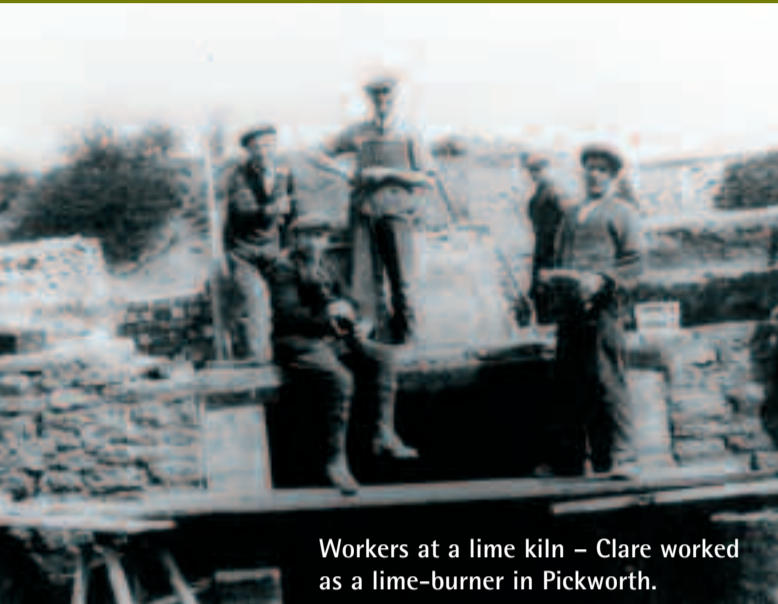


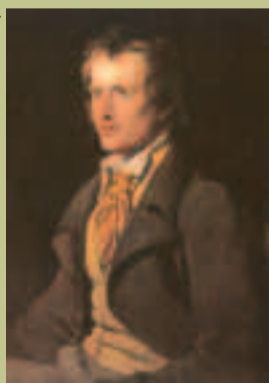
John Clare and Helpston



Workers at a lime kiln – Clare worked as a lime-burner in Pickworth.



National Portrait Gallery



John Clare was born in Helpston on 13th July 1793. As a child he had to work hard in the fields. When he could be spared he attended a Dame School in the village, and subsequently a Vestry School in Glington. His parents, teachers and some influential friends encouraged his learning, but others mocked reading as 'a sure indication of laziness'!

Clare didn't settle easily into a working life. He had many jobs including as a ploughboy and as a gardener at Burghley House. He grew up through a period of political unrest; work was hard to find and poorly paid. Desperate for money, he settled for a while as a lime-burner in Pickworth and Casterton, just north of Stamford. Here he met Martha Turner (usually known as Patty), whom he married in 1820.

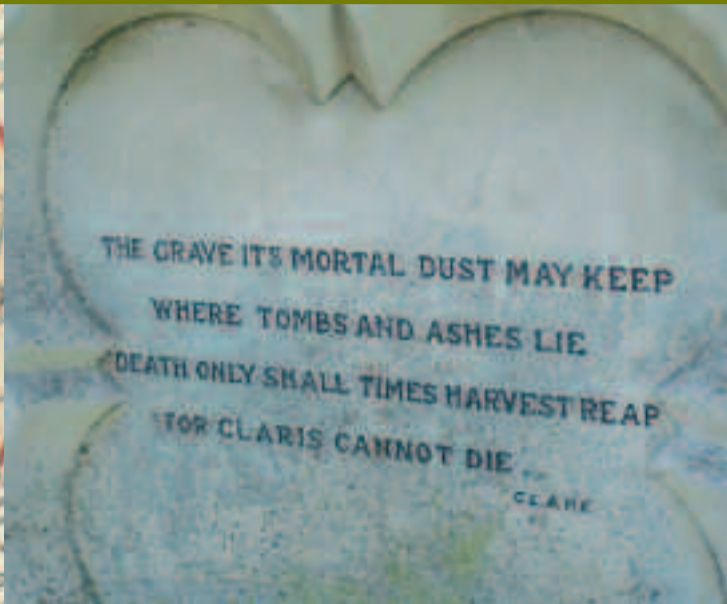
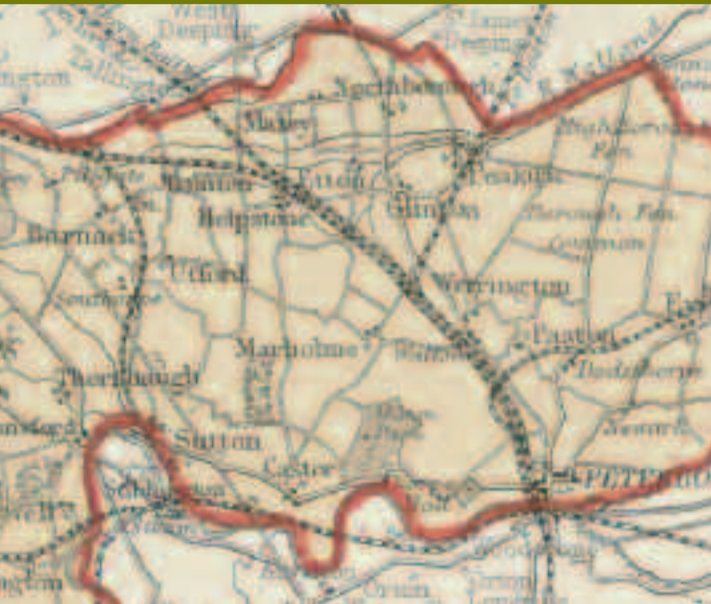
Clare wrote poetry for many years and hoped to make a name for himself – and earn some money for his family – through publication. Poverty was a real obstacle. He records paying a week's wages for a book of blank paper.

