John Clare

Edge of the Orison

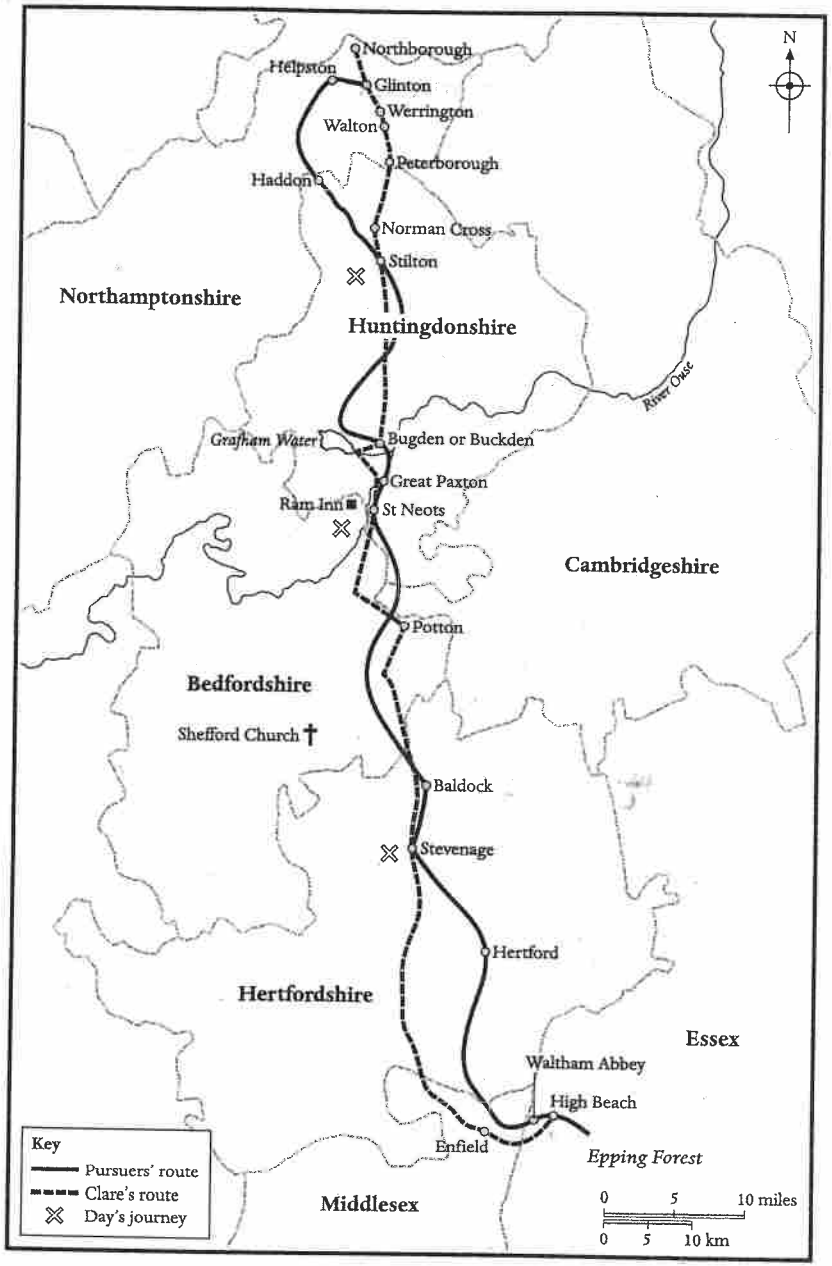
In the traces of John Clare's 'Journey out of Essex'

IAIN SINCLAIR

PENGUIN BOOKS

I had imagind that the worlds end was at the edge of the orison & that a days journey was able to find it so I went on with my heart full of hopes pleasures & discoverys expecting when I got to the brink of the world that I could look down like looking into a large pit & see into is secrets the same as I believd I could see heaven by looking into the water.

John Clare



Journeys out of Essex: John Clare (1841) his pursuers (2000)

FLYING

Helpston

The publican's face in Castor, it was just what we expected: ginger eyebrows, broken veins in ruddy cheeks, unsubstantiated grin. He leans over the slatted table, resting his weight on powerful arms, ice-blue shirt, sleeves rolled to the elbow. 'Sorry, gentlemen.'

