

John Clare Society AGM, Saturday 11 July 2026

Annual report by Dr Mike Mecham, Chair of the Society

WELCOME

A warm welcome to you all to this lovely and now familiar church of St Botolph's for another AGM, and Festival, of the John Clare Society.

I would like to begin by thanking Gary Alderson and his Festival organizing group for putting together this rich weekend programme in collaboration with the 'Poesies for Patty' team in Northborough and a host of other local people here, including the John Clare Cottage.

It is also a time of celebration. A founding member of the Society is Dorothy Rose, the great-great-granddaughter of John Clare, who until recently was a regular attendee at our festivals. In September, Dorothy will be 100 and you may have seen my articles about her in the *Newsletter* and the *Village Tribune*. I have visited her on several occasions this year, the last time on Monday. I recorded a video message from her for the Festival.

2026 is also the bicentenary of John Clare's [oldest] son, also John Clare.

ANNUAL REPORT.

I turn now to my annual report, a series of reflections on the past year.

I would characterize the last year as both **positive** and **productive** for all of us in the John Clare Society. I hope what we have achieved has put us on a sound footing for the way ahead and all its inevitable challenges. I will come to those later

I will present my report under **broad activity headings**:

- Provision
- Connections and sharing
- Partnerships
- Outreach

Provision

Firstly delivery - what we have provided you with over the past year.

Once again, we have produced three excellent, and essential, issues of the Newsletter edited by Stephen Sullivan.

And there is, as the always, the eagerly anticipated annual issue of the *Journal* edited by Simon Kovesi, now the longest serving editor after 18 years.

In my view it is one of the best of its kind and this year it seems to me that its colourful cover reflects the various directions we might follow in the future.

We also began the year by -

Firstly, launching our latest publication, *Clare's People*, which has sold well and has been well reviewed. My thanks especially to David Smith for his invaluable efforts as our Sales Officer.

Secondly, we also launched the Ronald Blythe Fellowship. To remind you, it is a £5k bequest from our late President providing for a bursary of £1,000 to be awarded each year to a PhD student to further their work in the field of Clare studies.

I am delighted to say that we made our first award to Mary B. Shannon, from the University of California; and I am also delighted to say that she is with us here today.

We are now looking forward to promoting the 2026 award with applications due by September.

Thirdly, and my own single most substantive load over the year, has been the creation of a new John Clare Society website. Working alongside our contractor Mark Crail over several months, it was launched in May. Refreshed, up-to-date, full of new information and articles, as well as runs of the *Newsletter* and *Journal*. A real research hub which I hope you like and which we will continue to develop and expand. You can also make one click on the website to receive email alerts on all new developments.

Connections and Sharing

I have been especially heartened by the connections I have been able to develop over the year with other like-minded organisations. While all have their own objectives and means of achieving them, we each share the common aim of promoting the work and life of John Clare, although our charitable status sometimes means it is not always possible to collaborate on certain issues.

I should like to **mention four in particular:**

Firstly, **Keira Harvey** the CEO of The John Clare Cottage, has been warm and generous in sharing ideas and information with us. For our part, we have enabled the Cottage to hold a full run of the *Journal* by donating issues from our stock. We also made a small financial contribution to the cost of the rethatching project. The Cottage lecture series is to be welcomed, and there should be opportunities for us to collaborate in the future. Keira will give you a brief update from her perspective later.

Secondly, **Richard Astle** of the Langdyke Trust and the Clare Countryside Project who has quickly shared information on new developments in the area and the countryside.

Thirdly, I am particularly indebted to **Tony Henthorn**, editor of the *Village Tribune* for enabling me to write a full John Clare related page in each of the issues since I became Chairman. His lavish promotion of the Festival and programme has been crucial. He also arranged the programme handouts that you have today. I think it is one of the best local platforms of its kind.

Finally, **Teresa Scott** and the Northborough's 'Poesies for Patty' group. She and her colleagues have added another dimension to the Festival. I will be chairing their

afternoon sessions in Northborough Church tomorrow and joining the 'Flitting' walk in the morning. Come and join us as we walk in the footsteps of the Clare family's move from Helston to Northborough. This has created a real partnership that I hope will continue to flourish in the future.

Partnerships

The year has also seen us establish some partnerships.

Clare Now and Then is a funded project to produce a new collection of John Clare's letters. Our partnership, involving no cost to us, provides support and a platform for promotion. Our President, John Goodridge is one of those involved.

We were also pleased to provide a letter of support to the National Lottery Heritage Fund for Art Pop-Up's application for funding for the Westings Meadow project. That was successful with a full grant awarded. Kathryn Parsons from Art Pop-Up will brief you later. She will also lead a family art and natural history fun event at the Cottage at 2pm.

We also teamed up with **Peterborough Council** and its **Tourist Board**. We lent support to a bid for Peterborough to become a **UK City of Culture**. Although the bid unfortunately failed, I was able to establish links with the Leader of the Council who agreed that any such UK wide bid should have the locality's most prominent cultural figure, John Clare, at its heart.

The **Tourist Board** also supported the Festival by posting details of the Festival on their new website as well as highlighting our own. I plan on meeting the Tourist Board Team soon.