An ambitious, young Stamford bookseller, Edward Drury, recognised Clare's talent and brought in his cousin, the leading London publisher John Taylor. Clare's first volume, *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery*, was published in January 1820 and quickly went through four editions. Clare acquired valuable patronage and favourable reviews, and on visits to London was welcomed into the heart of literary society.

Clare describes his love of nature and of literature:

*O for the feelings and careless health
That found me toiling in the fields – the joy
I felt at eve with not a wish for wealth,
When labour done and in the hedge put by
My delving spade – I homeward used to hie
With thoughts of books I often read by stealth
Beneath the blackthorn clumps at dinner's hour;
It urged my weary feet with eager speed
To hasten home where winter fires did shower
Scant light now felt as beautiful indeed,
Where bending o'er my knees I used to read
With earnest heed all books that had the power
To give me joy in most delicious ways,
And rest my spirits after weary days.*

John Clare and Helpston



Clare's second collection, *The Village Minstrel*, was published in 1821. It was followed by *The Shepherd's Calendar* in 1827. But sales declined quickly and publishers lost confidence in his work. He continued to find many thousands of readers – and a welcome if irregular income – through newspapers, magazines and annuals. His greatest collection, *The Midsummer Cushion*, appeared only in a vastly reduced form as *The Rural Muse* (1835). This was the final volume published in his lifetime.

Clare and his family moved three miles to Northborough in 1832 to a more spacious cottage with garden and orchard. He suffered increasingly from mental illness, including bouts of severe depression and delusions about his childhood sweetheart, Mary Joyce. In 1837 he was admitted to a private asylum in Epping Forest. He escaped in 1841 and walked the 80 miles back home. Five months later he was committed to Northampton General Lunatic Asylum. He remained here, continuing to write, until his death on 20th May 1864. Clare is buried in the churchyard on the south side of St Botolph's Church, Helpston.



John Clare Collection, Northampton Central Library

The lettering on Clare's grave terms him *The Northamptonshire Peasant Poet*, adding that 'A Poet Is Born, Not Made'. But neither statement quite captures Clare.

He put astonishing effort into furthering his education and developing his talent to produce an extraordinary range of writing. His poetry, essays, notes, letters and songs speak eloquently of his many passions: birds, flowers, animals and trees, his local environment and rural society, village stories and biblical paraphrases, politics and archaeology, love, labour and loss.

John Clare's is the unique and complex voice of a major figure in English literature.

He loved the brook's soft sound

The swallow swimming by:

He loved the daisy-covered ground,

The cloud-bedappled sky.

To him the dismal storm appeared

The very voice of God,

And where the evening rock was reared

Stood Moses with his rod.

And everything his eyes surveyed,

The insects i' the brake

Were creatures God almighty made:

He loved them for his sake

A silent man in life's affairs

A thinker from a boy,

A peasant in his daily cares –

The poet in his joy

John Clare and Helpston



John Clare's cottage, Helpston



John Clare is commemorated by a plaque in Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey, and his works are read, studied and enjoyed all over the world. Ironically the single aspect of Clare's life and work that attracts so many admirers is his intense commitment to the here and now – to his own time and place.

Clare's career, his eccentricity, his resistance to agricultural change, his fury at social exploitation and his contempt for hypocrisy sometimes made him a difficult neighbour. Some villagers were offended by his opinions; others preferred to stay out of his way in case they were ridiculed in his writing. Yet Clare staunchly defended impoverished labourers and picked his targets carefully, as in his precise, angry satire *The Parish*. He also described and defended the natural life and terrains of his village.

Today in Helpston his influence takes many forms. The village school is named after him, and every July the schoolchildren celebrate Clare's birthday by making beautiful 'midsummer cushions'. These miniature gardens, created by arranging flowers in a square of turf, are placed around the poet's grave in St Botolph's churchyard.

'Helpston', the opening poem of Clare's first volume, Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery, announces his arrival with an odd mixture of pride and disdain for his home.

Hail humble Helpstone where thy valies spread

Et thy mean Village lifts its lowly head

Unknown to grandeur Et unknown to fame

No minstrel boasting to advance thy name

Unletter'd spot unheard in poets song

Where bustling labour drives the hours along

Where dawning genius never met the day

Where useless ign'rance slumbers life away

Unknown nor heeded where low genius tries

Above the vulgar Et the vain to rise

The midsummer cushion ceremony, poetry readings and music mark the opening of the annual John Clare Festival, which takes place in Helpston on the weekend nearest Clare's birthday (13th July). The festival is the main event of a range of activities organised throughout the year, and around the world, by the John Clare Society. The Society was formed in 1981

after a group of enthusiasts gathered at a series of inspiring classes: it has hundreds of members worldwide.

Peter Moyses

