



The John Clare & Society

Newsletter no. 146

October 2022



THE JOHN CLARE SOCIETY

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A NOTE FROM THE CHAIRMAN

It is with great sadness that we learnt recently of the death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

The Queen's service and dedication to the country could not have been exceeded and she was loved and respected throughout Britain and beyond. We offer our thoughts and condolences to the Royal Family at this sad time.

As the October Newsletter is the first one following our AGM in July I thought I should detail the changes in the John Clare Society Committee for 2022–23. Our excellent Chair, Val Pedlar, and Treasurer, Linda Curry, have both retired after many years of service to the Society. I have taken over as Chairman, having been Secretary and Festival Co-ordinator previously. David Smith is our new Treasurer and we thank him for taking on this vital and important role. Ann Marshall will be our Events Organiser, which will include co-ordinating next year's Festival.

We have three new members on the Committee: Karen Lakey, who will be taking my place as Secretary; Gary Alderson, and Jonathan Wonham. It is important that we continue to have new members on our Committee and we thank them for their willingness to join us.

Over the next few years we hope to have occasional events in Helpston in addition to the Festival, probably in conjunction with other literary societies, so that we can support and learn from each other. These will be advertised in the forthcoming Newsletters and on our website.

I look forward to my term as Chairman and thank you, our members, for your continued support.

Sue Holgate

GENERAL SALES REPORT

You could almost feel normality at this year's John Clare Festival at Helpston. Another three days of hot sunshine, many people wandering from point of interest to point of interest with stoppages for greeting those they hadn't seen since the last festival. Thank you to all who visited and those that looked and bought at the bookstalls.

At the Society stall the first item we sold was *By Ourselves*, a highly illustrated book with b&w and coloured photographs, of the film, by Andrew Kötting, inspired by Clare's 'Journey Out of Essex.' This is a fascinating book following Clare with his writing but interweaving people and insights along the way. Another copy was sold a little later. To balance that we sold three copies of *Love's Cold Returning*, a definitive study of Clare's same journey, establishing route and facts following his footsteps, including social history of then, through to developments of today.

We sold copies of the new CD featuring Toby Jones's readings and new arrangements of some of Clare's collected folk tunes. A few copies are still available. A selection of 'new' postcards also sold well despite their higher price.

We took a total of £240, which compares favourably with the last, 'proper', Festival.

The Cottage has more of our stock for sale as the weather remains sunny, with another delivery of books to be made. Thank you to Sharon and her helpers for making all visitors so welcome.

Maybe our postal sales are less this summer but with all the harsh currents around I hope we will still provide a selection of useful little gifts for yourselves or others as Christmas approaches. (There, I said it!)

David Smith, Sales Officer

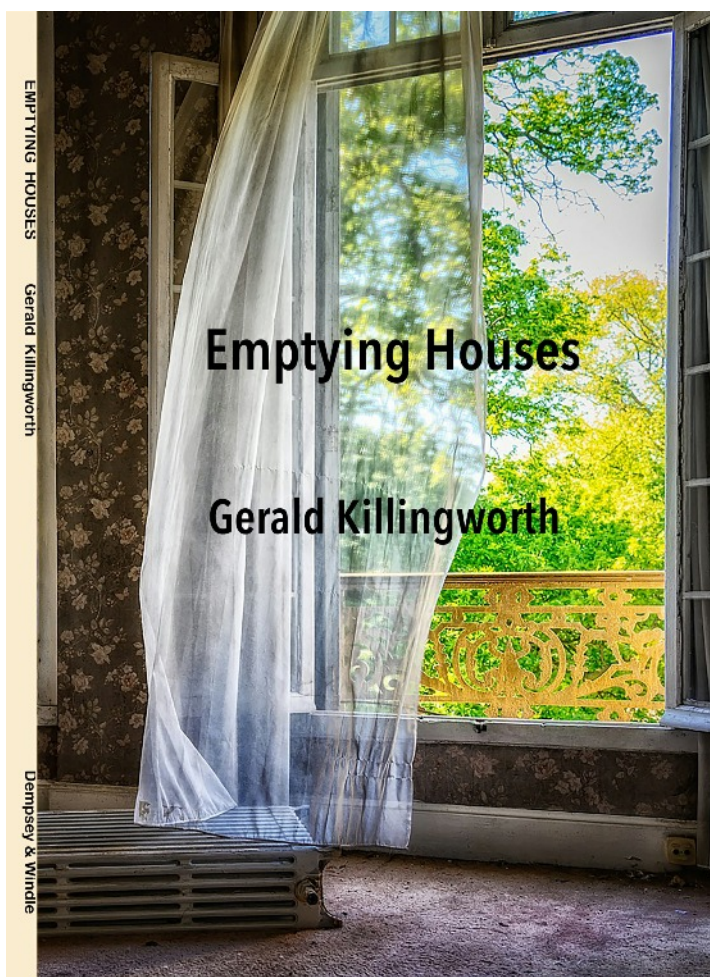
MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY'S REPORT

