His fascination with birds and nests may also illustrate this facet of his experience. In 'The Yellowhammers Nest' for example:

Five eggs, pen-scribbled over lilac shells
Resembling writing scrawls which fancy reads
As natures poesy and pastoral spells.' (lines 13–15)

'The Thrushes Nest':

There lay her shining eggs as bright as flowers
Ink spotted over shells of greeny blue.' (lines 10–11)

The nest becomes a circular stave with notes of ink spots and writing scrawls.

It is easy to imagine Clare, purposefully tramping through the Northamptonshire fields and fen country absorbing every sight, sound, pattern and texture, delighting in the environment, becoming as one with it – a restless sensory receptor.

How sweet when weary dropping on a bank
Turning a look around on things that be
Een feather headed grasses spindling rank
A trembling to the breeze one loves to see
And yellow buttercups where many a bee
Comes buzzing to its head and bows it down
And the great dragonflye wi gauzy wings
In gilded coat of purple green or brown
That on broad leaves of hazel basking clings. ('Summer' lines 1–8)

Nothing is missed; the scene, a moment in time, is pulled in and consumed. It is as if everything reminds Clare of everything else. He is in the midst of an emotional and sensory double helix.

It was not only his observational skills but his ability to listen and to delineate sound that gives a special tint to his poetry. John Clare was of course musically inclined, the writer of many songs, synaesthesia possibly enhancing the musical impulse. He was endowed with fine auditory discernment, an example

being 'Pleasant Sounds', where he describes the rustling of leaves, crumpling of cat-ice, wind halloos, whizzing of larger birds, the patter of squirrels.

Stephanie Kuduk Weiner (2009) makes this point:

> 'Clare's career as a poet began in eager listening: before he was a pupil of James Thomson and William Cowper, he tells us, he was a student of nature's music.... Though it is Clare's sharp, discerning vision that garnered the lion's share of critical attention, his sense of hearing is fundamental to the themes and techniques of his descriptive work'.

This close and active listening may have taken on a spiritual quality. Emma Mason (2015) argues from this standpoint:

> 'Through a listening to all the world – natural, spiritual, human, non-human – Clare is granted a way of conceptualising and thinking about the world that he carries from his dreams to his waking world, writing it down "to prolong the happiness of my faith"'.

In this sense, his faith is rooted in the confluence of the natural and man-made elements of the countryside.

She goes on to explain:

> 'The reorientation of our attention from trees to churches, kinship to shipwrecks, pipe organs to "open air" music – enacts a synesthetic gathering of dualisms into an ontology of universal kinship'.

This understanding of the connection between the physical and the ethereal is profoundly moving, especially given the sense of freedom and honesty with which it is expressed.

Clare understands that the countryside is not static; it shifts and wanes with the weather, the seasons, the cycle of agricultural practice. Movement is an abiding theme in his poetry, whether it be the movement from child to adult, to the enclosure of common land, or:

> Summer pleasures they are gone like to visions every one
> And the cloudy days of autumn and of winter cometh on
> I tried to call them back but unbidden they are gone
> Far away from heart and eye and forever far away.'
>
> 'Remembrances' (lines 1–4)

Or simply:

> The wind blows the trees about
> In the green field. ('Spring Wind' lines 1–2)

With his senses did he conceptualise a visual and auditory kaleidoscope? Is it possible to imagine a phantasmagoria of shifting colours and sounds almost painful to absorb? It would be at the same time euphoric and frustrating, because mere words are not enough to do justice to the experience.

Perhaps this need to manage a heightened sensory perception, to share this sense of wonder with others, encouraged Clare's life-long drive to write poetry even in the most harrowing of circumstances. Maybe, just maybe, it was a contributing factor in the slide towards mental disorder and the bi-polar tendencies, the manic depression of his later years. It is impossible to say. He was, after all, a superficially simple person – but in actuality, a psychologically complex individual.

