

## THE POET'S FAVOURITE PLACES

**Start and finish:** Helpston Blue Bell Inn /Bluebell, tel 01733 252394 or Exeter Arms, tel 01733 252483. Refreshments.

**Position:** about 6 ½ miles from Stamford and about 9 miles from Peterborough.

**Parking:** roadside in Helpston.

**Bus service:** hourly from Peterborough and Stamford.

**Distance:** 6 ½ miles.

**Time:** about 3 hours.

**OS Map:** 235 Explorer, 1:25,000.

## THE WALK

**1** Follow the public footpath opposite the Blue Bell. It starts as a track, bends round some buildings and then becomes a footpath between a field and a high hedge. Cross the footbridge and turn right alongside the ditch. Turn left at the hedge and almost immediately cross the stile. Continue on the other side of the hedge. A post marks the point where the path cuts diagonally across the corner of the field. It should be visible. If not, head for the cottage and cross the ditch by the footbridge.

**2** Turn right and continue through the farmyard and down the track to the end. The track at the T junction is known as Maxham's Green Road and, before the enclosure of the open fields at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was the most direct route from Helpston to Peterborough. By turning left you can extend the

walk by less than a mile to include Woodcroft Castle, but this would mean retracing your steps back to this point. If you prefer not to extend the walk, turn right and continue on to Maxham's Green Road and continue to the junction with Heath Road.

**3** Turn left and walk along Heath Road. The field on the left was the site of a Roman villa, which was investigated by John Clare and his friend, Edmund Artis. Oxe Wood, which is next on the left, was a frequent Sunday botanical destination.

**4** On the right side of Heath Road, there is a brideway and a footpath which start very close together. Take the footpath and then, before you reach Scotts Cottage and Marholm Road, cross one of the stiles on the right into Swaddywell Pit Nature Reserve. (Dogs on leads please.) Walk over the grass to the hard track and then follow it down into the pit. The main entrance to the Reserve is adjacent to the entrance to the stone yard on Marholm Road.

This is an example of conservation in action, thanks to the initiative of a few enthusiasts. Hopefully, in a few years' time it will be a place, which John Clare would recognise from his youth.

**5** Retrace your steps back on to Heath Road and this time follow the brideway. There are some attractive pools on the left with interesting plant and bird life. It is worth looking through gaps in the hedge to get a panoramic view of Swaddywell Pit. The big lumps of stone at the yard on the far right are not quarried locally. They are brought there for cutting and polishing.

**6** Turn right at King Street, known by John Clare as Roman Bank. Hilly Wood is on the left.

Turn right on to the Torpel Way footpath. Turn left on to the brideway, which follows the western edge of Rice Wood.

**7** Turn right along Broad Wheel Road until it meets Woodgate. Turn left up Woodgate, cross West Street and continue up Church Lane as far as the Exeter Arms.



## LOCAL INTEREST

### Woodcroft Castle

Unfortunately, the castle with towers and a moat and dating back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century, is hidden from view by trees much of the time. It was a Royalist stronghold during the English Civil War. John Clare described it as a "dreary looking building" but the owner, Mrs Bellairs, was a kind, good woman. He was employed there to "drive the plough" as a young man, but he only stayed a month because he did not like getting up so early in the morning or getting his feet wet every morning and evening when the moat overflowed.

On a visit with his young daughter many years later he admired the anemones and peonies in the garden and saw the swallows nesting under the bridges over the moat. Members of the Bellairs family contributed to the cost of John Clare's burial in 1864.

### Roman villa in the field north of Oxe Wood

John Clare visited it with "his friend Artis". He first met him in 1820 when he was looking for a sponsor for his poems and had been invited to Milton Hall but, in the absence of Earl Fitzwilliam, he was entertained by the senior servants, including the butler, Edmund Artis. He was a part-time archaeologist and John Clare helped with his archaeological digs. They unearthed a mosaic floor and Roman pottery at this site.

### Oxe Wood

John Clare found various rare plants there including orchids, "one-berry" (*Paris quadrifolia*) and ferns. He also used to go there to listen to bird song. It is now privately owned.



### John Clare and Helpston Heath

In his childhood Helpston, Ailsworth (Emmensales), Ufford, Southorpe and Wittering heaths were almost continuous, apart from small wooded areas and parts of the villagers' open fields. Locally "heath" was a level area of limestone, which was maintained as grassland by the grazing of the villagers' sheep and cattle. When John was 7 years old, because of family poverty, they could no longer afford to send him to the dame school in Helpston, and he went to look after the Helpston sheep and geese on the heath. After the Enclosure Act of 1809, the large open fields were divided into small fields, separated by hedges, and the village people lost the right to graze their animals on the heath and collect wood. Barriers were erected across the old footpaths. Many village people became paupers and a number of John Clare's poems reflect his anger over enclosures.

### King Street

The road linked the Roman town near Water Newton with Bourne and Lincoln. This section, which John Clare called Roman Bank, is on a slight embankment.

