

John Clare at High Beach

On 5 October about 20 Society members gathered at John Clare's High Beach local, "The Owl", on a beautiful day, to trace his footsteps through Epping Forest. The scene was set by Peter Cox recounting the circumstances of Clare's arrival and eventual escape from Matthew Allen's asylum. The poetry written there veered between melancholy, delusions and proclamations of love for Mary Joyce. Although the quality and shape of Clare's vast body of poetry appeared to largely rise above the turmoil in his life, at High Beach it does break through in some shambling and stark verse. A more sombre vision of asylum life was reflected in one piece quoted.

Matthew Allen, described as a man of questionable background, nevertheless provided an environment which was humane for its day and offered a freedom which allowed John Clare miles of walking and thinking space. But he was still a solitary man, an outsider living in another country. Somehow the melancholy of "I am" and its fierce cry of being, though written in Northampton, seems appropriate to High Beach.

Our walk in Clare's footsteps took us past the sites of the former asylum buildings: 'Springfield' with its Essex boarding; a well hidden 'Leppit's Hill Lodge'; 'Fairmead House', long since replaced; and finally 'Fairmead Cottage'. When we moved into the forest the sunlight through the trees created a lightness of mood which could easily have turned to melancholy for a lonely walker, which Clare must so often have been. Peter Cox's commentary, always informative but never intrusive, was punctuated by readings from Clare. It is in the forest or field that he seems best read. We felt that at that very spot Clare might have once composed; at that same tree he might have looked; or upon that track he might have walked.

Though the bustle of modern life was not far away, there was a stillness in the woods, only occasionally disturbed by riders or runners. I have been to High Beach many times, first as a boy from the East End, then as a searcher after John Clare. But perhaps for the first time it was brought alive in celebration and commemoration by the intimate knowledge of Clare and his natural world shared with me by my friends from the John Clare Society.

Mike Mecham



photograph by Pat Cox