It is quite possible to argue that John Clare was merely an unusually observant, an exceptionally gifted, naturalist. That he was a man finely attuned to the nuances of the natural world is without a doubt. He recognised the vulnerabilities of the environment, and by extension his personal vulnerabilities, in the harsh realities of his age. My own feeling, and it is only a feeling, is that there was more to it, a depth and excitement consistent with forms of synaesthesia. I take the lines:

yellow buttercups where many a bee
Comes buzzing to its head and bows it down. ('Summer' lines 5–6)

The yellow of the buttercup is a trumpet blast, the bee a ripple of a violin, a descending passage of music as the flower bows down. Could it be? As stated earlier, the link between John Clare and synaesthesia is impossible to establish, and the possibility is offered, in a playful manner, as an interesting conjecture. So here the question lies, and the answer awaits.

Notes

Cytowic, R.E., and Eaglemann, D. 2009 *Wednesday is Indigo Blue: Discovering the brain of Synaesthesia.* Cambridge. Mass. MIT Press

Felstiner, J., 2009 C*an Poetry Save the Earth? A Field Guide to Nature Poems.* Yale University Press.

Kuduk Weiner, S., 'Listening with John Clare' *Studies in Romanticism v*ol. 48. No. 3 (Fall 2009)

Mason, E., 2015 'Ecology with Religion: kinship in John Clare' in *New Essays on John Clare: Poetry, Culture and Community.* Ed. Kövesi, S. and McEathron, S., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

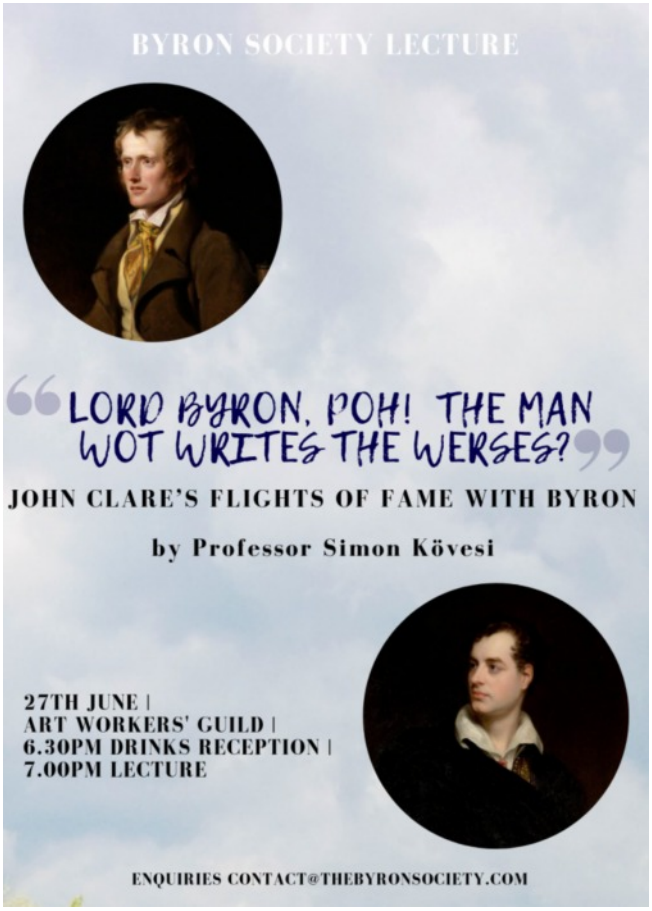
Stafford, F., 2015 'John Clare's colours' in *New Essays on John Clare* (ibid.)

