

Clare's horizon was set by the parishes surrounding Helpston. These were, counting clockwise from the north, Maxey, Etton (with Glington just beyond), Ufford and Bainton. Northborough, where he later moved, was to the east of Maxey; Castor, where his mother's family came from, to the south of Ufford. During his childhood most of these parishes had open fields. In 1799 Bainton was enclosed.

Ten years later, when Clare was sixteen, a parliamentary act was passed allowing for 'Inclosing Lands in the Parishes of *Maxey with Deepingate, Northborough, Glington with Peakirk, Etton, and Helpstone* in the County of *Northampton*'. The principal purpose of the act of enclosure was to maximize the profit available from the land:

And whereas some Parts of the said Arable, Meadow, and Pasture lands are intermixed, and otherwise inconveniently situated for the respective Owners and Occupiers thereof, and the said Commons and Waste Grounds yield but little Profit, and in

their present State are incapable of any considerable Improvement, and it would be very advantageous if the said Arable, Meadow, and Pasture Lands, and also the said Commons and Waste Grounds, were divided and inclosed, and in specific Shares thereof allotted to the several Persons interested therein, in proportion and according to their respective Estates, Rights, and Interests; But such Division, Allotment, and Inclosure cannot be effected without the Authority of Parliament.

The price of 'Improvement' was the loss of the 'Commons and Waste Grounds'. It took until 1820 to bring the enclosure fully into effect. Nearby Castor, meanwhile, remained as one of the country's longest-surviving open-field parishes, only being enclosed in 1898.

Under the open-field system, the agricultural land around the village of Helpston was divided into three large fields, Lolham Bridge Field to the north, Heath Field to the west and Woodcroft Field to the east. The fields were divided into 'furlongs' and the furlongs into 'lands', strips of ground ploughed into ridges. Each landowner or tenant in the village held a number of lands dispersed around the three fields. To the south, there was woodland—Royce Wood and Oxeye (or Oxeye) Wood, favourite haunts of young Clare. And a little further south, the horizon for which the boy had set out that summer morning: the common land, available for rough grazing, of Emmonsales (otherwise known as Ailesworth) Heath.

In Clare's world, there was an intimate relationship between society and environment. The open-field system fostered a sense of community: you could talk to the man working the next strip, you could see the shared ditches, you could tell the time of day by the movement of the common flock and herd from the village pound out to the heath and back. Once a year everyone would gather to 'beat the bounds', that is to say, walk around the perimeter of the parish as a way of marking its boundaries. The fields spread out in a wheel with the village at its hub.

In a brilliant analysis of Clare's 'open-field sense of space', the critic John Barrell has argued that 'the topography and organization of an open-field parish was circular, while the landscape of parlia-

mentary enclosure expressed a more linear sense'. The three large open fields formed a circle, with Helpston at its centre, around which crops were rotated annually. Livestock would be moved 'around the circle of the parish as they grazed in turn the fallows, the commons, the meadows, the stubble, the fallows again'. The countryside of Clare's childhood was in the most literal sense open, and many of his poems both describe and formally enact motions that are circular. But with the enclosure, the parish was divided into rectangular fields which were further subdivided by their owners. The enclosure award map of 1820 is ruled by a sense of linear—and again in the most literal sense—*enclosed* space.

In the years from 1809 to 1820, as Clare grew from adolescence to adulthood, Helpston and its neighbouring parishes were steadily enclosed. New public roads were staked out by 1811, new allotments of land within the next year, minor and private roads the year after that. In 1816 a parish meeting in Helpston drew up new bye-laws in which local rights of way were restricted in accordance with the new disposition of land. The final enclosure, the Award of 1820, enumerated the ownership of every acre, rood and perch, the position of every road, footway and public drain. Fences, gates and No Trespassing signs went up. Trees came down. Streams were stopped in their course so that the line of ditches could be made straight.

The economic effects of enclosure have been hotly debated in the century since 1911, when the socialist historians J. L. and Barbara Hammond published their classic study, *The Village Labourer 1760–1832*. According to one view, enclosure was solely for the benefit of the larger landowners. Small owner-occupiers and tenant farmers are supposed to have lost their land, while labourers who were no longer able to benefit from the commons were forced onto poor relief. The counter-argument is that enclosure increased both agricultural productivity and rural employment. Analysis of land-tax assessments and expenditure on parish relief suggest that in the case of Helpston more smallholders and tenant farmers lost their land in the years immediately before the enclosure than in its aftermath, whilst

the labouring poor may actually have been marginally better off as a result of enclosure.