We should like to welcome the following new members, who have recently joined (or rejoined) the Society:

Robert Farmer, Northampton
Gary Alderson, Barnack, Stamford
Anthony Corrigan, Alsager, Stoke-on-Trent
Valerie Greeley, Alsager, Stoke-on-Trent
Monica Timms, Swindon
Jacqueline Bodimead, Stanground, Peterborough
Pamela Kauders, Watford
Noel Staples, Uffington, Lincs
Marilyn Clements, Northampton
Anne Wallace, Greensboro, NC
Nicola Sarsfield, Helpston
Jim Pickles, London N14
Sean Street, Liverpool
Lee Johnson, Bolton
Chris Joyce, St Leonards-on-Sea
Stephen Pining, Maxey, Peterborough
Lesley Newitt, Helpston

Timothy Walsh, Stratford, CT
Alan Southgate, Todmorden, Lancs
Edward Baines, Braunston, Rutland
Evelyn Edwards, Cambridge
Joy Francis, Petersfield
Ann and Mark Goodridge, Hilton, Cambs
Nigel Kellman, Coventry
Patricia Stubbley, Bourne, Lincs
Richard Mason, Glinton, Peterborough
Linda Williams, Glinton, Peterborough
Jonathan Wilson, Worcester
Karen Lakey, Helpston
David Birkett, Hitchin
Roger Austin, Norman Cross, Peterborough
Helen Halliwell, San Francisco, CA

Robert Heyes, September 2022



I am a member of the John Clare Society currently living in Dorset, although I grew up near Peterborough at Orton Waterville. The highly-regarded poetry press Dempsey & Windle has just published a collection of my poems, entitled *Emptying Houses*. (ISBN 978-1-913-32979-2, £8.50) The publication date was July 1st, after which there was a Zoom launch. The poems are available on Amazon and from the publisher. They can also be ordered through bookshops.

If any members wish to purchase a copy of my collection from me (probably the easiest way to obtain one), they can email me at gkllngwrth@aol.com to arrange the purchase.

Gerald Killingworth

THE JOHN CLARE FESTIVAL 2022

Some Personal Reflections

After three years of patiently waiting, we were finally able to return to Helpston for The John Clare Society Festival. The theme this year was 'The Importance of Tradition' and the packed programme meant that there was something for everyone. However, the John Clare Cottage and the Bluebell Inn had both seen significant changes, and the Exeter Arms had morphed into a new housing development – but without a commemorative plaque!

Although this is a three-day festival, most of the activities were concentrated into the middle day, Saturday.

Friday saw the rescheduled Midsummer Cushion Ceremony and the children's



poetry awards taking place at 9:30 rather than 1:30, meaning that we had arrived too late for the procession. The Cushions, however, were not disappointing, with bright sunflowers, wild grasses, and scented roses amongst the colourful displays celebrating the life of John Clare.

On Friday, the John Clare Cottage was closed, so food had to be taken in the Bluebell Inn, with its new outdoor seating area and streamlined menu. The informal Friday Folk Music Evening held in the Bluebell was a joyous and

entertaining mix of tunes, songs, readings and dance – some items attributed to John Clare, others simply representing past and present folk traditions.

Saturday's busy programme required a prompt start and some difficult choices regarding which events to attend. We had a cheery send-off from the Welcome Tent prior to making an early visit to the bookstalls and then going on to the JCS AGM. So many books, so little time! There were classics from the stalls of Edward Baines and Noel Crack, and new publications from Ellis Hall & Bridget Somekh, Fred Chance, Robert Hamberger and Roger Rowe. Not to forget the well-stocked collection offered on the JCS sales stall.

Simon Kövesi chaired the AGM on behalf of Valerie Pedlar and attempted to get through the business of the meeting as efficiently as possible. JCS President, Carry Akroyd, concluded the morning with her address 'It's That Time of Year Again!', giving us an insight into seasonality in Clare's work as well as her own collecting penchants.

After a quick visit to Botolph's Barn to admire Nick Tearle's atmospheric fenland artworks, we went on to the Village Hall for lunch and some homemade quiche and legendary summer pudding. Next was a sprint to the John Clare Cottage for a quick drink, a chance to meet the new manageress, and to spend ten minutes savouring the period music ably played by the Beauvale Recorder Ensemble.

Back once again to the church to hear Robert Hamberger reading from his new book *A Length of Road*, and Professor John Goodridge's Ronald Blythe Centenary Lecture.



'Spirit of John Clare' : a one-off hand-crafted Garden Sculpture by ceramic artist Annie Horsley, at the Annakin Gallery.

Decision time again! We had to miss out Roger Rowe's guided village walk and opted to return to the Cottage to see the beautiful garden and live music with Chris Beard and Mike Billington, before we headed to the pop-up 'Annakin' gallery to see their latest selection of prints, cards, and ceramics.

