



# Botolph's Barn

PAST · PRESENT · FUTURE



## Welcome

Situated in the centre of Helpston, opposite St Botolph's Church and next to the Exeter Arms, Botolph's Barn is an 18th century, Grade 2\* listed building. Previously it was used mainly for agricultural purposes, although occasionally it served as the jail for prisoners awaiting judgement from the assize judge sitting in the Exeter Arms.

Today it provides meeting rooms for the village church and local community.

The Barn also hosts a small exhibition of the area's history, the life and works of the Helpston born poet, John Clare, and the surrounding natural environment. The Barn has Internet broadband access and can be booked as a venue for corporate meetings and events.

You'll find plenty of information on the computers downstairs. Turn them on and use the Barn website ([www.botolphsbarn.org.uk](http://www.botolphsbarn.org.uk)) to read some of Clare's poems, listen to the sounds of local birds and animals and learn more about Helpston, including forthcoming events and details of local groups and businesses. There is also a library of photographs, maps of local walks and links to web cameras located in the village and surrounding countryside.

The church of St Botolph's purchased Botolph's Barn in 2000. It was converted in 2005 with generous support from the Heritage Lottery Fund and from the Fitzwilliam Trust.

We hope you enjoy your visit.

[www.botolphsbarn.org.uk](http://www.botolphsbarn.org.uk)

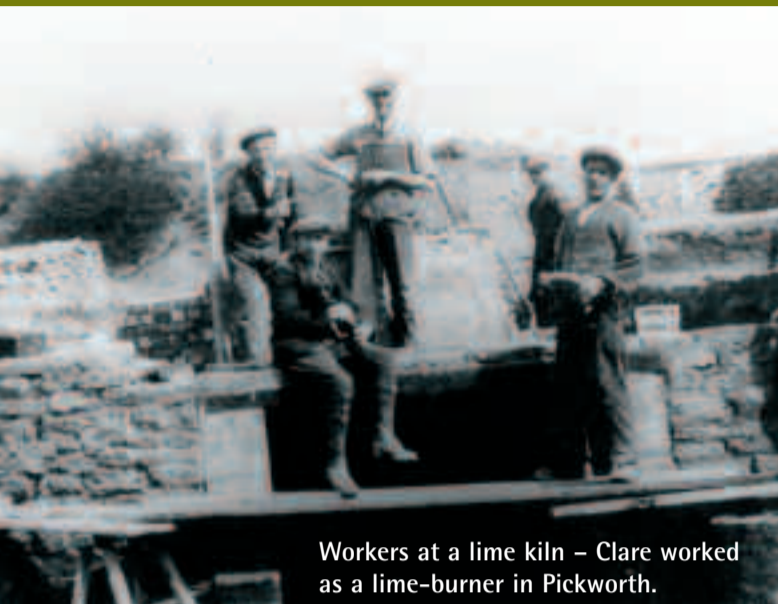


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# John Clare and Helpston



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.

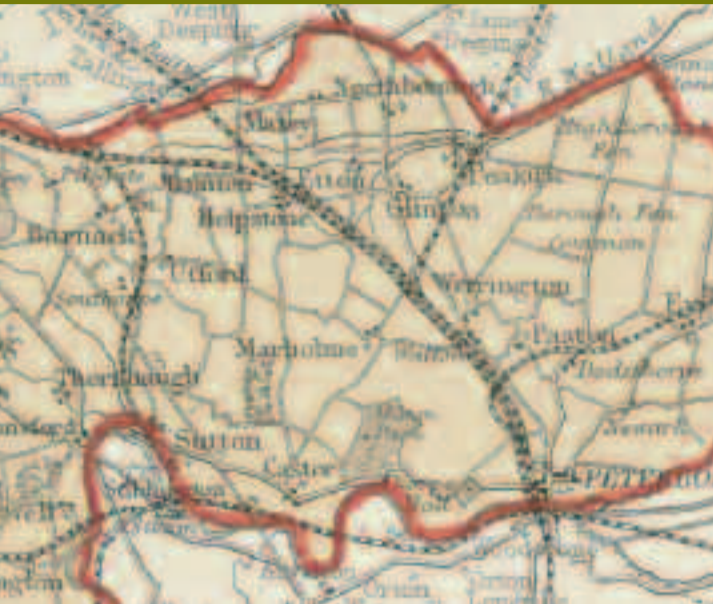
Clare wrote poetry for many years and hoped to make a name for himself – and earn some money for his family – through publication. Poverty was a real obstacle. He records paying a week's wages for a book of blank paper.

