

The John Clare Society

The 45th Annual General Meeting of the John Clare Society will take place in St. Botolph's Church, Helpston on Saturday 11 July 2026 at 10.30 a.m.

1. Welcome by the Chair

AGENDA

2. Apologies for absence
3. Minutes of the last meeting
4. Matters arising
5. Chair's Report – Mike Mecham
6. Treasurer's Report – David Smith
7. Membership Secretary's Report – Jo Holliday
8. Sales Officer's Report – David Smith
9. Election of Officers and Committee Members.

To be re-elected en bloc with the exception of Deputy Chair Valerie Pedlar who is standing down.

Chair – Mike Mecham
Secretary – Karen Lakey
Treasurer – David Smith
Sales Officer – David Smith
Membership Secretary – Jo Holliday
Journal Editor - Simon Kövesi
Newsletter Editor – Stephen Sullivan
Archivist - Sam Ward
Village Liaison - Anna Kinnaird
Committee Members – Rev. Gary Alderson
John Stafford

10. Any other business
11. Date of next meeting – Saturday 10 July 2027, time to be confirmed.



The 44th Annual General Meeting of the John Clare Society was held on Saturday 12 July 2025 at St. Botolph's Church, Helpston.

1. **Welcome by the Chair** Sue Holgate welcomed all to the 44th Annual General Meeting of the John Clare Society.
2. **Apologies for absence** were received from Mark Seaward, Ron Ingamells and William Thompson.
3. **Minutes of the last meeting** were approved by a show of hands, and signed as a correct record by the Chair.
4. **Matters arising.** None
5. **Chair's report.** Sue presented her report for the year 2024/2025, and welcomed everyone to the 44th Annual General Meeting of the John Clare Society.

Sue announced that this will be her final AGM as Chairman having served for 3 years. Sue thanked the Committee for their help and support, especially Anne who has recently managed the Festival almost single handedly. Also Gary, who has provided us with improvements to the Church, all of which has happened efficiently and on time.

Sue confirmed that we have held three Committee meetings this year, face to face in Peterborough, with Zoom meetings for those unable to attend in person. Sue explained that Committee members are spread all over the country: Simon in Glasgow, Valerie in Southport and Karen in Lymington. Sue gave special thanks to Karen for taking the Minutes which can be challenging via Zoom, and presented Karen with a gift.

Sue summarised key events over the last year:

- John Clare Cottage was closed during the winter months and re-opened in May; and will be open Wednesday to Saturday during the summer months. Keira Harvey has been appointed CEO and she came to speak to the Committee at our June meeting. Keira is committed to expanding the appeal of John Clare, and has identified three areas of focus: Wellbeing and Mental Health, Nature and the Environment; and Education – which will mean working with schools at a local and national level. She also hopes to secure a car park and the expansion of local footpaths to provide additional activities for visiting groups. There is a need for re-decoration and re-roofing of the thatched roof and, to this end, applications for funding have been made to the Pilgrim Trust and Historic England, and other avenues are also being explored. However, an official survey of the Cottage and dovecot may be needed to support these applications. The Committee were very pleased that Keira was able to meet us, and we have offered her the Society's full support.
- Sue confirmed that two oak trees have been planted at Swaddywell, to commemorate Linda and Norman, but unfortunately one of the trees has died and will be replaced.

- Sue spoke about the “Posies for Patty” event held in Northborough in May this year. The weekend was dedicated to Martha Clare who was born in Northborough. The Society supported this event, and hope that it will be possible to continue work together in the future.
- The other key things to mention are: The Society’s website development, which Sam Ward will speak about shortly; the launch of our new book of Clare’s poems, edited by Mike Mecham, which will be launched today; and the setting up of a bursary fund in memory of Ronnie Blythe, using his generous legacy to the Society; which Mike will speak about shortly.

Sue confirmed that, subject to Membership approval, Mike Mecham will succeed her as Chair. Sue is most grateful to Mike for stepping up, and is confident that he will steer the Society into the future with great success.

6. **Treasurer’s report.** David Smith presented the audited accounts for the year, which have been signed and audited by an independent examiner. See attached the full report.

David noted the increase in travel expenses, due to Committee Members becoming involved in and supporting initiatives; and also broadening our network through sponsorship of events.

