

Visit to John Clare's Cottage

On Monday 6 July nineteen members of the Art Appreciation group visited John Clare's cottage. This is situated in the village of Helpston just northeast of Peterborough. We went by shared cars.

The village street contains many old houses, barns and a pub built of the local Barnack stone, but the cottage is whitewashed with a thatched roof. We entered by a side gate and assembled in the rear courtyard which contains a statue of John Clare as a young man wearing a high collared topcoat and boots. Around the back of the coat are depicted many of the birds and animals that he loved and wrote about. He is also holding a No Entry sign which reminds one of how much he resented the land enclosures that were taking place as he grew up.

At the back of the courtyard is a recently constructed café where we were welcomed with coffee and cakes.

The cottage is owned by the John Clare society and run by volunteers. Our visit had been arranged through them.

After our coffee we were each given an audio guide and allowed to explore the cottage as we wished. The guide was excellent and described the life of John Clare and the interior layout of the cottage, and included readings of some of his poems which I especially enjoyed.



The cottage is very simple with thick whitewashed walls. One very large fireplace in the living room. In the kitchen were some typical cooking vessels and models of the kinds of simple local foods that they would have eaten. I could not get up the steep winding stairs, but an audio-visual display showing the simple bedrooms was provided in the large dovecote outside.

John Clare was born in this cottage on 13 July 1793 in a heatwave. His twin sister died after a few weeks. John's parents were poor farm labourers and rented the cottage which they shared with another family so it must have been very busy and crowded. All cooking was done on an open fire. Water had to be carried from a well.

Both John's parents were illiterate, but they were aware that he was a bit different and they paid for him to go to a local school at the church, where he learned to read and write. All writing was done with chalk on a slate as paper was very expensive. He was also taught by the vicar who lent him books. As a youth he loved wandering the local countryside and observing the animals and birds which feature in many of his poems. He had to work from an early age. First as a pot boy at the Blue Bell pub, then as a gardener at Burghley house. He enlisted with the militia and worked as a lime burner. In 1818 he had to accept parish relief as he had no money.

He was only five foot tall and malnourished, so he was never strong. He had bought himself a copy of James Thomson's poems *The Seasons* and began to write his own poems which he offered to a local bookseller who then passed them to a publisher John Taylor, and he produced them in 1820 as *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenes*. They were highly praised, and a second book *The Village Minstrel, and other poems* was published. He was acclaimed as a peasant poet and visited London where he got to know Charles Lamb.



He married Martha Turner and they lived at first in the cottage with his parents. They had many children. Clare's admirers raised an annuity for him, but it was not enough to support a family.

His further books of poems did not sell well, and he worked as a field labourer, but his health deteriorated and he became delusional. He was placed in a private asylum at Epping but he escaped in 1841 and walked the eighty miles back to Northborough, sleeping in hedges and eating grass. However, he was then certified insane and spent the last 23 years of his life at the asylum in Northampton where he continued to write poetry. He is buried in Helpston churchyard

Our visit concluded with a very pleasant lunch of homemade pea soup, sandwiches and cake. Some members walked to the church, but I remained to enjoy the flowers in the garden and think about John Clare's life. I was very moved by his poem

I Am:

I am – yet what I am none cares or knows;
My friends forsake me like a memory lost:
I am the self-consumer of my woes –
They rise and vanish in oblivious host,
Like shadows in love's frenzied stifled throes
And yet I am – and live like vapours tossed

Into the nothingness of scorn and noise,
Into the living sea of waking dreams,
Where there is neither sense of life nor joys,
But the vast shipwreck of my life's esteems;
And e'en the dearest that I loved the best
Are strange – nay rather stranger than the rest.

I long for scenes where man has never trod
A place where woman never smiled or wept
There to abide with my Creator, God,
And sleep as I in childhood sweetly slept,
Untroubling and untroubled where I lie
The grass below – above the vaulted sky.

I must thank Jill and Sue for organising this memorable visit.

Report by Marian Rowe

More images below by Susan Sullivan