But what matters to individual lives is personal experience, not economic statistics. The family of small farmers best known to Clare were the Turnills. They were forced from their home without compensation at the time of the enclosure; as far as Clare was concerned this was proof that the new regime gave unrestricted power to the large landowners. Equally, Clare loved to spend time with the gypsies who camped on the commons and margins: where were they to go once the 'waste' grounds became private property? It was through such eyes as these that he saw enclosure.

For many villagers, enclosure was experienced as an engine of social more than economic alienation. Use of the commons was technically a right restricted to those who occupied certain properties, but psychologically the unenclosed spaces were perceived as belonging to everyone. Enclosure was therefore symbolic of the destruction of an ancient birthright based on co-operation and common rights. The chance of Clare's time and place of birth gave him an exceptional insight into this changed world. An unusually high proportion of Helpston villagers held common rights. An unusually large area of the parish consisted of heathland and 'wastes' from which the commoners could gather fuel. And the open fields survived until an unusually late date. For all these reasons, the effect of enclosure was felt especially strongly in Helpston and by Clare.

Particular resentment was caused by the infringement of ancient customs. Festival days and their attendant rituals marked the high points of a labourer's year. On Whit Sunday, for instance, all the youth of Helpston had, for as many years as anyone could remember, met at Eastwell Fountain to drink sugared water as a good-luck charm. With enclosure, the spring at Eastwell became private property, so the custom was abolished; years later, Clare revisited the deserted spot and wrote an angry poem of loss. Equally, the march towards more intensive production led to the abolition of the annual holiday on Plough Monday. 'The vulgar tyrants of the soil', wrote

Clare in another verse fragment, 'Deem them an hinderance of toil.'

For Clare himself, enclosure infringed the right to roam, which had been one of the joys of his youth. It was an offence against not only community and custom, but also the land itself. In some of the most powerful pages ever written on Clare and enclosure, E. P. Thompson grasped the radical significance of this, discerning that 'Clare may be described, without hindsight, as a poet of ecological protest: he was not writing about man here and nature there, but lamenting a threatened equilibrium in which both were involved'.* The effect of enclosure on both people and landscape, together with a highly personal sense of loss at the disappearance of the open fields of his youth, became the subject of some of Clare's most powerful writing:

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 the axe of the spoiler and self-interest fell a prey;
And Crossberry Way and old Round Oak's narrow lane
With its hollow trees like pulpits, I shall never see again:
Inclosure like a Bonaparte let not a thing remain,
It levelled every bush and tree and levelled every hill
And hung the moles for traitors—though the brook is running still,
It runs a naked brook, cold and chill.

Many years after Clare had left it, the village of Helpston and its surroundings were described by G. J. De Wilde, a newspaper editor who became interested in the poet during his asylum years:

A not unpicturesque country lies about it, though its beauty is somewhat of the Dutch character—far-stretching distances,

*Strikingly, the earliest piece of explicitly ecological literary criticism (so far as I am aware) was an article called 'Enclosures: the Ecological Significance of a Poem by John Clare', by Robert Waller, published in *Mother Earth: Journal of the Soil Association* in 1964, just two years after the modern environmental movement was born to the cry of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. On Clare and ecology, see further Chapter 6 of my *The Song of the Earth*.

level meadows, intersected with grey willows and sedgy dikes, frequent spires, substantial watermills, and farm houses of white stone, and cottages of white stone also. Southward, a belt of wood, with a gentle rise beyond, redeems it from absolute flatness. Entering the town from the east you come to a cross, standing in the midst of four ways... Before you, and to the left, stretches the town, consisting of wide streets or roadways, with irregular buildings on either side, interspersed with gardens now lovely with profuse blooms of laburnum and lilac... The cottage in which John Clare was born is in the main street running south.

It sounds as if De Wilde went there on a fine summer day. Frederick Martin, in accordance with his desire to emphasise Clare's poverty and exclusion, characterised the village rather differently, drawing attention to 'the old Roman road now full of English mud' and 'the low huts of the farm labourers'.

It was a country of great houses and tiny villages. The gap between rich and poor was almost immeasurable. A two-roomed cottage could be rented for two pounds a year and a man could reasonably hope to support a family—without any kind of luxury—on thirty pounds a year, twenty of which would go on food. But in years of poor harvest and consequent high grain prices, he would struggle. And throughout the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, prices were exceptionally high.

