

## A Hundred and Fifty John Clare Society Newsletters: A Retrospective

*John Goodridge*

As founder members of the Society we are grateful and privileged to have the opportunity of sending you this newsletter, which, we hope, will give you some idea of the progress that has been made since we published our appeal nine months ago.

Thus the first *John Clare Society Newsletter*, dated December 1981, announced itself: four typed A4 pages, the last page being a proud list of the '198 paid up members' the Society's 'appeal' had won: definite proof that a John Clare Society could work. The *Newsletter* passed its 150th number in Spring 2024, forty-three years later, and this seemed a good moment to look back, to consider what the *Newsletter* has achieved and how it has changed and developed, and to talk to our five surviving editors. I am grateful that they all responded generously; I am only sorry that our first two editors, Pete Shaw and Edward Storey, both pioneers and founding members of the Society, are no longer with us to give their stories.

That first *Newsletter* appeared just two months after the Society itself was founded, having arisen out of a popular WEA (Workers' Educational Association) course on Clare, tutored by the poet Edward Storey, in nearby Castor. The first number was co-authored by founder-members Brian Blade (Chairman), George Dixon (Treasurer) and Edward himself, who also edited the first two volumes of the *John Clare Society Journal*. The Society's first Secretary, Pete Shaw, took on the second *Newsletter*, and Edward Storey covered numbers 3-5. As the former editor and now Society Vice-President Rodney Lines remembers, Edward soon found a 'fluid, friendly, chatty tone which set the style for many future editions'. This was important: finding a style to connect with our members, who might range from casual readers to devoted enthusiasts, and would certainly include nature lovers, literary scholars, local and worldwide readers, and perhaps people who were quite new to poetry. Each subsequent editor has managed to achieve this ease of communication, in their various styles.

Apart from helping to get this new society off the ground, Edward Storey was busy preparing his 1983 biography Clare, *A Right to Song*, at this time, so after three *Newsletters* he passed the editing on to Rodney Lines, which Rodney felt 'delighted

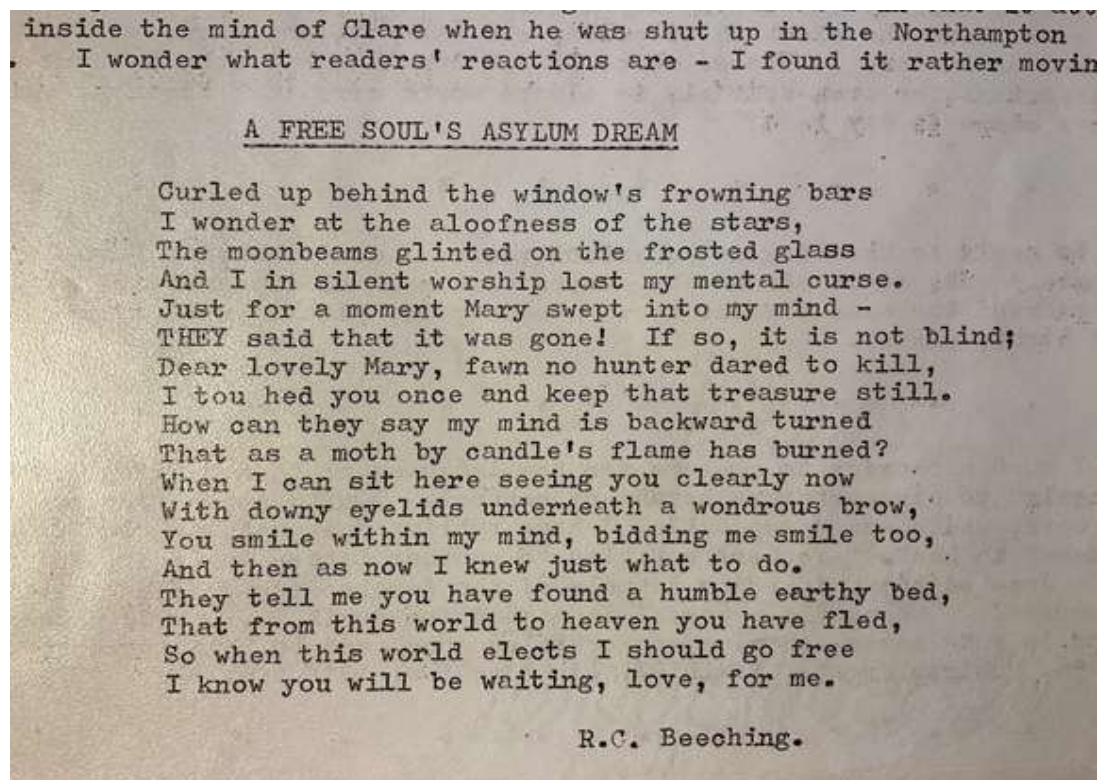
to do'. He recalls: 'I took over at number 6 (November 1983) and went on until my last, 24' (May 1989):