No food, no kitchen: an eccentric request, in the middle of the day, off-highway in England. Can't be done, but – seeing as how we've walked here from London – we can take a pint, outside, before we move on. So long as it's not – tough luck, Chris – the black stuff. Guinness pump is down.

I like this yard with its limestone discriminations, ancient wall of trapped sunshine, yellow slabs underfoot. Tokenist dressing of wallflowers. I like the publican. You could transpose him, with a dirtier shirt, straight into the Clare story. Seen it, done most of it, heard some tales in his time (he's paid to listen). Want to walk from Epping Forest to Glinton, gents? Fine with me. Swim, against the tide, down the Nene to Wisbech? Takes all sorts. Put your coins on the table, drink up, and don't piss in the terracotta.

A Peterborough face recovered from Clare's walk, from his life. They don't migrate these natives, they've been hanging around the same eight-mile circuit, good rich ground, since the Middle Ages. Sometimes farmer, sometimes butcher, sometimes publican: the expression of the man who slides your money into his pocket never changes. Country fatalism. It's bad, gentlemen, but it could be worse. When Clare, thrown fivepence from the cart of Helpston neighbours, demanded 'two half pints of ale and twopenn'oth of bread and cheese', that was perfectly acceptable. His pennies were as good as any other man's. Three and a half days of road dirt, gravel rattling in the shoe, dried sweat, the odour of a runaway; these things can be ignored as long as your equity holds out. The

Castor publican who pocketed our change had a professionally disinterested way of not-listening to a tall tale: strong teeth, weather in his face. A man who has come across from his fields to concede the obligatory show of hospitality. For a consideration.

Without funds, Clare wouldn't approach a public house. He knew from experience what would happen. Crippled foot, darkness falling, 'very uncomfortable and wretched'. Towards evening, after a long day, he located the Ram, lights in the window, countrymen drinking: 'I had no money and did not like to go in . . . so I travelled on.'

Beyond Castor, it's a great road for walking (if the cars don't get you). A classic straight track (on the Roman model), shaded by poplars or solitary hawthorn bushes, diminishing into hazy distance, between yellow fields, clumps of woodland. Warm pinkness in the cambered surface along which we progress, the last men in England. Heat rising from tarmac, drugged flies.

Once you cross the A47 (four lanes, all empty), and acknowledge the torched car in the cornfield, you discover that commonplace traffic, the swinish rush of metal, is happening somewhere else (probably Peterborough). If we don't meet Clare on this stretch, we'll never find him. Shimmering afternoon country, the thirsty pints at Castor, encourages the shamanic sense, it's not an illusion, that Hardy describes in *Tess*; we are flying, hovering a few inches above the road's sticky surface. Being carried forward without physical effort. Tess and her companions, drink taken, return to their chicken farm:

> They followed the road with a sensation that they were soaring along in a supporting medium, possessed of original and profound thoughts, themselves and surrounding nature forming an organism of which all the parts harmoniously and joyously interpenetrated each other.

Chris deals with the burnt car, patterns of rust and scorch, gaping jaw. He comes as close to contentment as he ever will in this vale

of tears. He has noticed a chain of polished repmobiles, in puddles of cool shadow, spread at regular intervals along the road, between Castor and Helpston. A sleep-therapy zone: men in striped shirts and loosened ties, necks twisted, cheeks against glass, mouths agape. Electric windows buzzed down. Sandwich wraps, burger cartons, cigarette packets. Mobiles switched off. The zizz. The throb of cooling engines. Slurry-eros of liquid shit, wild flowers, honeyed air. An ecstatic escape from Peterborough and its crackskull motorway system. They smile in sleep. Within the pod of the complimentary motor, the boxes of stock, lightweight jackets on hangers, they lay their urgent spiels to rest. A phantom babble of soft sell, unrepeatable offers, like wind in electricity cables.

Petit has located a definitive image of Blair's England. A best-value use of countryside. Every drowsy copse an oasis, every shady space pre-booked. Clare's mistake was in not travelling this road; he laboured through Peterborough, aiming for the Beehive at Werrington. Then rode the last miles in a cart, a Tyburn tumbrel, in the company of a stranger, his wife. A woman who 'caught fast my hands & wished me to get into the cart but I refused & thought her either drunk or mad'.