Gary asked a question about bank interest rates and David confirmed around 1.3% (1.26%).

Chair invited a proposer for the accounts to be adopted. Bridget Somekh proposed and John Stafford seconded. All were in favour by a show of hands.

Sue thanked David for his hard work, and for ensuring the ongoing accuracy and integrity of our accounts.

7. **Membership Report.** Valerie Pedlar presented the membership numbers (UK and abroad). See report for full details.

In summary, although membership has dropped it was not at such a rate as previous years, and is beginning to pick up again after the COVID years. Valerie noted that there is typically a spike in new membership following the Festival each year. Valerie also confirmed that she is stepping down, having taken the role only until a suitable successor could be found, and will now be handing over the role to Jo (subject to election).

Valerie invited questions from the floor, and there were no questions arising.

Sue commented that both the Church and the Cottage were closed for part of the year which may have had an impact on new membership.

Sue thanked Valerie for the incredible work she has undertaken in order to get the membership records in good order.

8. **Publicity Officer’s report.**

Ann Marshall thanked everyone for coming today, and noted that it was nice to see old and new faces.

Ann mentioned the Midsummer cushions ceremony yesterday, and invited everyone to take a look today. Ann gave special thanks to Gary for organising the display of the poems in the Church. She also encouraged everyone to buy a programme to see what is going on today.

Ann mentioned that she had joined Society in 1996, and had served on the Committee since 1998. She is now standing down, and wished to take the opportunity to thank everyone who has supported her over the years, and to offer her best wishes to whomever takes over the Festival organisation in future.

A question was asked about the evening concert which Ann responded to.

Sue thanked Ann for her dedication to ensuring that the Festival happens each year; and reminded Members that more help is always welcomed – both as part of the planning group and on the day(s).

9. **Sales Officer's report.** David Smith presented his report. Please see attached for detail.

David summarised that sales have been lower than usual this year, which is probably as a result of both the Cottage and the Church being closed for part of the year. Costs have also increased – mainly due to the design, production and publication of the new book "Clare's People", although he is confident that the book will create a lot of interest and will boost sales going forward.

David invited questions, and no questions were arising.

10. **Website Development**

Sam Ward, Archivist, provided an update on the Society's website development. Our website is currently out of date and full of adverts. Building a new website which will be achieved in two phases. Phase 1 – standard content: membership renewal, sales, publicity for events etc. The second stage will include other features, such as critical sources to Clare, links to related organisations and so on. Sam stated that any ideas would be welcomed from Members – if anyone has any thoughts about the new website, Sam would love to talk to you.

Sue confirmed it is a big project which will make it easier for members and new members to join, manage their membership, and to have access to a wide range of information relating to John Clare and the Society.

Sam invited questions, and David reminded people of our Social Media presence – FaceBook and Instagram.

11. **Election of Officers and Committee Members**

- a) New Committee members – elected separately. Sue expressed how pleased she, and existing Committee Members are to welcome several members to the Committee (subject to election today). All proposed new Committee Members have had the opportunity to participate in one or more of the meetings, and have already shown great enthusiasm and have offered new ideas.

Jo Holliday – proposed by David Smith – seconded Jonathan Wonham. Elected by show of hands

John Stafford – proposed by Mike Mecham. Seconded by Bridget Somekh. Elected by show of hands

Gary Alderson – proposed by Sue Holgate Seconded by John Stafford. Elected by show of hands

William Thompson – proposed by Mike Mecham seconded by Gary Alderson. Elected by show of hands

b) Officers – elected separately

Mike Mecham – Chair (proposed by Sue Holgate) Seconded by Roger Rowe– elected by show of hands. Sue presented Mike with the Chairman’s badge.

Valerie Pedlar – Deputy Chair (proposed by Ann Marshall) Seconded by Sue Holgate – elected by show of hands

Jo Holliday – Membership Secretary (proposed by David Smith) Seconded by Valerie Pedlar – elected by show of hands

c) Officers re-elected en bloc. All re-elected by show of hands.