In those early days of a young society there was an air of excitement that Clare had at last begun to receive the attention that he deserved, and I was inundated with letters, articles, messages from journalists, academics and many new members announcing forthcoming concerts, WEA classes, BBC broadcasts, newspaper reports both local and national, works by artists and actors, people's reminiscences of childhood in Helpston, and so on. There was more than enough material for many editions to come, which was produced on an old portable typewriter on A4 paper, run off on an ancient Gestetner duplicator and stapled together with a green cover depicting Clare designed, and drawn by my wife, Pauline.

Rodney developed his own, detailed and attentive style, offering a rich and varied diet of news, opinions, and information. Among the articles that appeared during his editorship were several important first-hand recollections. These included Alice Essex's memoir of 1918, 'My Clare Summer' (no. 6, November 1983) and Philip Huniken-Lepper's 'Memories of St Andrew's Hospital', where he served as a choirboy in 1920 (no. 7, April 1984). These were precious memories from Clare people. Poems inspired by Clare began to appear, such as Neil Curry's 'John Clare and the Acts of Enclosure' (no. 16, May 1987), and 'A Free Soul's Asylum Dream' by R. C. Beeching (no. 15, February 1987). They reflect Clare's ability to spark new creative work, which has subsequently blossomed, with full poetry collections on Clare, several novels and plays, musical adaptations, and an independent film, for example, devoted to Clare's 'Journey Out of Essex'.

In 1989 Rodney Lines became Vice-Chairman of the Society, and he was succeeded as Editor by Noël Staples, who brought his own unique style to the *Newsletter*. Noël's stint, from September 1989 to December 1990, ran to ten numbers (nos. 25-34). and saw some key technological changes, from typewriting to an early word processor. As Noël says, these changes 'showed' – both in the appearance and in the style of the *Newsletter*. The first computer used was very limited, but its 'ponderous "chink" sound' remains 'engraved forever' on Noël's mind, while the printer 'sounded like a miniature sawmill' – and the printing came out in one long perforated sheet that you had to tear into individual pages. As a social worker in his day job, Noël was fortunately permitted to use the Social Services franking machine, reimbursed by the

Society's Treasurer, saving him 'one tedious job', and no doubt a lot of extra work for the local Post Office.



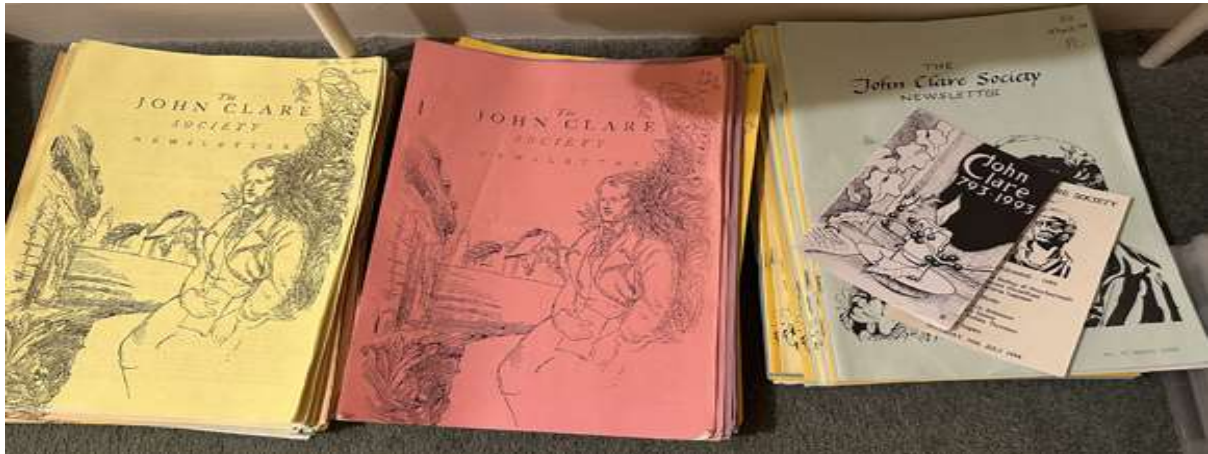
Above: 'A Free Soul's Asylum Dream' by R. C. Beeching (no. 15, February 1987)

Some important things happened in those two years of Noël's editorship, and one event in particular was written up proudly in the *Newsletter*. He remembers it well: that special moment when Clare's memorial stone was unveiled in Westminster Abbey, in Poet's Corner, which John Clare himself had once visited. Noël writes:

Re-reading those ten early editions has been fascinating – the initial edition recording the installation of Clare's plaque in Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey. I arranged the digital recording of the service by my late friend John Roberts, a retired BBC sound engineer. It's John's mellifluous voice you can hear narrating. Despite last minute changes it all worked beautifully.