Meadowsweet, cow parsley, hairy verges: our road dips and climbs, one of us strides ahead to the brow of the next moderate hill, the point where overreaching branches meet and mesh. The Clare we searched for was the Helpston child, coming towards us, on that mythic expedition to Emmonsales Heath. The heath skirted Castor Hanglands Woods – formerly, Castor Anglings Woods – which we were now passing. We stayed alert for John Clare's first steps in his willed disorientation.

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Searching for heaven, as Petit had done on the bridge over the Nene, is an initiation of gazing, losing yourself. Flowing water is a magician's hinge, the passage between worlds. John Clare's mother was absolutely right, book-learning is a kind of witchcraft, letters of the alphabet are instruments of intent. Like the coded language Clare noticed in the sky above flat fields. 'Wild geese scudding along and making all the letters of the Alphabet as they flew.'

The childhood walk to Emmonsales Heath, remembered, re-experienced as one of Clare's 'Autobiographical Fragments', was an announcement of difference, separation from the clods and clowns of Helpston.

I was finding new wonders every minute & was walking in a new world often wondering to my self that I had not found the end of the old one the sky still touchd the ground in the distance as usual & my childish wisdoms was puzzld in perplexitys

A sickness vocation: poetry. The poet's response to the privilege of place, the numinous road. To languages he would learn, of birds, snakes, foxes. Snail shells he would collect. Orchids. Difference was expressed as a fit, a throw of light: the way sorcerers feel each stage of their initiation as a physical blow, drowning in air, breathing in water, lifting from the ground. Elective epilepsy: plant-induced or resulting from trauma, a car crash, a street assault. The walker overwhelmed by the walk.

Edward Storey in his Clare biography, *The Right to Song*, describes 'fainting fits which [Clare] imagined owed their origin to the accident he had seen a few years earlier'. A man called Thomas Drake who 'fell off a load of hay and broke his neck'.

The accident happened in 1811, at harvest time. Clare was eighteen years old. Looking at something cold and empty, he knew the fear of being possessed by another man's spirit. Witnessing the chill of death. Light gone from the eyes.

The ghastly paleness of death struck such a terror on me that I could not forget for years & my dreams were constantly wanderings in churchyards digging graves seeing spirits in charnel houses etc etc In my fits I swooned away without a struggle . . . but I was always warned of their coming by a chillness & dithering that seemed to creep from ones toes ends till it got up to ones head when I turned senseless & fell Sparks of fire often flashed from my eyes

As a child, Clare solicited dramas that would bring about the necessary fracture in consciousness; make him a poet by default. He fell from a tree: 'I lay for a long time and knew nothing.' He slid into a gravel pit: 'I felt the water choke me and thunder in my ears.' A makeshift raft of bulrushes sank beneath his weight: 'I made shift to struggle to a shallow bush & catching hold of the branches I got out but how I did it I know not.'

Crossroads: Castor 3, Helpston 1¾. Barnack 4, Marholm 2. Puffball blisters cushion my tread, the cheapest form of inflatable trainer. Are we on time? I haven't looked at my watch in days: the pubs are all shut, we start walking as soon as it's light. I said to Anna, when she dropped us in Epping Forest, see you in Glinton at four o'clock on Thursday.

In response to a show he's seen at Tate Britain, a list of names painted on the wall, everyone the artist ever met, Petit amuses us by excavating celebrities of his own. He's fond of lists. And would write, if commissioners went for it, all his books that way. Favourite sounds from films: the whispering leaves of Maryon Park (*Blow-Up*), airport footsteps from *Point Blank*. Memorable meals. Much-loved cars. Coats, hairstyles, shoes, cigars. Recalling his time drifting around the Euro festivals as film critic (or film-maker), adventures as freelance essayist and thriller writer, Chris assembles an impressive (and ironically delivered) troop: the cocktail party from hell. Flesh pressed. Bottles shared.