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*

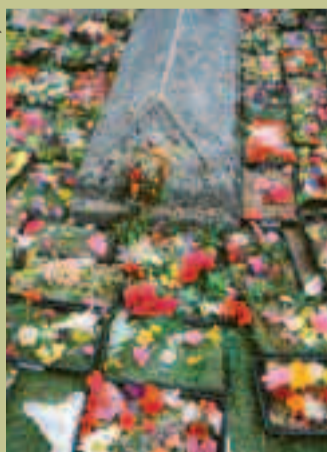
*Where dawning genius never met the day*

*Where useless ign'rance slumbers life away*

*Unknown nor heeded where low genius tries*

*Above the vulgar Et the vain to rise*

Peter Moyses



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.



# St Botolph's in the community autumn and winter



The Sunday Club performs



Women's Institute Party

St Botolph's church has been at the centre of village life for over a thousand years. Despite much change in the village and in society as a whole, St Botolph's retains that role today: contributing to village life and bringing people together regularly to celebrate in weekly worship, baptisms, weddings, funerals as well as the traditional festivals of the church.

### Harvest

Harvest Festival falls on the last Sunday in September. The church is decorated with flowers and garden produce. A sheaf of wheat is placed against the pulpit to remind everyone that their daily bread depends upon the harvest. After the service, a Harvest Supper is held in the Village Hall with young and old sharing a meal together.

### Remembrance Sunday

Remembrance Sunday is important as villagers remember family members or friends who have died in the wars. The service is made particularly special by the presence of the village's Scouts, Guides, Brownies and Cubs who attend in uniform after marching down West Street from the Scout Hut.

A villager, connected with someone who died in the wars, reads the solemn words, "At the going down of the sun, and in the morning, we shall remember them".

### Christmas

One of the most popular festivals in the run up to Christmas is Christingle – meaning Christ Light. The Christingle itself is a lighted candle, symbolising Jesus, the Light of the World, mounted on an orange, representing the world. A red ribbon around the orange denotes the blood of Christ. Four cocktail sticks, bearing dried fruit and sweets signify the four seasons and the fruits of the earth.



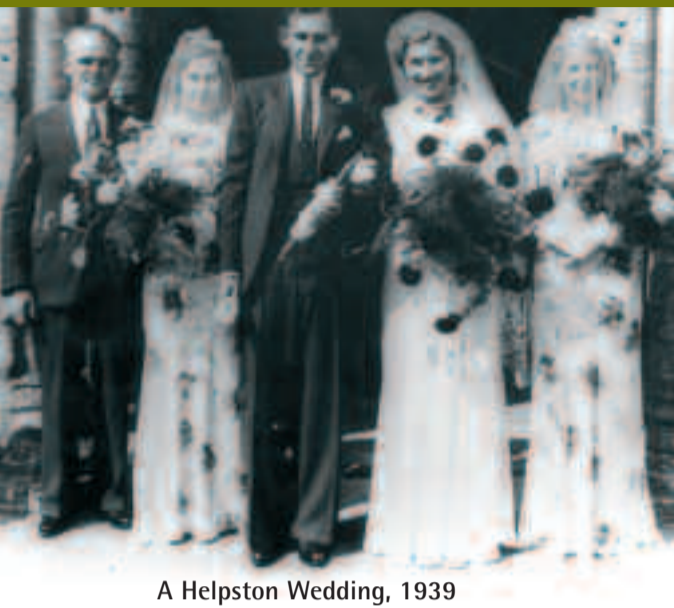
The Christmas carol service, held by candlelight, is held on the Sunday evening prior to Christmas Day. Milton Estates donate the Christmas tree, which is decorated enthusiastically by the children.

Before Christmas, members of the church go around the village singing carols: donations for charities supporting local homeless people are collected door to door.

