

# John Clare Memorial Lecture 2020

## *Part 1, by Ellis Hall*

It's exactly 200 years ago to the month that Clare's first collection, "Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery", was published, and he found himself transformed from a complete unknown - the son of an agricultural labourer - into a nationwide literary sensation. 'Poems Descriptive' quickly went through four editions and sold thousands of copies. He was the toast of literary London, and the critics agreed that England had at last found its own Robert Burns.

But he feared being a nine-day wonder, or, as he put it, "a farthing rushlight that glimmers for a day and is dead." And he was right to be worried. The following year his second collection, 'The Shepherd's Calendar' received mixed reviews and sold only 400 copies. His third, 'The Village Minstrel', barely registered with the public. And his fourth and last, 'The Rural Muse', published fifteen years after his first wild success, dropped into oblivion the moment it hit the shelves.

Over those years, the pain of being rejected and forgotten tipped him into a chronic depression that eventually turned to derangement. In 1837, after several violent episodes, he was committed to Matthew Allen's private asylum at High Beach, Epping Forest. It was from there, in July 1841, that he escaped and walked the 85 miles to his home in the Northants village of Northborough.

He was on the run from what he thought of as a prison, fearful of pursuit by men who would drag him back by force. Neither was he prepared for his long trek; he had no money, no food, no water, and the sole of one shoe broke early on in his flight, causing him excruciating pain and eventually slowing his progress to a crawl.

We know a little about what happened to him on his long walk because he wrote an account known as 'The Journey out of Essex'. I say we know 'a little' because it contains long gaps and is not entirely coherent. Some passages make perfect sense, others are vague and confused, and a few read like the ramblings of a madman. For these reasons, possibly, many have thought it unworthy of serious study.

But this does not stop Clare enthusiasts from re-enacting the journey, starting out at High Beach and arriving days later in Northborough, tired and sweaty and footsore. If you want to do the same there's a map you can download from the John Clare Cottage website, though I should warn you it's not authentic, because following in Clare's exact footsteps is no longer possible. Many of the nineteenth-century roads he trod have vanished, and half the landscape he passed through was bulldozed flat in the 1960s and 70s to make way for the A1 and the A1M.

Bridget and I first became fascinated with Clare when we studied him for A Level back in 1973, at a time when he was just a minor footnote in the history of the Romantic Movement. Forty years on we met up again and decided to collaborate on a project about his asylum escape, partly because of its dramatic nature, and partly because we thought it would be a unique way of getting to know and understand him. By finding the remains of the landscapes and buildings he'd seen with his own eyes, we hoped to connect with him in a way that would otherwise not be possible.

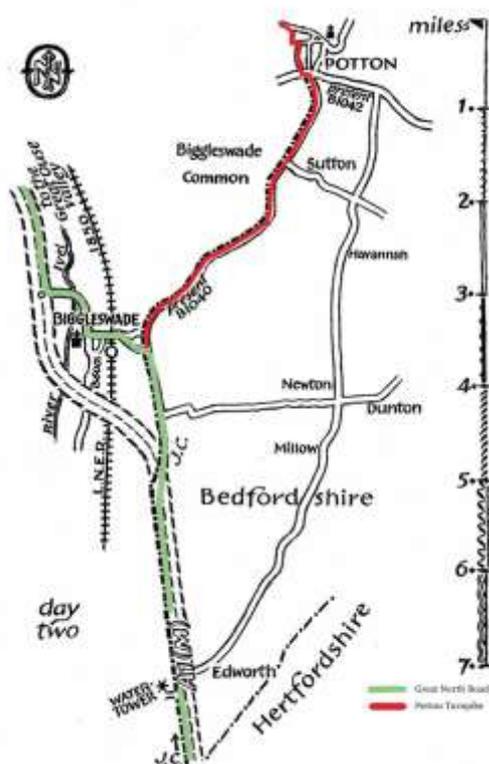
To fill the gaps in his account, we examined not just the materiality of the road, but also the social and economic conditions of his day. This allowed us to reconstruct the world through which he walked, the details of which he does not provide because contemporary readers would not have needed them.