Winterson, L., May 2014 'Doubling Light – John Clare: the layering of vision in my painting' John Clare Conference, Oxford Brookes University. Available at http:luciewinterson.co.uk/john-clare-talk/

Andrew Bramwell

The Byron Society

The Byron Society is holding a lecture at the Art Workers Guild, London, from 6.30 to 8.00pm, 27 June 2019. £7 for non-members. Professor Simon Kovesi on 'Lord Byron, poh! the man wot writes the werses?: John Clare's flights of fame with Byron'. All welcome. For more detail, visit http://www.thebyronsociety.com/lord-byron-poh-the-man-wot-writes-the-werses-john-clares-flights-of-fame-with-byron



JOHN CLARE'S COUNTRYSIDE: The Lowland Areas

Etton Maxey Pits in a storm. *Photo by Richard Astle*

For such a small area, John Clare's countryside is surprisingly diverse in terms of natural habitats. To the south of Helpston the land rises up to the fields and woodlands of Ailsworth Heath and Swaddywell Pit, before falling off again after the Hanglands into the valley of the river Nene. To the north, the large open space of the three-field system would have stretched away into the distance towards the river Welland. In Clare's day Helpston was divided from Maxey by large areas of wetland grazed by cattle and geese, and even in the 1950s the road from Etton to Maxey was often flooded in the winter.

Millions of years ago during the Jurassic period, this area was covered by tropical seas and has been an internationally important source of fossils of prehistoric marine life. More recently it would have been close to the coastline of a much larger North Sea and in historic times a village of the Fenland edge.
In the last 20 years the area has been extensively quarried for gravel, forming much of the current landscape of flooded pits and restored meadows with the Maxey Cut, a flood relief channel built in the 1950s, running through the middle, acting as an important wildlife corridor.

The Langdyke Countryside Trust manages three nature reserves in the area between Etton and Maxey, that together make up a patchwork of nature-rich habitats, ranging from grazing fields to wild flower meadows, wet-woodland,

hedgerows, ponds and lakes, reed-beds and a community orchard and small allotments for local people.

Etton Maxey Pits is Langdyke's largest reserve and has been managed since 2011 in association with Tarmac. It is a former gravel pit being restored to a mix of ponds, wet meadows and wild-flower rich banks.

In spring and summer, the larger ponds are home to common tern and black headed gulls, little grebes and mute swans, while the meadows provide nesting habitat for skylark, redshank and lapwing. Pyramidal orchids have spread rapidly across the reserve, and water voles have occasionally been found in the ditches. Common blue butterflies feed on the thistles on the banks and emperor and hairy dragonflies patrol the water-ways. Cuckoo, turtle dove, hobby and marsh harrier are regular summer visitors too.

The site floods in winter, providing food and shelter for ducks such as teal, gadwall and shoveler. Snipe and jack snipe can be found in the flooded meadows during winter and wading birds, including dunlin, black tailed godwit and ringed plover, stop off on migration north and south.

Snipe *Photo by Northeast Wildlife*

In Clare's day the snipe would have been a local breeding bird, nesting in the extensive fenland landscapes east of Glinton and probably south of Maxey. From his prose works it appears that it also nested in wet areas of the heaths south of Helpston. He wrote that 'snipes are often seen with us in summer and their nests have been found. I saw one yesterday (12th of May) it sat so close that I likend to set my foot on it. I examined the place and I fancied it was preparing a nest in the midst of a large tuft of fog or dead grass common on the heaths.'

Clare's comments about finding snipe on the heaths is of interest. This is not a habitat we would associate with this bird, which is today either a bird of hills or high moorland in northern Britain or coastal or inland wetlands in the south of the country. His comments demonstrate just how large the area of heathland to the south of Helpston must have been and how very different it would have looked to the classic heath we associate with Thomas Hardy's novels. Clare's heathland would have been a mix of rough grassland, gorse and damp meadows with ponds and boggy areas.

Clare celebrated the snipe in the poem, 'To the Snipe', which again suggests from its description of habitats a much more widespread distribution of the snipe across our countryside than we know now, perhaps because many of the wetter areas of field and heath have been drained in the last 200 years.