A casual labourer such as Parker Clare would have earned about a shilling a day—for which he could buy one large loaf of bread.* The availability of work fluctuated with the seasonal and economic cycles,

*A note on money: there were twelve pence (d.) to the shilling (s.), twenty shillings to the pound. The average wage of a Northamptonshire agricultural labourer when Clare was a young man was eight shillings a week (about 40 modern pence, 60 U.S. cents, 0.6 euros) or about £20 per year (\$30, 32 euros). It was, however, hard to support a family on less than £30–£40 a year. A pot of ale cost a penny; a loaf of bread varied from 4d. to 1s., according to the price of grain. Since bread is now a lot cheaper than beer, it is pointless to try to convert these sums to modern equivalents.

so Parker's annual wage might sometimes have been little more than ten pounds—which is why he needed to set his son to work as soon as the boy had sufficient strength. A major landowner, by contrast, could expect an annual income of over two thousand pounds from rents alone. The Earl of Fitzwilliam spent over ten thousand pounds in connection with the enclosure of Helpston and Maxey, for which, thanks to increased rents, he gained a thirty per cent return on his outlay.

During Clare's childhood, the county of Northampton introduced the so-called Speenhamland system of poor relief, whereby wages were supplemented from parish funds up to a minimum figure. This was a mixed blessing, since it allowed farmers to keep wages low. The spectre of the poorhouse was ever present, and the Clares became acutely conscious of it when Parker's rheumatism took a turn for the worse and his son had to become the breadwinner. Charitable benefits were available in the village—coal for widows, a clothing club—but malnutrition and disease were commonplace.

There were houses for about sixty families. The population at the beginning of the nineteenth century was three hundred. Almost everyone was employed in agriculture, though there was some lime-work available. Clare always struggled to obtain paper and was mocked by his fellow-villagers for his attempts at writing. It is a mild irony that shortly before his death employment prospects in Helpston were greatly improved by the establishment in the village of a high-quality paper works.

One of the purposes of the Speenhamland system was to discourage the movement of paupers from parish to parish—the benefit was only available where you had a settlement. There was, however, seasonal movement of migrant labour. In one of his earliest surviving prose sketches, written in his twenty-first year and never published, Clare describes an encounter with 'a Company of miserable Hibernians' (i.e. Irish). 'Weary, fainting and poverty struck', these 'pitiful Emigrants' passed through Helpston on their return from working in the fens—having found little reward, 'it being a very bad Harvest'. One of them, named Parbrick, was muttering to himself:

'By Jesu, though I've got neither money Victuals nor Clothing without shoes and stockings—and scarce a bit of Breeks left to cover my A—s and I don't care for that for I think I have got something in my head that will better all this Presently—Why to be sure I have—I'm certain on't so thou need not doubt on't...' this he repeated at least 20 times, bursting out now and then into a loud laugh.

What he had in his head was a plan to beg a penny off each person he met. A penny per person is a trifle, but ' "now let me see," continued he, "suppose there's 20,000 men in England Rich and Poor" '—wouldn't twenty thousand men mean twenty thousand pence, an enormous sum of money? Clare regarded the man as a 'scheming fellow' who did no service to the reputation of his fellow-countrymen, but the encounter seems to have stuck in his own head. Irish immigrants feature in a number of his poems. And his description of Parbrick—'With nothing to eat but a mouldy crust (and that but a very small one) with not a Farthing in his Pocket without a Friend in a strange Country Unknown and Unsupported'—prefigures his description of himself over twenty years later, beside the road to the north on his journey home from the Essex asylum.

A vivid passage in Clare's *Shepherd's Calendar* evokes the Scottish drovers who travelled the Great North Road with their small but sturdy highland cattle, their 'petticoats of banded plad', 'blankets o'er their shoulders slung', blue caps on their heads with scarlet tassels and thistle patterns. His own Scottish blood stirred by the sight of men in kilts, Clare wrote of their 'honest faces frank and free / That breath of mountain liberty'.

The migrants who most fascinated him were the gypsies. Their favoured local camp was at Langley or Langdyke Bush, an old whitethorn tree that became one of the most important landmarks in Clare's poetry. Dating back to Saxon times, it was renowned as the meeting-place of the 'hundred court' of Nassaburgh—that is to say, as the symbolic site of the common law rights of the local people:

O Langley Bush! the shepherd's sacred shade,
 Thy hollow trunk oft gain'd a look from me;
 Full many a journey o'er the heath I've made,
 For such-like curious things I love to see.
 What truth the story of the swain allows,
 That tells of honours which thy young days knew,
 Of 'Langley Court' being kept beneath thy boughs
 I cannot tell—thus much I know is true,
 That thou art reverenc'd: even the rude clan
 Of lawless gipsies, driven from stage to stage,
 Pilfering the hedges of the husbandman,
 Spare thee, as sacred, in thy withering age.
 Both swains and gipsies seem to love thy name,
 Thy spot's a favourite with the sooty crew.