Outreach

In terms of a wider outreach, I would like to pay tribute to the broad community of Clare scholars that add to the richness of the Society's focus.

One important platform and avenue for that is, of course, our own *Journal*. As well as giving us visibility and credibility in Academia, it gives us as individuals the opportunity to access latest thinking thereby enhancing our own appreciation.

The **Cambridge John Clare Centre** is one place that I readily reached out to. One of its members, Paul Chirico, was a past Chair of the Society and a driving force behind the establishment of the John Clare Cottage

Sarah Houghton-Walker from the Centre is another who has been only too willing to collaborate. Without hesitation she accepted my invitation to become one of the two academic adjudicators for the Ronald Blythe Fellowship. I was also excited to receive what I think will become a go-to short biography of John Clare which was published a few weeks ago. David Smith has copies available on our bookstall in the Scout Hut a specially reduced price of £10.50.

The other adjudicator who readily accepted my invitation was **Professor Bridget Keegan**, who is President of the John Clare Society of North America. Though far off I hope that we can explore jointly projects in the future.

But I have also endeavoured to promote John Clare outside of what we might call the Clare Community and into working class literature more generally.

As a labour historian and member of **Executive Committee of Britain's Society for the Study of Labour History**. I was able to successfully propose our President, Professor John Goodridge, for their 2026 annual lecture last month. His subject was the struggle of labouring class poets such as John Clare. It drew the largest audience of the annual four lectures to date and shifted the focus of the labour historians into another field. I was also able to promote *Clare's People* selling copies to folks who had never read Clare before.

My own Irish Labour History Society are also considering my proposal to lecture on the influence of John Clare on modern Irish poets, such as the great Seamus Heaney.

Another Irish poet who has for many years been an evangelist for John Clare is Tom Paulin. He was shortlisted for the 2025 T. S. Eliot Poetry Collection Prize. At the annual readings by shortlisted poets at the Royal Festival Hall in January, I was able to have a chat with him and present him with a copy of *Clare's People*. He described Clare to me as 'his hero'.

Another shortlisted poet was Paul Farley who edited this 2007 Faber & Faber selection of Clare's poems which I am sure some of you have. We spoke for some time about Clare, especially his BBC Radio Four programme from 2008 exploring Clare when he focused specifically on Clare's great poem 'The Lament of Swordy Well.' I also gave him a copy of *Clare's People*.

So, outreach offers rich opportunities for us to delve more into, and promote, our great poet.

Sad departures

Before I conclude and consider the challenges ahead, sadly I have to remember several friends of John Clare and the Society, figures who have died over the past year.

Two who were regular faces at the annual Festivals.

Edward Baines had for many years brought his bookstall along with a collection of John Clare books to savour and be tempted.

There was also **Peter Leverington** who was always here with his wife Mavis. Both gave devoted service to the Society over the years. Like the late Peter Moyse, Peter was also an inveterate photographer and took many photographs of Festivals over the years. I hope that it is going to be possible to add those to our new website as a small gallery,

On the academic front, there was the renowned Clare scholar **Professor John Lucas**. His short 1997 biographical study is still available online.

I also want to include **Professor Roger Sales**. Although he died in 2022 and was remembered in our *Newsletter*, we must also be thankful to him today because of a generous bequest of £3,000 which his estate has just made to us in accordance with his wishes. The Committee is considering an appropriate and specific application for it. He had a particular affection for the Society.

In his 2002 study, *John Clare: A Literary Life* he praised our annual Festival saying that:

“Students of Clare, at whatever level, will benefit from contact with the John Clare Society ... Everyone can learn things from a day in Helpston”.

Although these remain great sadnesses for all of us who knew them, we must also remember the contribution that they made to promoting the work and life of John Clare will be part of their legacy.

Conclusions

I hope all of this reassures you that your Committee remains active while laying the ground for meeting future challenges.

So, what are these challenges? They include:

Firstly, the challenge of growing a paying membership when finances are tight – and Jo Holliday will give you an update shortly on where we currently stand.

Secondly, the challenge of attracting more volunteers of all ages to manage and grow the Society at a time when people appear less inclined to commit to long-term in-person activities, preferring to join communities through social media. But the two need not be mutually exclusive and can be made to operate side-by-side and complement each other.

Thirdly, the eternal challenge of finding more diverse funding in a cash-strapped environment where there are other competitors.

Fourthly and ultimately, the challenge of continuing to remain relevant and true to our objectives.

These challenges are not unique to us. They apply to similar organisations in a fast-changing environment. Our advantage is that we have a community of organisations whose aims support ours. That is -

“To educate the public about the work and life of John Clare through collection and preservation, publication and events”.

So, collaboration, partnership and outreach remain a key part of our way forward over the coming years. Over this coming year your committee, in consultation with

you and others, will take a fundamental and clear-eyed look at who we are, what we do and how we do it. So, exciting times are ahead.

But I will finish, as I always try to do, with something uplifting from John Clare. Taking my cue from the children's midsummer cushions outside I leave you with four lines from Clare's collection *The Midsummer Cushion* and a poem entitled 'Pastoral Poesy':

"True poesy is not in words
But images that thoughts express
By which the simplest hearts are stirred
To elevated happiness".

Dr Mike Mecham
Chair, John Clare Society
Helpston
11 July 2026