We also investigated the more intriguing aspects of his account. There is only time here to cover one, so I'll talk briefly about how he navigated his way home, and how at one point his method failed him spectacularly, with potentially fatal results.

During the second week of July 1841, he met a band of gypsies in Epping Forest. One of them gave him instructions on how to get to the Great North Road, which would lead him 60 miles to a junction at Norman Cross in Huntingdonshire. From there he could branch off north-eastwards through the town of Peterborough and be home in less than half a day.

As he crossed the counties of Middlesex and Hertfordshire, Clare was wholly ignorant of the countryside around him. But that did not matter. All he had to do was stay on the Great North Road until he reached Norman Cross, when he'd be in familiar territory once more. He was careful not to get confused about which direction he was walking in, and on the first night turned himself into a human compass by lying down to sleep with his head pointing north.

But at the end of the second day he tells us that "At late evening [I went] through Potton in Bedfordshire where I called in a house to light my pipe." From this it is clear he has left the Great North Road entirely - Potton lies four miles to the east of it. So how could this have happened? Most likely, he had accidentally missed a right-angled turn westward that took the road into Biggleswade and, true to his method, continued walking northward up the Potton turnpike, which joined the Great North Road at that point.



Even so, all might have been well. He could have taken a road west from Potton that led to the village of Tempsford, and back to Great North Road. But instead, as night was falling, he followed another road that climbed two hundred feet onto Gamlingay Great Heath.

This was a bare, windswept tract of waste that extended for miles in all directions, and he was wholly unprepared for the conditions he met there. Because of its elevation and lack of cover, night-time temperatures during the summer regularly plummeted to eight Celsius, which windchill could further reduce. Unsurprisingly, then, he reports that,

"I lay down by a shed under some elm trees and tried to sleep but the wind came in between them so cold that I quaked like the ague."

There are no weather records for the locality on the night in question but Clare notes that there had been heavy showers earlier in the day. And

historical documents we consulted at the Met Office reveal that July 1841 experienced almost twice the average rainfall for the time of year. So Clare was very probably wet as well as cold.

But there was worse to come. He arrived at a junction where there was a milestone - the first he'd seen since leaving the Great North Road. What it told him caused him to panic, because it implied that he was walking *towards* London, not away from it. He says,

“I then suddenly forgot which was North or South, and though I narrowly examined both ways I could see no tree or bush or stone heap that I could recollect having passed, so I went on mile after mile, almost convinced I was going the same way I came.”

There must have been barely enough light for the milestone to be visible. When we checked the sidereal records for July 21<sup>st</sup> 1841 at Potton's latitude and longitude, we found that a quarter moon had slipped below the horizon just as he was climbing up onto the Heath, so we know he was walking by starlight alone. In an age before street lighting, none but the bravest would have chosen to travel alone on foot on a moonless night. As a case in point, one of Clare's literary heroes, Erasmus Darwin, named his circle of scientific friends 'The Lunar Society' because they held their meetings when the moon was full so they could return home safely by its light.

After hours of wandering around in the near pitch-dark, Clare found a route off the Heath, and by sheer chance stumbled across the Great North Road at the Tempsford tollgate. He must have been immensely relieved, and not just because he'd escaped the hostile climate. Like most people of his background, he had been brought up to be superstitious. In his imagination, the nocturnal world was filled with spirits of the dead and malevolent goblins he called 'Terribles with saucer eyes'. He'd even feared meeting them in Chancery Lane, in the heart of London, so although he does not say so, wandering alone at night on an empty and uninhabited wasteland must have been a terrifying ordeal for him.

The toll keeper at Tempsford assured him that once he was through the gate he would be travelling north once more, and his spirits instantly revived at the news. He soon found a farmhouse in whose porch he managed to snatch a couple of hours' sleep. We have managed to identify which house it was, but if you want to know how we achieved this, along with other Sherlockian feats of deduction, you'll have to read our book.

Bridget is now going to discuss how we approached the text of the 'Journey out of Essex', and how this not only changed our view of its literary merits, but also our understanding of its author.