Then we were off to the Scout Hut to see the Helpston Enclosure Map and enjoy a chance to discuss with Ellis Hall and Bridget Somekh their fascinating book, *Love's Cold Returning*, about Clare's 'Journey out of Essex'.

Next stop was the Poetry Reading in the church, ably hosted by Mike Mecham, with a lovely mix of dramatic, observational, and reflective poems on offer all by, or related to, our great poet.

We had a little free time at last, but unfortunately too late to visit the open gardens, or to catch the last of the afternoon teas.

Saturday concluded with a superb concert given by Milton Keynes-based band 'Innocent Hare', who made a brilliant entrance playing Handel's March from *Scipio*,

which I recall seeing in Clare's manuscript books. A well-chosen mix of mostly Clare related songs and tunes was the order of the evening, with informative introductions to each set.

Other commitments unfortunately prevented us from attending the Sunday Service at St Botolph's Church this year.

Another superb Festival had flown by all too quickly. It was lovely to be able to further our knowledge of John Clare, meet up with old friends and make the acquaintance of some very enthusiastic newcomers to the Festival.

Roll on next July; we'd better get the dates in our diary now (14-16 July 2023) and start planning a new strategy for getting to see everything that interests us next time. A big 'Thank You' must go to everyone involved in organising the John Clare Festival 2022.

John Stafford



JOHN CLARE'S HAT

From what John Clare has written it seems that, at least in his younger days, he was in the habit of wearing a hat on a regular basis. Two short extracts from his autobiographical writings give us a very good picture of his frequent use of his hat when writing down ideas and inspirations:

- (a) I used to drop down behind a hedge, bush or dyke and write down my things on the crown of my hat.
- (b) Among these trifles are many keepsakes of my early days when I used to drop down under a bush and scribble the fresh thoughts on the crown of my hat.

Presumably he was writing these down on a scrap of paper while it rested on the flat surface at the top of his hat.

Before I go on to suggest what the nature of Clare's headgear might have been, I would just like to speculate on the possible reason for Clare choosing to wear a hat so often. As a sensitive individual, could it be that he was somewhat embarrassed by the relatively early loss of his hair? The Hilton portrait, painted in 1820 when Clare was 26 years old, shows a very high forehead with the hair



brushed forward. Also, the very light skin colour of the forehead, lighter even than the rest of the face, is far from what you would expect from someone who spent a lot of time in the open air. This lighter shade of skin on the forehead even extends down to the eyebrows, perhaps indicating that the hat worn had either a peak or a brim.

The gradual loss of his hair is confirmed by the bust of the poet created by Henry Behnes in 1828. Here the hair line has receded greatly, giving Clare a much balder appearance.

On the left is the original watercolour painting which I obtained a few years ago and which has been dated to about 1840. This was purchased by a dealer at the Burghley Horse Trials near Stamford, and I suspect may well be of John Clare. Perhaps the most striking thing in the portrait is the unusual hat that the figure is wearing; it is so distinctive that one senses the artist seems to

have been unable to separate the person from his headgear.

Below is an illustration from Edward Artis's large book, *The Durobrivae of Antoninus*, published from 1823–1828. This fine work is beautifully-illustrated with superb engraved plates showing his discoveries and their excavation. Clare was a close friend of Artis, who was steward of the household at Milton Hall, and helped him with these excavations. The plate illustrated shows the excavation of an ancient lime-kiln, along with the people involved. At the top of the picture Artis, complete with top hat, can be seen directing operations; but the really interesting figure is that at the bottom right. This person has much more of an agricultural look about him, with a long smock, leggings, and a large soft hat complete with brim, and even a narrow band of a different colour above the brim. Perhaps also significant are this person's very bushy sideboards, which remind me of the Behnes bust. I know that Peter Moyses, that great champion of



Clare, was convinced that the person shown here is John Clare, and my own feeling is that he could well be right. The great similarity between the hats shown is unlikely to have been a coincidence.

I am still trying to locate other paintings by Francis Simpson, Clare's friend from Stamford, in order to be able to tell if the one I have is by him. Any help that readers would be able to give me in this would be much appreciated.

Noel Crack.

JOHN CLARE PRIMARY SCHOOL Poetry Competition 2022

I like face paints, cakes and sweets
I like dancing at the disco
Party food is delicious, crunchy and munchy
Bouncy castles are massive and jumpy!
Birthday cookies are yummy, yummy
I eat them all up in my tummy!

**Freya Beesley, Penelope Ward and Dexter Tilley, Buttercross Class
(Group Entry).**

BIRTHDAYS

I was six on 8th March.
I had a chocolate cake with pink icing on and it was yummy!
I got lots of lovely presents from my family and friends
I had a great day full of surprises.