Karen Lakey – Secretary

David Smith – Treasurer/Sales Officer

Simon Kövesi – Journal Editor

Stephen Sullivan/Sam Ward – Newsletter Editor

Sam Ward - Archivist

Anna Kinnaird – Village Liaison

12. **Any other business**

Sue opened up “any other business” to the attending membership:-

- It was requested that Edward Baines be remembered, as sadly, he has recently passed away. Edward should also be remembered for his work at the Lime Kiln at Pickworth.
- Ann drew the meeting’s attention to posters advertising a play “John Clare: The Madhouse Sessions”. The play features Clare poems set to music, and is an immersive experience of Clare’s time in the asylum. This is a one-man show initially in Camden, London. Attendance is encouraged.
- Mike informed attendees that John Bangay has sadly recently passed away. John donated some of his artwork for the new book; and an article about John is in the most recent Newsletter (written by Gary Alderson).

Sue then invited Mike to address the Members, in his role of the newly elected Chair.

Mike started by reflecting on the rather gloomy meeting last year, where the Committee were concerned about needing new Committee Members in order to continue undertaking new initiatives and to running the annual Festival. He was pleased to confirm that a number of people came forward and have now been elected as members of the John Clare Society Committee. Mike feels that this year is, therefore, completely different and with a new air of optimism. There is a lot of enthusiasm for the Festival, as is demonstrated by the number of people attending here today. Mike was pleased to confirm that the Festival will go ahead again next year.

Mike introduced the new bursary scheme as another reason for optimism. The new scheme has been set up using the money from Ronnie’s legacy to the Society, and will be known as “The Ronald Blythe

Fellowship". The bursary will provide £1000 each year for 5 years for an individual to undertake a piece of research into Clare studies. This is a lovely way to spend the money so generously bequeathed by Ronnie. The initiative was suggested by Simon Kovesi, who was instrumental in putting this together; and we are very proud to be launching the scheme today.

Mike then reminded Members of the new book of Poetry, titled "Clare's People"; and was pleased to say that there is been significant interest already, and the book is available to purchase here today. Mike also invited anyone to attend, or to read a poem at the 2pm session this afternoon, where the "Clare's People" will formally be launched.

The final reason for optimism was the huge success of the "Posies for Patty" event in Northborough, which allowed two like-minded groups to collaborate and get to know each other, which bodes well for the future.

Mike was sorry to advise that Pete Shaw passed away this year. Pete was the first secretary for the Society, and very well liked and respected. Mike played a recording from 1993 radio programme by Pete, which has been included in our new book, "Clare's People".

Mike drew Members' attention to the display outside Anna's shop, relating to the "Overseers book for the Poor", in which John Clare is mentioned as a contributor to the Poor Law Fund.

Finally, Mike came to the sad task of having to say goodbye to Sue Holgate and Ann Marshall. Mike stated that they have been the bedrock of the John Clare Society for 20+ years. They have made a huge contribution, and will be sorely missed.

Mike then reflected on his memories of Sue and of Ann:-

Sue joined committee in 2003, and had taken on the roles of Membership Secretary and Festival Organiser, as well as being the Hon. Secretary before being elected as Chair in 2022. Mike remembered first meeting Sue at a Committee meeting 2003 meeting in Peterborough Museum in 2003, and was struck by the quiet enthusiasm she always showed. Mike particularly appreciated Sue's, again quiet, and effective efficiency in all matters she was involved in.

Ann joined The Society in 1996 and has been on the Committee since 1998. One of Ann's earliest roles was Publicity Officer, a task which required a lot of commitment, and she shaped the role. She was part of the Festival Planning Group for many years, ultimately taking over from Ann as Festival Organiser, and in 2022 became Vice Chair for the Society. Mike reflected on his first meeting with Ann at the Festival, where she was wearing a lovely straw hat! Since then, Mike has enjoyed Ann's friendship and remembered particularly a John Clare walk they took together, taking it in turns to read poems and Mike even singing a song!

Mike said it was appropriate to finish with a few lines from John Clare, taken from the poem "The Flitting".

*But times will change and friends will part And nature still can make amends, Their memory lingers
round the heart Like life, whose essence is its friends.*

Mike then presented Sue and Ann with gifts, on behalf of the Society.

13. Date of next meeting – Saturday 11 July 2026, time to be confirmed