## *Part 2, by Bridget Somekh*

We used the ‘Journey out of Essex’ as our source – 3,000 words Clare wrote immediately he arrived home. We checked each stage of his walk, matching it with evidence from maps of the time and the buildings that survive, today, from 1841. We were also interested in the social life of the road at the time, so we could get a sense of how Clare might have experienced it.

Was this a justifiable approach? There are obvious points where the Journey is not reliable as an autobiographical account. For example, not one of the pubs Clare mentions can be traced in contemporary records.

And, whether or not the Journey is a reliable autobiographical account, how do we rate it as a literary narrative? It is certainly not a travelogue saying where he went and what happened to him on each of the four days. When I was writing about his first day on the road I had almost nothing to go on, because once he was redirected to the road recommended by the gypsies he writes only:

“I walked down the lane gently and was soon in Enfield Town and bye and bye on the great York Road where it was all plain sailing and steering ahead meeting no enemy and fearing none I reached Stevenage.”

The words “meeting no enemy and fearing none” hark back to the very beginning of Day 1 when Clare writes,

“having only honest courage and myself in my army I led the way and my troops soon followed...”

Given that he is escaping after four years in a Lunatic Asylum, is he mad and believing himself to be a military leader? Or is he just joking?

When we started work, we assumed that Clare had been mad. But how madness was defined in Victorian times was different from today. Very soon, a tone of comic innuendo emerges from the text. Midway through the Journey, he writes a note saying,

“the man whose daughter is the Queen of England is sitting on a stone pile on the highway to Bugden without a farthing in his pocket”.

He’s obviously describing himself and it sounds crazy, but we realised that it’s much more likely to be a joke, written to buoy up his spirits in the face of exhaustion and a very painful foot.

Clare had been a frequent contributor to *The London Magazine* for the previous twenty years. Among its writers, several of whom he knew well, there was a tradition of satirical writing, drawing on political cartoons of the time and continuing into my lifetime through Monty Python and Spitting Image. A fellow-writer, J. H. Reynolds, wrote a satirical piece on the literati of the *London Magazine*, in which Clare appears as a man “with ten little children all under the age of four years”. We can imagine Clare’s pleasure at being included as one of the writers’ set, although we also know that his publishers were anxious he should not get a reputation, like Burns, for being a womaniser.

Clare is selective in what he includes in his narrative. He pays little attention to the places he passed and none at all to modern wonders such as the first single track railway from London, built only the year before, at Ponder's End – which he must have crossed.

Instead of giving an account of each stage of his journey, he shapes his story through vivid incidents, focusing on his interactions with people on the road. Dialogue is suggested vividly and succinctly without stage directions, and emotions are unstated but powerfully implied.

For example, this is how he describes the moment when he gets back on the road after wandering, lost, for hours over Gamlingay Heath in the dark. The emotion is all contained in the last four words:

“Before I got through the man came out with a candle and eyed me narrowly but having no fear I stopt to ask him wether I was going northward and he said when you get through the gate you are; so I thanked him kindly and went through on the other side and gathered my old strength.”

The most muddled section of his story – from parting company with the gypsy girl at Buckden to arriving at Stilton – is written as a set of disconnected memories without a storyline. It's often taken as evidence of his madness. However, the passage starts with him saying that he has “little recollection of my journey between here and Stilton for I was knocked up and noticed little or nothing” – and ends with an almost exact repetition, that “I remember going through Buckden but I don't recollect the name of any place until I came to Stilton”.

The repetition suggests that this part of the Journey has been deliberately written to convey a sense of suffering and exhaustion. Elsewhere he takes trouble to correct details, such as place names, for accuracy.

Clare had been in Matthew Allen's asylum for four years and until the last six months or so he had been well treated, living in the main house with Allen's family and able to mix with other patients of respectable backgrounds. However, he desperately missed his wife Patty and their children, and over the time became more and more obsessed with his teenage love, Mary Joyce.

All his life he had written poems to Mary, but now he had come to believe that she was his first wife and was living at his home in Northborough with Patty and his children. Now he was escaping to join this family, and above all he longed to be reunited with Mary.