Laila Smith, Buttercross Class (3)

Colourful balloons in different shapes and sizes
It's your birthday and you get lots of wonderful cards and presents
Chocolate birthday cake that tastes all yummy
Dressing up to be a Superhero is such good fun!

Phoebe Edwards-Worth, Buttercross Class (2)

Today is my birthday
Having a party
The party is at my house
And I am six.
Elsa is coming!

Sophia Dobson, Buttercross Class (1)

THE QUEEN'S JUBILEE

The queen lives in Buckingham Palace
Where her guards are on the gravel;
The queen is up there when we are down here.

Martha Treliving, Woodgate Class (3)

I saw my sister singing for the Jubilee.
It was lovely to see.

Aby Demolde, Woodgate Class (2)

The bells are ringing for the Jubilee.
Do the Jubilee dance.
Everyone is celebrating.
Parties everywhere.
The Red Arrows are flying

Sam Power, Woodgate Class (1)

TRADITION

Treats are ready for children to hunt
Races have begun
Anniversaries are all about love,
Dancing around the Christmas tree
In Halloween spooky things happen,
The weddings are ready for us to celebrate.
It has arrived – my birthday is here
Off to Trick or Treat with all my friends
Now a New Year's coming again!

Charlotte Peat, Broadwheel Class (3)

I love traditions.
My favourite one is Christmas – But all traditions are the best.
Easter you get chocolate
The Easter bunny hides it.
No one could miss out, unless you don't celebrate it.
At my birthday I turn nine.
I am so happy; all my friends come
To the party to have fun and eat cake!
At Halloween I dress up in the spookiest costume I can find.
Everyone looks scary and most people decorate their houses.
Firework Night on the 5th of November.
BOOM goes a firework and CRASH goes another. I love this tradition!
At weddings there's a massive cake for the lot, two people get married.
Traditions are the best.

Penelope Weston, Broadwheel Class (2)

WEDDINGS

Waistcoats can be worn on the big day
Events are enjoyed which makes sense today.
Dads are thrilled at the time.
Dance floors, high heels, tripping over.
I've been to a few in my time -
 seen dresses covered in red wine.
Nagging, joking, lots of laughs
Good fun never ends. Let's have fun
 With all our friends
Stag dos, hen dos, all the lot.
 By the end of the night they've all lost the plot!

Elsie Thompson, Broadwheel Class (1)

CHRISTMAS POEM

Christmas time is finally here,
Time to spread some Christmas cheer.
Decorating the tree, having fun,
Making Christmas pudding, yum, yum, yum!

Christmas Jumper day singing songs,
So much fun all day long.
Watching the stars glow in the night,
And the North Star shining so bright.

I placed the angel on top of the tree;
She looks down on us, while we glee.
I'm feeling anxious, Santa is coming,
I try to distract myself, so I start humming.

I wrap my presents for friends and family,
Plying around, making memories.
Outside it's freezing cold,
And the parents crack open a bottle of mulled wine.

We open our presents, under the tree,
So much fun, yipee, yipee!
Putting up lights that shine all night long
We're going on a Christmas walk, so I bring my dog along.

Watching movies, with a cup of tea,
Getting comfy, smelling the tree.
It's snowing outside. 'Let's build a snowman!'
We needed no help, not even a man!

Seeing everyone so happy and jolly,
I went for a walk. Ouch! I got pricked with holly.
The time of year has finally come,
So Merry Christmas, everyone!

Florence Weston, Swaddywell Class (3)

MIDSUMMER CUSHIONS

Midsummer Cushions
Made on Midsummer days
To decorate his sacred grave.
Turf and mud, brightest of all
Flowers that can feel it all.
All they see
All day long,
Flowers that stay bright and strong.

Green grass and mud too,
Red, white and blue.
Today's the day,
The flowers will climb and we will see them shine,
Midsummer Cushions.

Laying our pillows around the grave,
Silence falls as we all stand brave.
Midsummer Cushions.

Some flowers big,
Some flowers small.
Some flowers tall,
Some flowers short.
Midsummer Cushions.

Lucy Edmonds, Swaddywell Class (2)



Festival poster at Helpston, 2022.

David Smith

TRADITIONS

There's loads: Halloween, Christmas,
Easter and New Year
That's only four but there are some more.

Here are some of my favourite traditions.
Please listen.

Trees decked with baubles at Christmas time,
I put lights on mine.
Sparklers on bonfire night,
Sometimes they can be very bright.
On Halloween we hand out sweets,
Some people have heaps.
On Fathers' Day, dads lay.
On April Fools there are no rules.

But now the day has finally come,
It's Midsummer Cushion time!
Children decorate their turf with incredible flowers,
Sometimes it takes them hours.

We will see these flowers shine in three weeks' time.
As we walk down to the church we will lay
Our turf on John Clare's grave, where he rests brave.