Lover of swamps
The quagmire over grown
With hassock tufts of sedge – where fear encamps
Around thy home alone

The trembling grass
Quakes from the human foot
Nor hears the weight of man to let him pass
Where thou alone and mute

Sittest at rest
In safety neath the clump
Of huge flag-forrest that thy haunts invest
Or some old sallow stump

The good news is that snipe can still be seen in good numbers on Langdyke's reserves. They do feed at Swaddywell pit in the winter, when they spring up from under your feet as you walk across the top field, and they can be found in considerable numbers at Etton Maxey Pits and also at our newest reserve, Vergette Wood Meadow.

Vergette Wood Meadow has been farmed by the Vergette family for many generations. In the first decade of the century it was quarried for gravel and restored as a wild flower meadow and wet woodland. The land became a Langdyke nature reserve in 2018. It consists of an area of periodically flooded woodland and a wildflower meadow.

Little grebe, coot and mute swan nest in the flooded areas of the woodland and hobby and barn owl can often be seen hunting overhead. Snipe feed here in the winter when other ducks, including pintail and tufted duck, find shelter on the water. Grass, vetchling and tare flower in the meadow and flocks of linnet are often seen in the hedgerow that runs parallel to the South Drain. Turtle dove are regularly seen in the area and their gentle purring call can be heard from the hedgerows in the summer.

There is no public access to the site but there are good views across the meadow from the South Drain and across the woodland from the Green Lane.

The third Langdyke reserve in this area is **Etton High Meadow**. This eight-acre paddock was created in the 1990s out of arable fields and is now completely enclosed by tall hedgerows, including native species such as maple, blackthorn and spindle.

Many familiar farmland birds make their home here, including kestrel, little owl, yellowhammer and whitethroat – and dragonflies such as brown hawker and ruddy darter can be found by the restored pond.
The Trust has planted a small community orchard on the meadow using local varieties of apple, pear and plum and provided space for allotments for local people.

Richard Astle
Chair
Langdyke Countryside Trust
richard@athene-communications.co.uk

The Trust is celebrating its 20th anniversary in 2019 and we would love to have more active involvement from members of the John Clare Society. If you'd like to find out more about our work or how to get involved please visit www.langdyke.org.uk or join our Facebook page

A POSSIBLE NEW PORTRAIT OF JOHN CLARE

In 1836 John Clare was in communication with a gentleman from Alloa in Scotland called George Reid, who was an admirer of the poet. He had purchased copies of Clare's books and had also supplied books to him. He requested a portrait of Clare, who promised to try to get one painted. In a series of letters to Reid, Clare explained that he was having difficulty getting anyone able to take on the task, but that he had a friend locally who could do it and would do a good job.

From clues in his correspondence with Reid it is clear that the painter friend was Francis Simpson from Stamford. It was arranged for Clare's wife Patty to collect the finished work, but when she tried to do so it turned out that the artists had been unwell and wished to retain the painting longer in order to finish it. Clare explained this in his letter to Reid of June 19th 1837; in this letter Clare complained that he was very unwell himself, and hardly able to do anything. It was in fact just over two weeks later that he was taken to Epping Forest to be admitted into Matthew Allen's private asylum at High Beech.

No more is heard of George Reid until four years later when, after Clare's escape from the asylum and his long walk home, a letter arrived at Northborough from Reid enquiring about the poet. Clare replied. telling him of his condition, but there is no mention of a portrait. It looks very much as if Reid never received this reply and it may well be that it was never completed. All we know is that a portrait of Clare was nearly completed by Francis Simpson.

My story moves on until four years ago, when a friend informed me that there was a portrait listed for sale on eBay that was possibly of John Clare. When I saw the image I contacted the seller to find out more. It turned out that the portrait had been bought by him in a shop in Oundle, and that they had bought it at the Burghley Horse Trials at Stamford. The new owner was a gentleman who had retired from a long career in the art market and was able to detect that the painting dated from around 1840. He had taken it to the National Gallery in London for their opinion, but they were very non-committal about whether it was a portrait of John Clare.