J. G. Ballard. Warren Beatty. Robbie Coltrane. Richard Condon. Eddie Constantine. James Crumley: 'Montana man, drinker, very chippy.' Catherine Deneuve: 'Shared joke about *Repulsion*.' Ed

Dorn. Manny Farber. Fassbinder: 'Sat at the same table a couple of times, he was sweating in a heavy leather coat, wouldn't talk.' David Gascoyne. Annie Giradot. Lord Gowrie. Gloria Grahame. Monte Hellman: 'Played back a blank tape.' Werner Herzog. Patricia Highsmith. Bo Hopkins: 'Met him in a bar in LA, on his way to a wedding.' Geoffrey Household. Anna Karina. Harvey Keitel. Kraftwerk. Howard Marks. Lee Marvin: 'Interesting man, knew where he was, flat overlooking some stables.' Ed McBain. Michael Moorcock. Robert Mitchum. Jack Nicholson. Jack Palance. George Pelecanos. Donald Pleasence. Derek Raymond. Nic Roeg. James Sallis. Martin Scorsese. Andrew Sinclair. Steven Spielberg: 'Devouring a hamburger at ten in the morning.' Terence Stamp. Sting. Francis Stuart: 'That's right.' Donald Sutherland: 'Least actorly of actors, on his way to see Fellini.' François Truffaut. Christopher Walken: 'Strangest of them all by a country mile.' Wim Wenders. Donald Westlake: 'Can't see where those early books came from.' Billie Whitelaw. Shelley Winters. Rudy Wurlitzer.

Enough. The road is too crowded now, city noises, dry hum of air conditioning in generic hotel suites: Petit waiting for Scorsese

in the wrong room. Cold coffee, remains of breakfast on a tray. Ghosts weary of playing themselves. Writers caught on the hop, terrified of giving the game away. Francis Stuart, toothless, bulb-nosed, admitting to everything: Yeats, Joyce, Beckett. The particular sound of white tyres splashing through puddles outside a restaurant in Berlin. Great days being wiped, inch by inch, as he stares, with no sign of recognition, at a dull landscape, a wet road.

As we approached Helpston, coming out of the woods, we spotted our first vehicle: a police car with a red stripe, parked, waiting. To warn off the unwary. Clare left here four times for London, days, weeks, mere excursions, but his list of celebrities could trump Petit, quality if not quantity.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge: 'His words hung in their places at a quiet pace from a drawl in good set marching order, so that you would suppose he had learnt what he intended to say before he came.' Thomas De Quincey: 'Something of a child overgrown, in a blue coat and black neckerchief.' Charles Lamb. William Hazlitt: 'For the blood of me I could not find him out.' John Taylor (the publisher Clare shared with Keats). Henry Cary, Dante translator. J. H. Reynolds. Thomas Hood. Lord Radstock. Lord Milton. The Marquess of Exeter. Painters of the day: Peter de Wint, Rippingille, Sir Thomas Lawrence. Thomas Wainewright, forger and poisoner: 'A very comical sort of chap.' Scottish poet Allan Cunningham. And, unconfirmed, Alfred Tennyson (visitor to High Beach, Dr Allen's Epping Forest retreat). Plus those with whom he conversed in secret, the ones he would become in the asylum years: Lord Byron, Lord Nelson, Jack Randall the prizefighter. And Victoria's mother too, it must be assumed, when Clare announced himself the spiritual father of the young queen.

The poet's Helpston cottage is endlessly reproduced in engravings, postcards, watercolours, but it's not here. This whitewashed replica is an occupied home, a desirable property (convenient for Peterborough). The Clareness of the thing is an act of faith.

IN THIS COTTAGE JOHN CLARE
THE POET WAS BORN
JULY 13: 1793
THIS TABLET IS ERECTED BY THE
PETERBOROUGH MUSEUM SOCIETY
1921

What is it about dead poets, their huts and gravestones? What are we looking for? Sombre enthusiasts, joiners of literary societies, guided tourists: what do you want? The superstition of touch. Affection without responsibility. We dowse with slim pamphlets handed out by museums, special-interest maps. We've walked all these miles for a shrine we are barely capable of recording.

With his magnifying glass, Renchi examines the grain in the stone, the Clare plaque – and the face of the young man in the William Hilton portrait of 1820, reproduced on the cover of my paperback edition of the poems. Hilton's Clare is a PR cameo, a lollipop of delight. A noble peasant in autumn's country casuals. (Down the street is Helpston's Gothic memorial with its grudging quote: 'THE GRAVE ITS MORTAL DUST MAY KEEP.') What happened? This can't be the same person as the old gentleman with the high forehead and bushy eyebrows, the private patient photographed in Northampton General Lunatic Asylum. The post-card with its oversize facsimile signature. The madhouse worthy looks towards us with narrowed eyes. Hilton's young man, pink in his cheeks, ignores our impertinent curiosity. He stares, unblinking, at an imaginary window.