Poppy Williams, Swaddywell Class (1)

JOHN CLARE CUSHIONS

Midsummer Cushions are a Helpston tradition,
We walk to the church and put our flowers in position.

Midsummer Cushions are a Helpston tradition,
To find the perfect flower our absolute mission.

Midsummer Cushions are a Helpston tradition,
Before picking flowers, the children ask permission.

Midsummer Cushions are a Helpston tradition,
We honour John Clare, while listening to a musician.

Findlay Craighead, Torpel Class (3)

MIDSUMMER CUSHIONS

Midsummer Cushions is a sweet tradition,
All the children make it their mission,
To make it beautiful, brilliant and bright
Just as the sun shines with lots of light.

Every year the church prepares,
Having a ceremony about John Clare;
Children carrying trays of flowers,
Giving John Clare mighty powers.

The vicar arrives and starts to talk,
Everyone watches as he walks,
Telling us about John Clare's life,
And how he had a wonderful wife.

As we walked back to school,
Thinking about John Clare's long haul,
Still so little I know
On how his life swiftly let go.

As the exciting day ends
My mind is full of thoughts and bends.
One of these thoughts is about John Clare,
And how his life was full of care.

Hasan-Ali Said, Torpel Class (2).

OUR FLOWER TRADITION

Every year we have this tradition;
To complete it is an important mission.
We collect our flowers every year,
With all our hope and not a fear.

Pretty pink tulips in the sun,
Collecting them is so much fun.
Lovely white daisies in the rain,
When we find them we make a chain.

The tradition is about John Clare;
We bring these flowers to show we care.
He loved his poetry a great, great deal,
It allowed his feelings to reveal.

We bring our trays to the church
And around the grave will they perch.
Thirteenth of July is the date –
This is how we celebrate!

Poppy Walls, Torpel Class (1)

A SOUNDING SKULL, AND CREATION'S PAIN

Charles Causley and John Clare [Part 2 of 2]

The first part of this article appeared in the Newsletter for February 2022.

...As though John Clare from a sounding skull
Brim with a hundred years of dirt and stone
Signalled to us...

...As if to find poems still
Beating there;
Then, like an anchor, to be lowered fast
Out of creation's pain, the stropping wind,
Deep out of sight, into the world's mind.
(From Causley's 'Helpston')

In my first article, I outlined Charles Causley's connections with John Clare, exploring the earlier poem he produced directly inspired by Clare. In this second part, I'll investigate that later poem, 'Helpston', recount some further Clare links that Causley made, and briefly reiterate Clare's wider influence on Causley's work.

'Helpston' was written in the early 1970s, some 25 years after Causley first visited there. That first occasion prompted the delicately-balanced tribute, 'At the Grave of John Clare', a free-verse meditation from the outset of Causley's literary career. It blends genuinely deep respect and affection for his predecessor's life and work with real sympathy and understanding – as well as clear-eyed social observation, and insightful (even grim) humour.

The return visit and second poem probably arose during one of many trips around the country that Causley the schoolteacher made over weekends and school holidays, for leisure or giving readings and talks. He is again in company, but this time perhaps with just one (unspecified) companion. They travel by car, rather than as part of an earlier coach-trip outing with teacher-training colleagues.

'Helpston' has the same gently reflective, elegiac tone as the earlier piece; the similarities go beyond that and the subject-matter, however. In both, Causley unflinchingly presents gritty realities of hardship, illness, isolation and mortality; contemplates the ironies of fate, reputation and legacy; carefully attends to a crystallisation of place and atmosphere with a few deft touches; and intertwines the personal and the universal with nature, literature and posterity. Both pieces are unstinting odes to a much-admired poetic forebear and model.

The later poem follows some new paths, though. A sense of the sea, so frequent and multi-faceted in Causley's poetry, appears early on; Causley recalls how the landlocked Cambridgeshire horizon 'sank' into 'green fleets' and re-interprets the grave as 'an upturned stone boat / Beached at God's thick door'. Such watery transformations peep through elsewhere, albeit obliquely: stagnant water, an absent sea-breeze and a kind of lighthouse-beam. Ultimately, too, that theme will provide a moving coda to end the poem.

Helpston the village figures very little this time, avoiding the topography and sociology that mark 'At the Grave...' This time, it's more the focus of a legacy than a physical destination. Causley now ignores the church, although both poems pay close attention to the graveyard and its features. In the first, there are no flowers, and the grave and monument are unflatteringly described; the building's fabric appears cold ('dove-grey'). Here, things are seen somewhat more positively: 'the flowers flickered... / Like green antennae'. Now, the stone seems warmer ('toast-

coloured'). Clare's skull is 'sounding' – amongst other associations, another maritime allusion – sending signals across centuries.

The Parting Pot has vanished; the Blue Bell and the Bull at Peterborough book-end this later visit, providing, respectively, a starting-point and then a fortifying whisky. That drink appears both to be a protection from painful thoughts, and then a stimulus for exaltation.