Langley Bush was on King Street, the Roman road (a branch of Ermine Street) which ran in a straight north-south line through the parish to the west of the village. Between the road and the village there was an old Roman quarry called Swordy Well, where Clare tended sheep and cows as a boy, played 'roly poly' on the gentle rise, and botanised when he grew up. On the far side of the road lay Cauper Green. 'I hope [that] is not spelt right, it is so ugly a word. Should it not be *Cooper* or *Cowper*?' asked his publisher. Clare preferred its rough grass to a trim lawn and relished both its wild flowers and its remnants of antiquity—old coins, even a skull and bones. He was fascinated by the relics of ancient times. They inspired him to meditate on time, on mortality and endurance. He was fully aware that *Remains* was a word used not only for archaeological ruins, but also for the posthumously published works of writers.

The gypsies were also associated with an isolated farmstead two miles from the village. 'Disinhabited and in ruins', it was known as the 'heath house'. His mother told him a local legend—at once grisly and funny—about its murderous history, which he turned into a poem. And he wrote evocatively of it in an autobiographical fragment:

I remember with what fearful steps I used to go up the old tottering stairs when I was a boy in the dinner hours at harvest

with other companions to examine the haunted ruins—the walls were riddled all over with names and dates of shepherds and herdsmen in their idle hours when they crept under its shelter from showers in summer and storms in winter and there were mysterious stainings on the old rotting floors which were said to be the blood of the murdered inhabitants—it was also the haunt of Gipseys and others who pulled up every thing of wood to burn till they left nothing but the walls—the wild cat used to hide and raise its kittens in the old roof, an animal that used to be common in our woods though rather scarce lately—and the owls used to get from the sun in its chimney and at the fall of evening used to make a horrid hissing noise that was often taken for the waking noise of the haunting spirits that made it a spot shunned desolate and dejected.

Dejected is one of Clare's many felicitous nonce-spellings, seeming to combine *neglected* with *dejected*. (As for the wild cat—now confined to the Highlands of Scotland—it is a reminder that Clare was surrounded by a more diverse variety of undomesticated animals than we are.)

The principal landmark to the east of the village, into the parish of Etton, was Woodcroft Castle, a mediaeval manor house with a moat and a circular tower. Clare held down a ploughing job there for a month while he was a teenager. 'It is a curious old place', he wrote,

and was made rather famous in the rebellion of Oliver Cromwell—some years back there was a curious old bow found in one of the chimneys and the vulgar notion was that it was the identical bow that belonged to Robin Hood so readily does that name associate itself in the imagination with such things and places. I had a coin of Cromwell's brought me last year by a neighbour, picked up in the neighbouring field, as large as a crown piece.

Clare told the story of Woodcroft Castle's Cromwellian fame in a 'tale' inserted within his long poem 'The Village Minstrel' (though excluded from the published text). During the Civil War, the house was occupied and defended by a royalist company under the captaincy of Michael Hudson, the King's chaplain. A parliamentary

force set out from Stamford, passed through Helpston ('ah Helpstone I ween / Thou ne'er knew a rebel before'), and attacked the stronghold. According to Clare's account, Hudson's men, outnumbered three to one, fought bravely to the last, but ended up being herded to the top of the tower and thrown into the moat. Hudson clung to the parapet, only to have his hand 'slashed off on the tower as he hung / and his body fell bleeding below'.

The locality had other Civil War associations: there had been a skirmish between parliamentary and royalist forces at Cauper Field, while Cromwell's widow was buried in Northborough churchyard (as Clare's widow would be). Clare's respect for nobility meant that he had no time for Cromwell and the regicides: he always wrote of the Civil War as a 'rebellion', the term used by those who opposed the parliamentary side.

