



John Clare's countryside



Bee orchid

Much of John Clare's poetry is intimately connected with the countryside and wildlife around Helpston. The poet spent much of his time in the fields, heaths and woods around the village, often writing down lines of poetry as he wandered on slips of paper that he tucked into his hat.

Clare wrote about the birds, flowers and animals he found in the local countryside. Some of his poems are about birds that are familiar to villagers today

*Little trotty wagtail he went into the rain
And tittering tottering sideways he ne'er got straight again
He stooped to get a worm and looked up to catch a fly
And then he flew away ere his feathers they were dry*

Others preserve memories of birds that can no longer be found around Helpston, such as the nightjar

*The weary woodman rocking home beneath
His tightly banded faggot wonders oft
While crossing over the furze-crowded heath
To hear the fern owl's cry that whews aloft*



Chris Gomersall

Pied wagtail

But if Clare glorified the beauty of nature, he was also profoundly aware of just how quickly that environment was changing as the enclosure of common land brought dramatic changes to once familiar features

*By Langley Bush I roam, but the bush hath left its hill
On Cowper Hill I stray, 'tis a desert strange and chill
And spreading Lea Close Oak, ere decay had penned its will,
To axe of the spoiler and self-interest fell a prey*

One of his greatest laments to the changing face of the countryside charts, uniquely in the first person, the demise of Swordy Well, once a place of quiet natural beauty



Yellow-wort

*I am Swordy Well a piece of land
That's fell upon the town
Who worked me till I couldn't stand
And crush me now I'm down*

But despite this note of despair Clare is perhaps best remembered as a poet who captures the beauty, mystery and calm of the natural world around him

*I wandered down the narrow lane
Whose battered paths was hardly dry
And to the wild heath went again
Upon its wilderness to lie
There mixed with joy that never tires
Far from the busy hum of men
Among its molehills, furze and briars
Then further strolled and dropped again*