Living in confinement over a long period has the effect of taking away life-affirming qualities such as independence and responsibility. Clare's deficit in life skills meant that he set out without money or food, and lacking even a serviceable pair of shoes.

But it appears that over the long hours of walking he was buoyed up by a belief in himself as a writer. From the beginning of the second day he started making notes along the way and began picking out the events that would make a good story. Everything points to him arriving home with the narrative bursting to be written down.

His decision the next morning not to go on writing in his small notebook but to copy what he had written into a brand-new folio-sized book before going on, demonstrates the importance he placed on the Journey.

The cost of books of this kind made its use exceptional for a man who habitually wrote on any available scrap of paper, and it's surprising that he found such a book in his possession when he got home.

Publication was clearly in his mind when he copied the two poems to Mary into the front cover. The note at the bottom of the first page that they "were written directly after my return home to Northborough last Friday evening" presents himself in the role of a Romantic hero who has endured great privations for the sake of his mistress. We know that Clare had enjoyed reading Dante with his London friend Eliza Emmerson and here he seems to be imitating Dante in casting Mary, like Beatrice, as his muse. The title of our book is taken from the first of these two poems:

I've wandered many a weary mile  
Love in my heart was burning  
To find a home in Mary's smile  
But cold is love's returning.

Living closely with the Journey, we've been astonished at its narrative power and careful structuring. We believe it is more deserving of serious study than has previously been thought.

Clare's habitual lack of punctuation makes things difficult for readers of his prose. Whereas his poems are tightly bound and framed by end-rhymes which make the structure obvious, the prose is continuous, with no full stops and no paragraph divisions. It's sometimes difficult to know where a new sentence starts and it's easy to miss the care with which Clare has shaped his narrative.

The opening is beautifully constructed: starting on Friday July 23rd with the bleak arrival home to find no Mary, then flashing back to his disappointment at being abandoned by the gypsies the previous Sunday, followed by the suspense of Monday's terse entry, "Did nothing" and the comic of irony of setting out with his imaginary troops on Tuesday.

Taken all together the account of Day 1 makes a good story. The narrative doesn't get bogged down in detail and the description of finding a place to sleep in Stevenage is so precise that Ellis and I were able to find on the 1835 tithe map the exact house where he dossed down on bales of clover.

The Journey ends with a quotation from Byron's 'Prisoner of Chillon', drawing a deliberate comparison between his sufferings on his long escape from Essex and those of the prisoner Bonnivard. Clare surely intends us to view his adventure as epic in scope, even suggesting a literary kinship with Homer by staging an ironic inversion of Odysseus' homecoming, in which he, the hero, returns to a wife whom he does not recognise.

The aim of our work was to come close to Clare and I felt a prickle of adrenalin when I held in my hand the notebook he had carried with him on his Journey Out of Essex. I'll end with my poem.

**MS 8, John Clare Collection, Northampton Library**

It has been rebound, but its weight lies in my hand  
just as it did in his. Inside, in faintest ink,  
John Clare Poems, Feb. 1841; and then Child Harold's  
howl at the spring blotted out, capitalising word-shouts,  
quicksands of madness befuddling his hopes.

The first gathering is edged with tiny rips  
where he cut its folds, in haste, with a blunted knife;  
and here two pages opened flat have been spattered  
with wet and closed damp, doubling a blot;  
and here he's turned it landscape and used a thicker nib.

But wherever ... the words roll out across the page  
in handwriting that's clear to read, with loops  
on Ls and Gs, and sit-up-and-beg Bs,  
and Ss doubled, long and short, and high curls  
completing every D, sometimes looped back to cross a T.

Inside the binding, page-corners are scuffed  
from rubbing in his pocket. Here, like old friends  
are Jack Randall's Challenge; Don Juan's vitriol  
at "little Vicky" and her snuff-box; and  
the very first draft of Journey out of Essex.

Our meeting is one-to-one. On this page,  
pen poised, John Clare spun out his fancy  
and it's my fancy that I watch him writing this Note:  
king of the castle, sitting on road-menders' flints,  
he smiles at that pretty gypsy from the lodge and winks.