He was equally indignant about the killing of the French king in the year of his birth. His autobiographical 'Sketches' end with a strong affirmation of his anti-revolutionary political creed:

I believe the reading a small pamphlet on the Murder of the French King many years ago with other inhuman butcheries cured me very early from thinking favourably of radicalism—the words 'revolution and reform' so much in fashion with sneering arch infidels thrills me with terror when ever I see them—there was a Robspiere, or something like that name, a most indefatigable butcher in the cause of the French levellers, and if the account of him be true, hell has never reeked juster revenge on a villain since it was first opened for their torture—may the foes of my country ever find their hopes blasted by disappointments and the silent prayers of the honest man to a power that governs with justice for their destruction meet always with success. That's the creed of my conscience—and I care for nobody else's.

It might be thought that Clare is asserting his political orthodoxy here in order to reassure his publisher that his work will always be safely free from sedition, but we should be wary of ascribing such an ulterior motive to him. He invariably made a point of saying what he

meant, straight from the heart. Indeed, his bluntness sometimes got him into trouble. He said to people's faces the same that he would say behind their backs. 'I was in earnest always or I was nothing . . . if I tried to dissemble my real opinion my innocence would break through and betray me, so I spoke as I thought.'

Should we therefore take him at his word when he says 'with the old dish that was served to my forefathers I am content'? He wrote a poem in praise of his native England, which began with a quotation of some patriotic lines from William Cowper:

England, with all thy faults, I love thee still—
My country! and while yet a nook is left,
Where English minds and manners may be found,
Shall be constrain'd to love thee.

On copying out his poem for his publisher, Clare joked, 'I think I shall stand a chance for the Laureat Vacancy next time it turns out!!!!' He had the instinctive conservatism and patriotism of the countryman.

His suspicion of the kind of innovation represented by Cromwell in the seventeenth century and the French Revolutionaries in his own time did not, however, mean that he was incapable of political indignation. But his political horizon had the same limits as his physical one. He raged at the injustices of local life. As we will see, he angered at least one of his patrons by publishing poetic lines about 'accursed wealth'; he accused enclosing landlords of tyranny; he spoke for the rights of the common people, the gypsies and even of the common itself (and of trees and badgers and birds). His recollection of Woodcroft Castle combines anti-Cromwellian sentiment with a warm-hearted allusion to Robin Hood. The point about Robin Hood is that he is a hero of the folk tradition. He outwits the Sheriff of Nottingham's 'lawless law' (Clare's term for enclosure). He robs from the rich to give to the poor. He inhabits the greenwood, which Clare always associates with freedom. And all along he is innately noble, an aristocrat in disguise. Anti-Cromwell but pro-Robin, Clare combined allegiance to the ancient rights of the English commoner with distaste for 'revolution and reform'. Among the political com-

mentators of his age, his position was much closer to that of William Cobbett, conservative-radical countryman, than that of William Hazlitt, liberal metropolitan apologist for both Cromwell and the French Revolution.

The historian E. P. Thompson has written of the paradox whereby the popular culture of the eighteenth century was simultaneously rebellious and traditional: 'The conservative culture of the plebs as often as not resists, in the name of custom, those economic rationalizations and innovations (such as enclosure, work-discipline, unregulated "free" markets in grain) which rulers, dealers or employers seek to impose.' Clare conforms to this model. That is why he was deferential to the local grandees—with their sense of *noblesse oblige*—but bitterly satirical towards the newly prosperous, socially aspirant farmers who benefited from the enclosure at the expense of the rights and customs of his own class.

As may be seen from Clare's use of the term *infidels* with respect to reformers, politics was intimately bound up with religion. And here too, Clare regarded himself as a traditionalist. The parish church of St Botolph and the octagonal fourteenth-century cross on the green were the symbolic centres of village life. There was an 'Independent' Non-conformist chapel in Helpston, though Primitive and United Methodist chapels were only built around the time of Clare's death. His brief flirtation with radical religion will be examined later, but his 'Sketches in the Life' includes a strong statement of religious orthodoxy: 'I reverence the church and do from my soul as much as any one curse the hand that's lifted to undermine its constitution—I never did like the runnings and racings after novelty in any thing . . . The "free will" of Ranters, "new light" of Methodists, and "Election Lottery" of Calvinism I always heard with disgust and considered their enthusiastic ravings little more intelligible or sensible than the bellowings of Bedlam.'

The tall spire of Glington Church, visible for miles across the flat landscape, is glimpsed in many of Clare's poems. It was an important landmark for him not because it pointed to Heaven, but because it pinpointed the location of fond recollections—of schooldays and

Richard Turnill and Mary Joyce. Though he professed himself an Anglican, Clare's attendance at church was most irregular. His deepest feelings of a religious kind were reserved for his experience of nature and his memories of childhood innocence and joy.