I braved London's bright new National Portrait Gallery to witness the original Hilton painting, proudly hung with other Romantics of the 'Late 18th and Early 19th' centuries: Keats, Shelley, Byron, stern Wordsworth, Coleridge. High-toned company. William Blake. Cockneys and mountain men. Poets of family, education, private means: with access (when required) to conversation, credit at the chemist's shop.

Portraiture is the harbinger of mortality: if you are willing to

be painted, you are willing to die. The Hilton Clare, full-lipped, fine-featured, has something of the contemporary poet Lee Harwood: clear eyes set on a horizon we can't bring into focus. Harwood's work, from whatever era, twenty years old to sixty, is youthful and optimistic: open. Darkness, at the point in Clare's career when Hilton caught him, stays in the background, bistre and lampblack. The artificial night of the studio. He's proud of the long coat (so green that it's brown), the high, soft collar and that astonishing necktie or cravat, a de Kooning spasm of yellow and green and gold. An oily river leaking from his throat.

The Hilton image, computer enhanced, is everywhere. A slice of it dresses Jonathan Bate's definitive biography. This is the Clare so many readers want to know, the country boy in town, on the cusp of fame. Helpston, once indifferent or antagonistic to the Clare project, now searches for ways to exploit the memory. Poet and village, so they think, are indivisible.

Combing the attic for family material, clues to her father's boasted connection to Clare, Anna found an envelope addressed in her mother's hand to '63 de Beauvoir Road'. This was our first experience of Hackney, a communal house on the west side of Kingsland Road. A mid-Victorian speculation with ambitions to infiltrate Islington. 'Special envelope – keep!' That was the extent of Mrs Hadman's message. The envelope was the point of the communication. It must have been 1968, the year before we took the fatal step and moved east, never to move again.

175TH ANNIVERSARY
OF BIRTH OF
JOHN CLARE
13 JULY 1988
HELPSTON PETERBOROUGH

The post office franking machine got the date wrong by twenty years. And offered, as compensation, a grey-on-grey version of the Hilton portrait, cropped and reversed: Clare spun deliriously,

defined by dates he didn't want cut into his memorial slab. My mother-in-law, for whatever reason, was in Helpston on the day, 13 July, of the Clare anniversary. She may have been visiting the family grave in Glinton.

As the Hilton portrait flatters our notion of what a poet should be, imperfections smoothed, so Clare's Helpston cottage has shaken off its menial status, its smoky, small-windowed darkness. It stands back from the road as an extended white block, hung with flower baskets like a Routier-recommended restaurant. Roses climb the walls. Additional bedrooms, eyelashes of a Dusty Springfield luxuriance, bulge from crisp thatch above twinkling glass. The milestone Clare fancied for his grave decorates a welcoming mat of close-cropped grass, set in a bed of gaudy, freshly watered busy Lizzies.

In his book, *Literary Britain*, originally published in 1951, the photographer Bill Brandt swooped on 'Clare's Birthplace'. The idea of this project was: characteristic scrap of verse on the left-hand page, place associated with poet on the right.

> But painful memory's banish'd thoughts in view
> Remind him, when 'twas young, what happy days he knew.

Punctuation and sentiment are over-refined: Brandt (secretive, self-inventing, perverse) contrives a theatrical composition to counter the upbeat message with Fenland gloom. Graded monochrome doctored in the darkroom. A creeping miasma of sullen harm. A low stone wall where the driveway now runs down the east side of the cottage. Absence of TV aerials and masts. No milestones set in flowerbeds, no winking bedroom windows in pristine thatch. The rear of the cottage, back then, suggested a turfcutter's shack. Clare remained in the limbo of libraries, his books carted off to Northampton, his snuffboxes to Peterborough. The shoes with the flapping soles were not yet holy relics.

Brandt's vision of literary England is: absence. Classical statuary in sombrous gardens, rocks in operatic slap, lowering clouds, effigies – scarcely a human figure in the entire collection. A water-reflected

stickman represents Parson Crabbe. (Clare mistrusted parsons. Crabbe, he reckoned, wrote about the peasantry 'as much like the Magistrate as the poet'.) England as a park from which poets have been permanently banished, leaving behind some very nasty weather and enough architectural salvage to fill a Hoxton builder's yard.