I should say that nobody seemed aware of the connection between John Clare and the artist Francis Simpson. The friendship between them was a long one. Clare wanted to user an illustration by Simpson in his *Village Minstrel* of 1821, and is known to have accompanied him on sketching trips.

I now have this painting; the outer areas are unfinished but the figure is beautifully and delicately portrayed. The person is shown seated by a river or pond and reading a small book. Francis Simpson is best known for his fine drawings of church fonts, engravings of which were published in a book entitled *A Series of Baptismal Fonts, Chronologically Arranged* in 1828. It turns out, however, that he was also a very good watercolour artist. What I need now is to locate one of these watercolours in order to compare the techniques and look for other similarities. Dr Sam Ward was kind enough to point out one example for sale on a Canadian website, entitled 'Spring in Burghley Park', but the image shown is too small and indistinct to be able to make a comparison. I have tried advertising in the *Stamford Mercury*, but without any success. So I would like to ask if any of our readers are aware of the location of any watercolours by Francis Simpson, could they please let me know? My telephone number is: 01373 465590 and my e-mail: f.n.crack@gmail.com. I would be most grateful and – who knows? – you might play a part in an important new discovery.

Noel Crack

The Countryside and Townsfolk (according to me)

When the townsfolk vacate to the country
To roam across meadows or leas
And wander down rides in the forest
Where they don't see the wood for the trees
Dressed in bright wellies that sparkle
And hats with bobbles and flaps
And fluorescent jackets with backpacks
Armed with locally bought survey maps
They all set off at a canter
With umbrellas and sticks as they walk,
But what puzzles me as they all clatter by
Is they seem to do nothing but talk.
It seems quite a shame from my point of view
Although they mean nothing to me
To spend all that money on clothing and time
And not see what they've come here to see.

Now there's unwritten rules of the country
Townsfolk would do well to observe
For not to be seen in the country
Is also not to be heard.
Use your eyes and your ears as a guide
As you walk up hill or a fell.
Don't forget that thing on the front of your face –
It gives you a good sense of smell.
You never know what's around the next bend
So creep up and silently peer:
You may see a fox coming homeward
Or you may see a small muntjac deer.
Notice the grass which is flattened
Where fox cubs or badger kits lay,
or get downwind of those holes in the bank
Where a rabbit may come out to play.
Look in the hedgerows and treetops
Listen for bird song as well
You may hear a woodpecker tapping –
See a squirrel – you never can tell.

Stealthily walk by rivers and streams
Try not to be too keen.
Then a flash of blue off an old dead branch –
A kingfisher you'd never have seen.
There's far too much to write it all down
And you can't see it all in a book
But the countryside is a magical place
If you stop and you listen and look.
So don't watch it all on the telly,
Come and get that countryside feel.
Change your bright clothes for some drab ones
Then, like me, you'll see it for real.

Tim Speed

THE HEDGER AND THE HEDGE

John Clare makes frequent references to agricultural workers. He had been one himself.

Many are no more than just figures in his landscape, perhaps, and rarely do we have a full picture of them or their work. There are exceptions: the detailed work of the sheep-shearer, or the lonely, monotonous work of the thresher, for example. The hedger is interesting, too. By looking at Clare's words about this labourer, we have a dimension that is missing from some others:

The lonesome hedger brustles at his toil ['Signs of Winter']

Working often some distance from his home, he is not omnipresent like the ploughman, shepherd, milkmaid or swain, but – either explicitly or implicitly – whenever 'hedge' or 'hedgerow' is mentioned, the hedger is a significant part of the thread in Clare's tapestry of labour. It might be fair to suggest that Clare had a degree of respect for this worker. Interestingly, however, the occupation is not identified in the 1841 Census for Helpston (nor for Glinton or Etton). In Helpston a single shepherd, machine thresher and thatcher are shown; otherwise 'Ag.Lab' or 'Farm worker' appear 120 times. Parish records might provide more specific information.