On Christmas Eve, St Botolph's holds a midnight communion service. The church bells ring out so that everyone in the village knows that Christmas has come.



# St Botolph's in the community spring and summer



A Helpston Wedding, 1939



## Lent

Preparations for Easter start on Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. The priest burns the palm crosses from the previous year's Palm Sunday procession and uses the ashes to make the sign of the cross on the forehead of each person in the congregation.

## Easter

Holy Week – the week running up to Easter – begins with a special service on Palm Sunday. There is a procession, led by a donkey, around the village to recall Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. Palm crosses are handed out.

Church services are held every day during Holy Week. Easter Eve is marked with a bonfire, in a special grate. From this the Paschal candle is lit and taken into the darkened church to light candles for the congregation. Easter Day is the highlight of the church year, with music and flowers celebrating the resurrection of Jesus.



St George's Day

## St George's Day, 26 April

England's patron saint is remembered with a parade service on the Sunday nearest to St George's Day. Scouts, Guides, Cubs and Brownies march to the church to present their flags. This is a special outing for the St George's flag, which has its own flagpole on the south side of the church.

## The Church Gala

Held in the middle of May since 1982, the gala involves the whole community. The village green hosts stalls and traditional games, teas are served in the village hall and exhibitions held in the church and Barn. The money raised covers the costs of maintaining the historic church buildings.

## St Botolph's Day, 17 June

On the Sunday nearest to the saint's day, 17 June, the church celebrates the saint's life. Botolph was a gifted leader and helped many to find faith and serve God.



Church Gala Day





# St Botolph's Church



## St Botolph's is the parish church of Helpston.

The church is built on the site of a Saxon church, over a thousand years old, which was located approximately in the position of the existing nave. Historians point out that

*"The daily life of the vast majority of England's population was closely bound to the local parish church, which by the end of the 10th century was the focal point of a community. Everyone would worship together, and they were led through the mysteries of the sacrament by the local priest."*

Some of the Saxon stonework still exists, incorporated in the present building, which was built mainly between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, though what was originally a Norman tower was rebuilt in 1865. The first recorded name of a rector of the church is Galfrid de Helpston in 1230.

Today, whilst the building remains much as it would have been for centuries past, St Botolph's is part of a larger benefice of six village parishes to the north and west of Peterborough, reflecting the changing role of the church and the long-term decline in numbers of both clergy and church goers. The rector is shared between the six villages and lay people now play a bigger part in the running of the church, its worship and its work in the community.

St Botolph's still retains its place at the centre of village life. The role of the parish church continues to be to foster a broad and inclusive community of faith, and meanwhile offer invitation, hospitality, prayer and concern for every resident.

The Church is the driving force behind the Botolph's Barn project. Members of the Parochial Church Council developed the vision for the project and it was the church that raised the funds to purchase the Barn.

## St Botolph

The parish church is named after St Botolph, a Saxon monk who lived in the seventh century. The future saint was sent to Germany by his parents to study with his brother Adulf. Adulf stayed abroad, becoming Bishop of Utrecht, but Botolph returned and was granted land by Ethelmund or Ethelwold, King of the Southern Angles, whose sisters he had met in Germany. The king offered Botolph land to build a monastery at Icanhoe (Ox-island). Botolph is thought to have died in 680 – the date of his birth is unknown.

Icanhoe has often been identified as modern day Boston, Lincolnshire, mainly because Boston is thought to be a corruption of 'Botolph's town'. In fact the location may have been near the village of Iken in Suffolk, which also has an ancient church dedicated to Botolph.

Botolph was known in the Saxon world for his wisdom, holiness and pastoral care. His brother Adulf was also venerated and made a saint, but his following has not survived.

Some 64 parish churches are dedicated to Botolph – most of them in East Anglia, although there are three designed by Sir Christopher Wren in London.





# 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*





# Today's Countryside



**You can still find many of the natural features that John Clare loved and wrote about around Helpston. But if the names remain the same, much else has changed.**

The original Royce Wood was cut down in the 1960s. Emmonsales heath has long since gone under the plough and the original Swordy Well became first a quarry, then a bomb site and then a rubbish tip.

