



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
PAST · PRESENT · FUTURE