The skilled hedger had been central to rural work for centuries. The long-established open-field system presented a countryside with few hedges, but they would still have been there. The chequerboard pattern of the fields is something recalled by Clare [in 'Childish Recollections'] :

Here stands the tree wi clasping ivy bound
Which oft Ive clumb see the chaps at plough
And checkered fields for many a furlong round

A reliable hedger was a key member of the landowner's or tenant-farmer's workforce. Hedge maintenance was an annual necessity and often an expensive item in Manor accounts. But hedgers were not immune to loss of employment. During the agricultural depression of the 1820–1830s, hedgecutting and maintenance declined; some farmers arguing that as such work brought in no profit, it could not be afforded. Efforts were made to correct this decline, as much to ensure that the skills would not be lost as to restore hedges and renew ditches. Earl Spencer, who had been one of Clare's benefactors, founded a valuable annual prize for hedge-cutting and laying. In the first year, 1836, sixty Northamptonshire hedgers competed for the £12 offered. The competition continued through the century, later under the auspices of the County's Agricultural Association.

Enclosure had been widespread for decades. In the late 16th/early 17th centuries, it often came about through local 'Agreements'. By the 18th/early 19th centuries, Acts of Parliament were often needed. It was by such an Act that enclosure came to Helpston, the effects of which were evident by Clare's young manhood. He describes what once had been:

Unbounded freedom ruled the wandering scene
Nor fence of ownership crept in between
To hide the prospect of the following eye ['The Mores']

Other areas, though, were hedged. In 'Childhood': 'theres the old hedge with its glossy red heps^**;** there were 'old lane hedges' where gypsies had their 'abodes neath hedge or spreading oak'. Clare makes clear what had come next. Many ancient field hedges, along with mature trees, had been grubbed out :

Inclosure...levelled every bush and tree ['Remembrances'].
Mulberry bushes where the boy would run...
To fill his hands with fruit are grubbed and done

And hedgerow briars – flower-lovers overjoyed
Came and got flower pots – these are all destroyed ['The Mores']
A tree beheaded or a bush destroyed...
Now all's laid waste by desolation's hand
Whose cruel weapons level half the land ['Helpstone']

The speaker in 'The Round Oak' tells us that

The apple-top't oak in the old narrow lane
And the hedgerow of bramble and thorn
Will ne'er throw their green on my visions again
As they did on that sweet dewy morn
When I went for spring pootys and birds nest to look
Down the border of bushes ayont the fair spring

There is an irony here. Just as many hedges, together with their banks, were grubbed out, new alignments were measured and marked out and owners of the now privatised, newly-enclosed land needed new hedges:

Fence now meets fence in owner's little bounds....
In little parcels little minds to please ['The Mores']

Work still for the hedger and for day-labourers, even Clare himself. Having been ordered to destroy ancient hedges, the hedger now has to put in quick-growing thorn. Older hedges would have been quite tall, established on banks up to three feet high. Post-enclosure, hedges in Northamptonshire were generally lower, built on banks created from the soil removed as drainage ditches were delved. The ditcher would have been a partner to the hedger at times, but Clare allows just the briefest glimpse of this labourer.

Hedges were boundary-markers. They also gave protection to haystacks. There was a 'rhyme hung hedge' ['A Winter's Day'] where livestock

print full many a hungry track
Round circling hedge that guards the stack

The hedge provided cover for tools at the end of a day, saving having to hike them back and forth – the billhooks and mattocks and gloves; mowers' scythes, and old ploughs. Hedges shaded or sheltered workers, cattle and sheep, and gave privacy to courting swains and maids – including John and his current love, of whom there seem to have been many, on the evidence of various 'Northampton Asylum Poems':

The hedges will shelter my Emma and me …
As we walk down the wood neath the wind shaking tree
['Song' *LPII* p.535].