That recording is still in circulation; indeed, Ronald Blythe, our late founding President, chose a key moment from it, Ted Hughes reading 'The Nightingales Nest' in the Abbey, as one of his eight 'Desert Island Discs' for the famous BBC radio programme, in 2001. (The BBC had to phone the Society to get our permission to play it on air, for it was on one of our own audio-cassette tapes.)

On the process of looking back, Noël concluded that it was a ‘fascinating trip down memory lane after 30 years, remaking many connections! No Internet! No emails! Such a different IT world then!’ And he adds: ‘I moved on to edit our quarterly Quaker A5 booklet newsletter – like the current Clare Newsletter’.



Above: three piles of *Newsletters* from three editors (Rodney Lines, Noël Staples and Peter Cox), in the old A4 format (photograph: Noël Staples)

The *Newsletter* was next put in the very capable hands of Dr Peter Cox, who edited nos. 35-95 (March 1992 to March 2007), a very substantial tranche indeed, and one that took us past the millennium and saw the completion of the great Oxford English Texts John Clare editing project. Peter, the longest-serving editor to date, remembers how the early *Newsletters* had eight pages and a cover sheet which showed ‘a young Clare outside his cottage, and the threshing barn and church spire’. From June 1993 onwards there was ‘a new cover design by John Lincoln, of an older Clare looking at a rural view with the river bridge and distant spire’. And in June 1999, the format was reduced from A4 to the ‘digest’ size of A5 (like Noël’s Quaker *Newsletter*, as he remarked), which was easier to hold and read, and greatly expanded in its pages from the earlier *Newsletters*. Carry Akroyd’s fresh design was then used for the front cover, starting with the second of these compact numbers, and proved so attractive and appropriate for a miscellaneous *Clare Newsletter* that it remains on the cover to the present day.

While the early *Newsletters* had the style of a personal letter (‘Dear Member’), as membership increased it began to change. Peter Cox favoured poetry as a way to lead into the main matter, Clare’s own voice to kick off proceedings. As he

remembers, 'nearly always my newsletters began with a few lines of Clare's verse, with comment on them'. Varied contributions from members on subjects around Clare's life and poetry fed into what Peter characterises as a 'companionable publication, linking the large and varied company of Clare-lovers to each other'.

# *The John Clare Society*

## *Newsletter No. 95 – March 2007*

Dear Member

March month of "many weathers" wildly comes  
In hail and snow and rain and threatening hums  
And floods: while often at his cottage door  
The shepherd stands to hear the distant roar  
Loosed from the rushing mills and river locks 5  
With thundering sound and over powering shocks  
And headlong hurry through the meadow brigs  
Brushing the leaning willows fingering twigs  
In feathering foam and eddy hurrying chase  
Rolling a storm o'ertaken traveller's pace 10  
From bank to bank along the meadow leas  
Spreading and shining like to little seas  
While in the pale sunlight a watery brood  
Of swooping white birds flock about the flood  
Yet winter seems half weary...

Shepherd's Calendar, March, 11.1-15

Tim Chilcott's parallel text edition of The Shepherd's Calendar (reviewed on page 8) enables us to see very easily how John Taylor edited Clare's manuscript. Studying the texts side by side is fascinating. At first Taylor regularises spellings but makes no other changes except to put in 8 commas and 2 hyphens, in cottage-door and river-locks. The commas do not really improve clarity but do impede the sense of rushing water which Clare is describing. Modern readers would not expect or require the hyphens. In its context "threatening hums" seems to me unexpected, an original choice of words, presumably explained by lines 4 and 5, the rising waters coming closer and getting louder.

Above: poetry for the people: the first page of Peter Cox's final *Newsletter*, no. 95

A memorable period in Peter Cox's time as editor was the bicentenary year of 1993 and the busy preparations leading up to it. There was a lot going on, as he recalls. In 1993 there were 'talks and events everywhere', and membership of the Society was 'rocketing'. And as yet, of course, we had no online presence or email, so the *Newsletter* printed long lists of events in every number. (I can remember updating these, along with the late Mary Moyse, our then Secretary.)