The whisky at first seems to fortify Causley against dark imaginings of Clare's end, especially his wake and burial. The ploughman-poet stares at the school-teacher clearly yet unseeingly from his casket, having avoided dissection. Deep-seated fears of the time (think Burke and Hare) about grave-robbing and intrusive 'anatomising' lurk; but instead, the whisky's warmth then seems to induce reassurance at the poem's end. Out of the pain that Clare endured in his life and his writing (his 'creation'), and against a keen (razor-like: 'stropping') wind absent at the graveside, that nautical thread re-emerges. Clare – and by extension, his poetry – is 'an anchor ... into the world's mind'. To Causley, he and they are a steadying rock, a saving grace that cements the ploughman's memory for us.

The working process that eventually produced the final published version of 'Helpston' was painstakingly thoughtful and detailed (like most of Causley's writing). The drafts in his Archive at Exeter University show a dense, dynamic evolution, with the new poem's early working title echoing the original: 'Revisiting the Grave of John Clare'. Images are re-worked or rejected; individual words weighed for their associations and thematic contributions; rhythms are polished; and Causley works through a teeming press of ideas to arrive at his final shape and meaning. Examining these photos alongside the text of the poem as published yields remarkable insights into Causley's assiduous working methods, as well as his creativity.

Clare figured prominently elsewhere throughout Causley's working life, beyond inspiring these two poems. The Exeter Archive and Causley's house in Launceston hold a number of books by and about Clare, including an exceedingly rare version of *Birds' Nests* illustrated by a northern artists' group and inscribed by the poet James Kirkup. It also has the records of his contributions to the Clare Centenary Festival Week at Peterborough in May 1964, including judging a poetry competition. There were BBC Radio broadcasts about Clare, and Causley read at the unveiling of Clare's plaque in Poets' Corner at Westminster Abbey, in 1989. Perhaps most pertinently, here, Causley felt compelled to decline the offer of the presidency role for the Clare Society at its inception in 1981, feeling that it needed someone more local and available than a Cornishman. He did however suggest his friend Ronald Blythe for that role.

In my previous article, I drew a few parallels between both poets, while also suggesting that they were limited by their very significant differences. What cannot be denied or downplayed is the influence of Clare on Causley as a figure, an observer, a commentator and a craftsman. Reading Charles Causley's *Collected Poems 1951–2000* will throw out myriad resonances and echoes, contrasts and complements to the many admirers and students of John Clare.

Mike Cooper

(Trustee Director, The Charles Causley Trust)

A PORTRAIT OF JOHN CLARE

(A Beginners' Guide to John Clare)

Presented by John Stafford & Richard Ollier



"Mad"

"Mad
John"

"Outcast"

"Peasant
Poet"

Saturday 19th November 2022

2pm Enderby Community Library

Townsend Road, Enderby, Leicester, LE19 4PG.

Tickets in support of Library Funds

£4 (including refreshments).

Available from Enderby Library or

Telephone 0116 3053523 or 2841978

THE MENTAL HEALTH DIMENSION

This is an abbreviation of Ch.3 of Doreen Thakoordin's M.A. Dissertation, 'How does an exploration of John Clare's writing about politics, religion and mental health enhance his reputation?' (Open University, January 2021)

I think I have been here long enough

(J & A Tibble, Letters, p.299)

The state of Clare's emotional health is an important part of his brand. 'The Northamptonshire Peasant Poet', 'The Working Class Poet' and 'The Mad Poet' are all one. Thus, an investigation into the nature and manifestations of Clare's mental illness would seem to be valuable in attempting to come to an understanding of his writings as studies of his political and religious standpoints.

Whilst it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to explore how diseases of the mind were regarded in England up to Clare's time, it is, I think, relevant to trace, albeit briefly, a history of mental health treatment from the earliest times. It often makes uncomfortable reading.

In his enlightening and engaging publication of 1965, *Madness and Civilisation*, Michel Foucault leads the reader through what are often harrowing descriptions of how the sick, criminal and insane were placed in the same category and consequently treated from the earliest times in the same way: that is, by confinement. In England, an Act of 1575 established the building of Houses of Correction, to whose upkeep the public was encouraged to contribute. Anyone with the necessary finance was able to open a House of Correction. By an Act of 1670, the notorious workhouses were established. Clare only just managed to save his parents from the workhouse when his father, crippled with arthritis after years of hard labour, was unable to work to support himself and his wife any longer.

To deal with those who then resorted to begging in the streets, it was decided that they be shipped to Canada or to the East or West Indies and in 1630 King Charles established a commission which ensured the rigorous observation of the Poor Laws. Later in the same year a series of orders was published that all those who lived in idleness (notwithstanding that the idleness had been forced on most of the urban poor) should be locked up in Houses of Correction.