Evening-time was a time for courting and we get glimpses of hedges then, too:

both of us roaming…
I' the hollow old Ash tree the Owl hooted loud …
And whewed down the hedge like a spirit i' white
['The Evening was Lovely']
The church yard yew we'll pass, and gurgling brook….
And see the snow white moth, on stilly breeze…
Dance by the spinney hedge, & through the leaves ['To Melancholy']

Hedges were also essential to keeping herds and flocks and horses 'enclosed'. Lambs were protected inside 'small hedged closes'. Daily washing could be placed over hedges to dry. They bordered orchards and meadows:

Here stands the tree wi clasping ivy bound
Which oft Ive clumb to see the chaps at plough
And checkerd fields for many a furlong round ['Childish Recollections']

Hedges were part of gardens, too. In 'Pastoral Poesy' there is the touching image of 'the old man full of leisure hours' whose garden is described:

Those box-edged borders that impart
Their fragrance near his door
Hath been the comfort of his heart
For sixty years or more

Whenever Clare mentions a 'style' (as in 'Prison Amusements' in 'Child Harold'), a hedge will be present:

And in the maple bush there hides the style
And then the gate the awthorn stands before
Till close upon it you cannot see't the while
'Tis like to Ivy creeping o'er a door
All green as spring nor gap is seen before

As well as a habitat for wildlife, hedges were important providers to local people: haws, crab-apples, elderflower and elderberries, bramble berries, sloes, hazel nuts:

Within these brambly solitudes
The ragged noisy boy intrudes
To gather nuts that ripe and brown
As soon as shook will rattle down ['September']
the hips and the hawes
Now glow on the hedges ['Song (To – E.B.)' *LPII* p.535]

Not only food items; the hedge was a source of winter fuel – the pickings from dead wood, cropped branches etc., stored up for winter.

Hedge-fruits, gathered in quantity, were money-earners: 'industrious huswives wend their way / Pulling the brittle branches careful down / And hawking loads of berrys to the town' ['October']. In this context I wonder if, earlier in the year, in Clare's countryside, the children targeted the early green leaves of the hawthorn – for ' bread and cheese'? They did in Ivor Gurney's pre-First World War Cotswolds:

[They] laugh for the inexpensiveness // Of country grocery and are pleased no less // Than hedge sparrows…..[*Collected Poems,* Carcanet 2004, p.93.]

The hedger's main work was seasonal; many agricultural jobs were. *The Shepherd's Calendar* is the poem where he comes into his own. We are aware of him and his hedges, hedgerows and hedgeways throughout the twelve months; a large presence in autumn and winter, less so in spring and summer.

'March' , just at the start of spring, brings him into clear focus:

Muffled in baffles leathern coat and gloves
The hedger toils oft scaring rustling doves
From out the hedgrows who in hunger brouze
The chockolate berrys on the ivy bough
And flocking field fares speckld like the thrush
Picking the red awe from the sweeing bush

By 'May' spring had arrived – 'Hedges the May adorning' – and the hedger's main work was over for the year:

Each hedge is loaded thick with green
And where the hedger late hath been
Tender shoots begin to grow
From the mossy stumps below..,.
They lay their bill and mittens bye
And on to other labours hie

Workers do not seem to have many perks. But the hedger had one. From 'Summer Images':

> And now the homebound hedger bundles round
> His evening faggot and with every stride
> His leathern doublet leaves a rustling sound
> Till silly sheep beside
> His path start tremulous....

Through the summer months there are lovely descriptions of the hedgerow: the may blossom, dog-roses, primroses in the banks:

> Round field hedge now flowers in full glory twine
> Large bindweed bells wild hop and streakd woodbine....
> These round each bush in sweet disorder run ['June'].