Peter also recalls the passionate but ultimately unsuccessful campaigns to get Tom Bates' statuary of Clare placed into appropriate civic arenas around this time. (Fortunately, some of his work may now be seen at last, for example in St Andrews Church, Northampton, and in the John Clare Lecture Theatre on Nottingham Trent University's Clifton Campus.)

Dr Valerie Pedlar took over from Peter in 2007, editing the *Newsletter* for nine years (June 2007 to June 2016, nos. 96-127), another solid tranche of issues, until she was elected to the Chair of the Society in 2016. As with Noël Staples, her editorship saw important technological changes, and a nettle that had to be grasped:

I felt it was necessary to move from paper-based production into the digital world and instead of physical cut-and-paste to its electronic equivalent; in effect to reduce the work of the printer since I could send print-ready copy. Thus I was able to produce an e-newsletter for those members who were happy to receive it this way.

Our *Newsletter* had now become a well-ordered and handsome publication, whether delivered on paper or in electronic form, and Val needed to meet the challenge of finding suitable illustrations, to add to the text. Continuity proved an advantage here when her predecessor, as she says, 'introduced me to a wonderful book of Bewick prints, many of which marry beautifully with Clare's work'.

She found that another enjoyable aspect of editing was getting to know the contributors, for although we 'always encourage new people to submit pieces for publication, there have been certain regulars, and communicating with them and reading their work has been a great pleasure'. Supporting this interest in the personalities of our readers and writers, Val Pedlar introduced a series of sketches of 'distinguished Clareans', beginning with Ronald Blythe in her first *Newsletter* (no. 96), some of these pieces illustrated by Vice-President Kelsey Thornton's attractive

line portraits. A greater range of music, film and theatre, art, events and performances, as well as books were getting more reviewed in the *Newsletter* now, by a range of contributors. Among the more adventurous contributions printed during Val's time as editor, as a veteran Hendrix fan I especially remember Tom Ryder's article, 'Was Jimi Inspired by Johnny?' (no. 97, September 2007), on whether Clare's writings on his love for Mary Joyce might have influenced Jimi Hendrix, an adventurous reader, and thereby fed into the great guitarist's song, 'The Wind Cries Mary' (1967).

Most recently, Dr Stephen Sullivan took over from Valerie Pedlar, in June 2016 (no. 127), and has now taken us safely past the 150 mark, with the help of his doughty proof-reader, Dr Sam Ward. Stephen warmly remembers the kindness and hospitality of the Society's then President, the artist Carry Akroyd, when he was getting started, including the gift of a sheaf of drawings for his use, for like Val Pedlar before him, he realised that he had to find good ways to illustrate the *Newsletter*, and again it was found through the thoughtfulness and sense of continuity in the Society's officers.

Leafing through these well-produced and attractive recent *Newsletters*, as the Society itself moves deeper into its 'forties', I notice at once a number of sad but celebratory obituaries to our key founding members, those who set the Clare Society in motion, such as Edward Storey, and Ronald Blythe. At the other end of the scale – so to speak – we now print in full the children's poems that have won awards and commendations in Helpston's John Clare School's annual poetry prize competition, which the Society sponsors. One-name societies like ours tend to be rather overstocked with older folk – like myself – running on grey power – so it's heart-warming to see youngsters drawn towards John Clare and his poetry, especially in this way that stimulates their natural creativity. Besides the children's poems, there are regular features, like the 'before and after' accounts of the annual Clare Festival, in the June and September numbers, along with a diet of stimulating short essays and other contributions by members and friends.

In the age of blogs and social media, with several well-subscribed such channels now dedicated to John Clare, the *Newsletter* remarkably still remains an important resource for all who love the poet. We also now have a number of wonderful and very welcome sister organisations. The John Clare Society of North America has its own annual *Newsletter* and regular sessions at the MLA convention. The Langdyke

Trust cares for Clare country and runs wildlife sanctuaries in Clare Country, while The John Clare Trust cares for his cottage, with its lively programme of events and activities. The Centre for John Clare Studies at the University of Cambridge, with its regular seminars and other events is now well established. Our *Newsletter* enables information on all these and on other activities based around John Clare and his world, to reach our members and – one hopes – to stimulate greater participation in events. Long may it thrive.



Above: some recent *Newsletters*, with the popular cover design by Carry Akroyd