At the same time as believing that confinement was the most satisfactory way to contain the insane, successive Governments in power in Clare's lifetime from that of the Whig Duke of Portland to the Liberal Lord Palmerston, seeing an opportunity for profit, began to exhibit those who were called inmates of these establishments to the paying public. Foucault tells us:

As late as 1815 ... the hospital of Bethlehem exhibited lunatics for a penny every Sunday. Now the annual revenue from these exhibitions amounted to almost four hundred pounds, which suggests an astonishingly high number of ninety-six thousand visits a year.

So we can see that people with emotional difficulties were regarded as second-class citizens to be confined, restrained, punished or gawped at. They have had their voices ignored and we will never know of their experiences. Thankfully for the modern reader, John Clare, through his letters, journals, poems and songs, has left us a valuable insight into a brilliant mind within an incarcerated body.

The treatment of insanity (a convenient term for a plethora of emotional difficulties) became a medical model only slowly. In England, this approach was

pioneered by the Quaker Henry Tuke who opened 'The Retreat', a huge house at Lamel Hill in York, in 1796. Following Tuke's example, the emphasis on a more understanding, kinder, considered approach became the norm for several private enterprises. Those who used this service became patients and those charged with their care were doctors.

Clare's mind, which had been causing him and those closest to him concern since 1813, became increasingly troubled and, in 1837, a few patrons and friends paid for him to be admitted to High Beach in Essex, run by Dr Matthew Allen.

The person who signed the admission papers, Dr Fenwick Skrimshire, entered, as the reason for Clare's admission '...many years writing poetry' (Bate, *John Clare*, p.409). Whilst this may have an element of flippancy in it, Alex Hudson, Editor of the BBC's *Newsweek International*, examines the thesis that poetry drives one insane, and wonders if the act of writing poetry attracts those who are predisposed to mental illness and mood disorders:

But perhaps what's perceived as mental illness – the detail, obsession, reflection, introversion, the need to transform something common (words) into something else entirely (poetry) – is not actually the product of damaged thinking. Creatives often have little patience with those who try to connect the dots between their work and an unhealthy state of mind.... Of course, the more people break the rules, the more likely they are to be perceived as mentally ill. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet-books/2011/02/revisiting-the-links-between-poetry-and-mental-illness>)

We recall Clare's fury at Taylor's interference with his reflective comments in 'Helpston' blaming the rural gentry for its destruction, Clare's habit of breaking the rules of acceptance by the middle classes, and the apocryphal tale of his struggling violently when he was removed from his Northborough home to be taken to Northampton Asylum.

Had a diagnosis been made today, it would probably have been one of 'stress', with elements of bipolar disorder, and Clare would have been ascribed a specialist social worker to whom he would have access, at least in theory, whenever he needed counselling. Crucially, he could have availed himself of the layer of advocacy which enables present-day service-users to question the decisions of professionals. He certainly wouldn't have spent the last thirty years of his life '...in the purgatorial hell and French Bastille of English liberty' (Storey, *Letters*)

The generally-accepted view is that Dr Allen's facility was the model of the 'new' medical approach inspired by Henry Tuke, and that Clare was reaping the benefits of the picturesque surroundings and specialist care being offered.

In the summer of 1840, Dr Allen wrote to *The Times* about an article which had erroneously stated that the poet John Clare was dead:

He is at present in excellent health and looks very well, and is in mind, though full of very strange delusions, in a much more comfortable and happy state than he was when he first came. (Bate, p.429-30)

Even though the remainder of Allen's long letter is a thinly-veiled appeal for as much money from as many people as possible to continue to keep Clare in this happy state, it is, nevertheless, the most detailed description of Clare's state of mind while at High Beach which survives. Indeed Clare wrote the poem beginning 'I love to see the Beech Hill...' praising the surroundings of High Beach. Like so many of his poems, it begins with 'I love...':

I love to see the Beech Hill mounting high
The brook without a bridge and nearly dry

There's Buckets Hill, a place of furze and clouds
Which evening in golden haze enshrouds

(Quoted by LS Young, 'John Clare and High Beech', *JCS Newsletter* April 1984)

As with so much of Clare's writing, the reader can imagine herself in the poem with Clare. She sits beside him as he indicates Buckets (Buckhurst) Hill from Beech Hill (using the witty pun on 'mountain'). There follows the alliteration of 'brook', 'bridge' and 'Buckets' to emphasise the scenery which we can see – but why, I would like to ask Clare, does he say that the brook is 'nearly dry'? Why not use more grandiose language to describe this idyllic rural feature?

Because would come the answer *I observe rather than romanticise*. At the end of the stanza everything becomes softened with the onomatopoeic 'furze' and misty with the clouds, followed by the golden finale of the setting sun, assuming an almost Biblical presentation of the gates of Heaven.