The air would have been full of scents, and sounds – the alarms and songs of birds building nests, sitting eggs and fledglings. Also, the wind: Clare wrote of the 'seugh [moaning] through the hedges'. The 'thickset hedge' of July presented 'High hedgerows wi grey willow shadows'; sheep 'bleat about the close in swarms / And hide neath hedges in the cool'. As far as the hedger was concerned, the hedges were left to themselves and to the birds:

> The chaffinch is building his nest on the brere….
> And the bottle tit hangs up his pudding bag near…
> I' the ribs o'the hedge the hedgesparrow builds

The hedger's work began in earnest in the autumn. In *Wildwood* (2007), Roger Deakin suggests why: it is the time 'the hedge reveals its architecture' , and Clare, 'Theres no green on the hedges'. Gaps and other damage needed repair; the hedger is in Ivor Gurney's simple yet telling line: 'This gap-mender, of quiet courage unhastening' [*Collected Poems,* p.201]. Dead and rotten wood had to be taken out. Some new hedge-laying would have to be done. The thorn 'fence' that 'circles the stack' would need attention to make it effective protection from livestock over the coming winter. We get a glimpse of him in 'The Autumn Robin' when, distracted from the toil by the robin's song, 'He pauses ere he knocks / The stake down in the meadow gap'.

This is the hedger at work – driving in 'stakes', so essential, giving the hedge stability; something still done today. Incidentally, this little detail, of the hedger pausing in his work in response to the robin's song, helps us appreciate a labourer as a feeling human being. In 'Summer Morning' the poet begins: 'I love to peep out on a summers morn'. He notices the 'scouting rabbit', 'coy hare' and 'blundering pheasant'. There is also:

> The little flower begemd around wi drops
> That shine at sunrise like to burnishd gold
> Tis sweet to view the milk maid often stops
> And wonders much such spangles to behold
> The hedger too admires em deck the thorn
> And thinks he sees no beauties like the morn

Not one of Clare's 'clowns'!

There are other sounds: 'The autumn is faded.... / Winds sing in the hedges like notes of a bird' and 'The Autumn wind on suthering wings... / Through the hawthorn hedges sings / The years departing song' ['The Autumn Wind'].

Autumn is the period when the hedger would have needed his gloves or 'mittens'. Hedges were invariably structured from various thorn: whitethorn/ hawthorn and, the one with the most vicious thorns, blackthorn. The new 'fences' demanded by his employer could well have been blackthorn. Fast-growing, but it

would be some time before those hedges resembled anything like the glories of the many ancient ones which, with the oaks, maples, hazels and ash had been destroyed, along with 'the wildings blushing along the hedge side' [A 'Child Harold' Song]. The results of the hedger's labours were evident by October, but come November:

The hedger soakd wi the dull weather chops
On at his toils which scarcly keeps him warm
And every stroke he takes large swarms of drops
Patter about him like an april storm....
hedges lost to leaves'

There is a 'Northborough Sonnet', the hedger the sole subject, which gives a contrasting image to the 'toils which scarcly keeps him warm':

The hedger burning hot when passers bye
Knock their numbed hands agen their sides for cold
Brustles the bushes down & sings for joy
& looks up but to laugh to hear it told
How cold the day – the heat of his employ
Makes winter summer & and the white thorn bough
Is all that makes it winter time for him
& oft he lays his bill & mittens down
To knock his hat up & to whipe his brow
Thinking complaints of cold are only whims
With him toil is but leisure any how
Or rough or smooth – when both joys message sings
Loud from the wood though storms and dar[kn]ess hums
He rustles on till evening calls him home'

I'll leave aside comment on the speaker's view that 'With him toil is but leisure any how'.

At Christmas time, hedges were again providers – of ivy, holly, ash boughs for cottage decoration. After the snow has come:

Hedges left at night, no more descried
Are turned to one white sweep of curving hills…
The boy that goes to fodder with supprise
Walks o'er the gate he opened yesternight
The hedges all have vanished from his eyes ['Snow Storm'].

So the hedger's year and the hedges have come full circle.

Norman Goodman