Modern agriculture techniques have also had an effect – there are fewer weeds in the fields and fewer ponds and wet areas. Clare might well wonder where all the insects had gone too, including the wild bees.

*These children of the sun which summer brings  
As pastoral minstrels in her merry train  
Pipe rustic ballads upon busy wings  
And glad the cotter's quiet toils again*



**Bumble bee**

Today some 50% of England's wild bees are believed to face extinction. Whilst nearby Castor Hanglands lost 50% of its butterfly species in the late 20th century.

Many animals familiar to Clare can no longer be found around the village. The polecat, subject of one of Clare's poems, has not been seen locally for many years.

Chris Gomersall



**Little owl**

*The martin-cat long-shagged of courage good  
Of weazle shape a dweller in the wood  
With badger hair long-shagged and darting eyes  
And lower than the common cat in size*

On a more positive note he would also have wondered about some of the wildlife he could see around the village today. The collared dove, now one of our commonest birds, first bred in England in the 1950s. The little owl was only introduced to England in the 1880s and the now familiar bark of the muntjac deer, would have been unknown to 19th century villagers.

The people of Helpston are also actively involved in recreating some of Clare's lost landmarks, starting with the establishment of a nature reserve at Swaddywell Pit, south of Helpston. Perhaps Clare himself was prophetic when he wrote at the end of the Lament of Swordy Well

*And if I could but find a friend  
With no deceit to sham  
Who'd send me some few sheep to tend  
And leave me as I am  
To keep my hills from cart and plough  
And strife of mongrel men  
And as a spring found me find me now  
I should look up agen*



**Pond dipping at Swaddywell**



**Botolph's Barn**  
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# Two walks around Helpston



## 1806

### Then

The swifts dash across the roof-tops as you set off down Woodgate one evening in July 1806.

The road is quiet. Helpston is an isolated and tight knit community. There is no road across to Glington. A few carts returning from the fields pass by, but little else.

Having passed the Bluebell Inn you turn along Broadwheel Road, and into Royce Wood. An old wood of ancient oaks and many wildflowers. At dusk nightingales sing and a cuckoo calls loudly before flying over the fields of Long Close.

Turning south you walk beside the wood and look out over one of the three main fields, divided into many strips each farmed by different families. A corncrake is calling in the distance.

The field is full of people, working hard to bring in the harvest. Everyone has their job to do, even the youngest children. Their lives revolve around the natural cycle – this is the busiest time of their year.

At the top of King Street you pause at Swordy Well. To the north is the open field, to the south the common land and Emonsdales Heath. Swordy Well's gentle slopes are full of flowers. A gaggle of village boys play chase across its 'roly-poly ups and downs'.

Walking back down mud-covered Heath Road a nightjar calls in the distance. The rector passes on his horse, wishing you a good evening.

Back in the village all is quiet and very dark. The villagers have settled down in their small, damp cottages, ready to rise early again for more work in the fields.

### Now

## 2006

The swifts dash across the roof-tops as you set off down Woodgate one evening in July 2006.

Careful where you walk, a stream of cars pass by. The level crossing gates on the main road to Glington must have gone up. You can hear the high speed train in the distance.

Having passed the Bluebell Inn you turn into Broadwheel Road and into Royce Wood. The old oaks were cut down long ago and no nightingales sing. Long Close is surrounded by the houses on Crossberry Way. Some children are roller blading on the traffic-calmed road.

It's quiet as you emerge into the fields. Large, enclosed fields run up to the horizon where you can just make out the clay pigeon tower. A pheasant calls and you can hear a red-legged partridge near Hilly Wood – both introduced game birds.

The fields are empty around apart from a single farmer in a combine working the fields along Heath Road and a solitary dog-walker.

On to Swaddywell, past the electricity pylons and the flat, set aside field that covers many tonnes of household waste from when this and several other fields were land-fill sites. As you walk up King Street, the cyclists from Peterborough Cycle Club rush past.

Walking back down Heath Road a little owl calls from the fields. Two horse-riders wearing luminous yellow jackets pass you just outside the electricity sub-station.

Back in the village the street lights are on. In their houses people watch TV and prepare for an early morning start at their office in Peterborough or London.