In spite of this splendid panorama available to him, Clare's sojourn with Dr Allen could have had only a limited beneficial effect, as, in 1841, four years after he first entered Beach Hill, he absconded to walk for five days to seek his home and his 'wife' Mary. Here is another example of Clare seeking to belong somewhere. He is now far away from his Helpston home, from Northborough where his family is and from High Beach where well-meaning friends had placed him. Here we meet him, trudging along by day, vulnerable to fellow-travellers and sleeping at the mercy of the elements at night. After five days, his epic journey is at an end:

[I] was making for the Beehive as fast as I could when a cart passed me with a man and a woman and a boy in it – when nearing me the woman jumped out and caught fast hold of my hands and wished me to get into the cart but I refused and thought her either drunk or mad. But when I was told it was my second wife Patty I got in and was soon at Northborough but Mary was not there, neither could I get any information about her further than the old story of her being dead six years ago, which might be taken from a brand new old newspaper printed a dozen years ago, but I took no notice of the blarney having seen her myself about a twelvemonth ago alive and well and as young as ever. (Bate p.264)

This is Clare at his most desperately ill, and it would be a hard heart indeed left untouched by the enormosity of his predicament. Little wonder, then, that five short months later, he was taken away from home for what was to be the last time.

Clare was now a patient at Northampton County Lunatic Asylum where he was to spend the rest of his life. Many of his biographers lead us to understand that Clare was treated courteously and respectfully in this facility, provided with writing materials, and was often to be seen at liberty in the centre of Northampton exchanging pleasantries with the local people. However, as the Tibbles remind us, Clare's stay at Northampton was:

...a tale of kind attention, visits from friends and inquisitive strangers, freedom (eventually restricted) to go into the town; a tale of isolation, courage, despair, the gradual loss of grip. It is saddeningly inevitable, as the slow years drag themselves out in weariness. For Clare did not die until 20th May 1864.

(J & A Tibble, *John Clare*, p.415)

The authors use emotive language here: 'courage', 'despair', 'loss of grip' (curiously vernacular), for example. Bate remarks:

Frederick Martin's 1865 biography should be read and enjoyed but not trusted.

J.W. and Anne Tibble's *John Clare: A Life...1932...was pioneering but suffers from many errors and omissions.* (p.631)

I may venture to suggest, however, that in the nineteen-thirties, when the Tibbles were writing, attitudes towards mental health were different from our

modern 'It's OK to be not OK' mantra. Furthermore, Anne Tibble was the daughter of a manual worker and I am sure that this influenced the affection and empathy she had for John Clare.

Much has been conjectured about the origins and causes of Clare's madness. [I use the term for convenience and in no way to be judgemental about Clare's (or anyone else's) mental health issues.] The main body of opinion holds that symptoms began with the move from Helpston to Northborough in 1832 organised by well-meaning friends who decided, on Clare's behalf, that life would be better there. However, although it was scarcely three miles from Helpston, easily accessible to the man who would walk ninety miles in five days nine years later, it was not Helpston. It was not home. Already, in a letter dated 1823, nine years before the move from Helpston, and while he was engaged in writing *The Parish*, Clare writes:

I have been in a terrible state of health six months gradually declining...
& I verily believe it will upset me at last... I firmly believe I shall never get over it... I cannot feel much better if I do its only for a day or two & then I am as bad as ever.

E. Blackmore, in his fascinating study of Clare's changing states of mind, ('John Clare's Psychiatric Disorder and its Influence on his Poetry', *Victorian Poetry* vol 24 no. 3) writes in great detail about the possible causes of Clare's insanity and proposes several interesting diagnoses, from drunkenness and venereal disease to manic depression. Perhaps we should delve further into Clare's past for the true cause. He was a twin, the weaker of the two, whilst his sister, Bessey, was 'a fine, bonny lass' who only survived for a few weeks

There is a great possibility, in my view, that Clare carried this loss as a further burden throughout his difficult and poverty-stricken life. After all, in his most famous late poem 'I Am', much stress is put on his isolation and singularity. In the first stanza, the phrase 'I Am' appears four times, yet collapses after the first example from self-affirmation into confusion, as if he is seeking his identity from the reader. From the present state of his mind, Clare longs for a future where he can rest as if in a cradle with God. A committed Christian, is Clare relishing being reunited with Bessey in that same cradle which they shared so long ago?

So, Clare was geographically, financially and emotionally lost. Whilst it would be inaccurate to lay the blame solely on his poverty for his anxieties, Clare's life was, indeed, governed for the most part by a constant lack of money for even the most basic needs of himself and his growing family.

Foucault's use of the image of the 'Ship of Fools' lends itself to provide an illustration of Clare's state of mind at this time. Originally a method of both excluding and containing those deemed 'mad', Clare, too has, as it were, sailed away from all he had known and he would never reach his desired destination of being an accepted, popular, financially secure poet. His entire life was like that sea voyage, eternally lost between home and success.

Doreen Thakoordin

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