He used to find small yellow snails with a black base, which he called pootys there, as well as wild vervain and sweet rocket flowers.

### Hilly Wood

On one of his visits, John Clare found 5 kinds of fern in this wood. On another, he was accosted by one of Sir John Trollope's "meddlesome and consieted" gamekeepers and accused of being a poacher.

He was indignant because he had never shot even so much as a sparrow in his life.

This wood is still privately owned.

### Rice Wood

John Clare called it Royce Wood after the name of a local family, related to the car-designing family at Alwalton. This wood is unusual because it is open to the public.

In 1825 John Clare saw 3 men who were laying out the plan for an "Iron Railway" between Manchester and London. It would have crossed

Round Oak spring, a pond south west of the wood.



His concern was for the orchids, which grew in this boggy place. Fortunately the line was never built, but is interesting because it was 20 years before the main railway line north of the village was authorised.

**JOHN CLARE'S HELPSTON**

He once described Helpston as a "gloomy village in Northamptonshire", but another time said it was a "happy Eden".



**John Clare Memorial**

This was erected in 1869 and stands on the site of the village pond. When there were feast days in the village a greasy pole was laid over the pond and the young men would compete to cross it, the prize being a pig.

**John Clare's Cottage**

He was born there in 1793. Both parents were illiterate though his father could read a little. The family's first landlord charged them £2 a year rent, paid for by selling apples from a tree in the garden.

After his death, the new landlord put up the rent and the cottage was divided into four. The Clare family could afford only two rooms. The cottage is currently being restored thanks partly to a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund.

**Exeter Arms public house**

This was used as the village courthouse and there were bullock fairs in the yard.

After his death, John Clare's body was brought back by train from the asylum at Northampton and was stored there overnight before the burial.



**Manor of Clapham**

This was the home of a branch of the Belairs family in John Clare's time. The stone base of the gibbet from Langley Bush stands in the garden.



**One in a series of circular walks issued by Parishes in Barnack Ward**

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Printed by Chadwick Associates 01780 740893  
Supported by Peterborough City Council



**John Clare Country  
The Poet's Favourite Places**



John Clare's Cottage & The Blue Bell, Helpston

**One in a series of circular walks issued by Parishes in Barnack Ward**



**Blue Bell / Bluebell public house**

The landlord, Francis Gregory, knew the Clare family well as they were neighbours and John's father used to sing ballads there. Francis who was unmarried and lived with his mother, had about 6 acres of land and he hired John to work there for a year as potboy and to do the ploughing and look after the livestock. His mother used to send John to Maxey mill at least once a week to buy a bag of flour as it was cheaper than flour in the village.



**17 Woodgate**

John Clare knew it as "Bachelors' Hall", home of the Billings brothers, James and John. They shared an interest in books and he spent many convivial evenings with his friends, singing, drinking and telling witch and ghost stories. He described it as a "ruinous hut" and the thatched roof

was in need of repair. The house has since been renovated. The arch on the right may have originated at Torpel manor.

**St Botolph's Church and churchyard**



This church was in disrepair and the churchyard was overgrown when John Clare lived in Helpston. He was buried next to his parents in the churchyard in 1864.

**Market Cross**

This dates from the 14<sup>th</sup> century. It is unusual because of the heart shaped base.

**Savage's Barn**

In John Clare's time the farmer was a man named Savage and John's father used to work there as a flail thresher. A flail was an 18inch long piece of wood attached to a handle with a thong. The barn is unusual now as it still has a thatched roof.



**SWADDYWELL PIT NATURE RESERVE**

The name is said to have been derived from a sword found in a pool and John Clare called it Swordy Well. In Roman times it was a limestone quarry but by the 1800 the old workings had grassed over and as a young boy he played roly-poly down the slopes. Later on while watching the village livestock graze, he was entranced by the wild flowers such as pasque flowers and bee orchids, the butterflies and the birds. He grieved when it was ploughed and all this was lost.

Between 1915 and 1924 it was leased by the Society for the Promotion of Nature Reserves. It became one of the first nature reserves in the country, but again it was sold for quarrying. Then it became a waste dump for all kinds of rubbish including waste from the paper factory and canisters of herbicides. In the late 1990s it was a car race track and venue for raves. The land was acquired by the Langdyke Trust in 2003 and its members are striving to increase its wild life and community value. Due to the rock faces of limestone and estuarine sands it has been designated as a Regionally Important Geological Site.



Swaddlywell Pit

**Wildlife Habitats**

There are several different habitats, notably open water, reed beds, scrub and grassland and each of these provides food and shelter for many bird and insect species. There are numerous dragonflies in spring and summer, 14 species altogether. In spring there are large numbers of great crested newts in the ponds. Swallows and house martins are attracted by the insects over the water from their nesting sites in the villages. Flowers include pyramidal and bee orchids, field scabious, common centaury, yellow wort, wild carrot and marjoram.