Morning mist over warming ground is typical of Huntingdonshire, Lincolnshire, Northampton: wretched conditions for airfields and motorways, a boon to photographers with a preordained vision. Brandt's suggestion is that the poet has just this moment stepped out. Clare, the peasant verse-maker, is never allowed to move beyond the Helpston perspective. The cottage looks on to a village green. The village is an island in a system of open fields, bordered on one side by low, wooded hills, the quarries of Barnack – and, on the other, by dark Fens, from which invaders, hobgoblins and Molly Gangs, will come.

In the afterburn of the Sixties, Clare's cottage was noticed by mid-Atlantic modernists: its potential as real estate was exposed. The poet Tom Raworth, acknowledged by his peers for his speed and sharpness of eye, had been packaged with the Clare lookalike, Lee Harwood. One of those three-poets-for-the-price-of-one Penguins. We all had the book, Liberal Studies would have collapsed without this convenient prompt. Harwood had contacts with the New York school (Ashbery, Koch) and Raworth was perpetually touring the States or signing in at some writers' punishment colony. Now, in the way of these things, the freelance life, he was at Essex University, outside Colchester. A friend and colleague of John Barrell, who published his Clare study, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place*, in 1972.

Raworth remembers Barrell investigating original Clare manuscripts, pouring over enclosure maps for Helpston. The poet Donald Davie's influence was still felt in Colchester (an active Essex/Cambridge nexus): Thomas Hardy, Pound, the landscape-architecture of poetry. Primary research was back in favour: examination of documents, land registers, meditations on painters and

paintings. Along with, in the case of the modernist poets, scavenging of cultural ephemera: Hollywood clips, vintage postcards, kids' crayon drawings, French dialogue overheard and misreported. The dominant theory, adopted from a reading of the Black Mountain poet Charles Olson, promoted 'open field' poetics. A system which sat nicely alongside Barrell's work on Helpston and enclosures. 'The eye, snatched to the horizon, roams,' Barrell said. Clare's work belonged in the closed system of traditional forms. When the circle of Helpston landscape, once open and common to all, was hedged and divided into a complex jigsaw, John Clare was one of the hedgers. He needed the work. The rest of his life would be a series of personal enclosures, from London drawing rooms to Epping Forest, to the imposed restrictions of the Northampton years.

Moving, Raworth's 1971 publication, opens with a quote from Clare (placed against a page of coloured Camel cigarette packets by Joe Brainard). Icons of mass production find themselves in the company of lines from a famously grim asylum poem by John Clare: 'I am'.

> Into the nothingness of scorn and noise,
> Into the living sea of waking dreams,
> Where there is neither sense of life or joys,
> But the vast shipwreck of my lifes esteems;
> Even the dearest that I love the best
> Are strange – nay, rather – stranger than the rest.

I'm not sure how many readers, at that time, picked up on Raworth's choice of epigraph; Jonathan Bate in his chapter on Clare as 'The Poet's Poet' doesn't find room for it. He traces an orthodox anthology of influence: Norman Gale, Arthur Symons, Edward Thomas, Edmund Blunden, Geoffrey Grigson, Robert Graves, Sidney Keyes, John Ashbery, Patrick Kavanagh, Tom Paulin, R. S. Thomas. Poets needing compensatory values in time of war, damaged rhymers and soil worshippers, thick in the tongue.

Raworth's 'HELPSTON £9,850. STONE BUILT RESIDENCE' takes an oblique, 'open field' approach. Snippet from

newspaper. John Barrell's eighteenth-century notion of 'view' acknowledged but found to be out of service: 'the view is again unapproachable'. The Helpston cottage has become an illustration in an estate agent's window. Clare's father trying to make the rent from the sale of apples, years of debt, fear of eviction, has now been translated into an aspirational lifestyle. Brandt's Gothic shipwreck, submerged in fog (but solid, rooted in melancholy), becomes a colour print, a development opportunity. A Victorian terraced house in Hackney, at the time of Raworth's quoted price, would sell for around £4,000. Large properties in squares approved by John Betjeman could be found for £7,000. And Helpston's once-spurned peasant cottage, with 'unapproachable' views, commands almost £10,000.

'The surface mysticism of the rich,' Raworth writes, 'which has eaten our country boys.' The functioning village, dependent on the benevolence of landowners, the patronage of parsons, the social ambitions of tenant farmers, has dissolved. Expensive properties and nobody at home. 'You change constantly/ a dog : a clown,' Raworth continues. 'Clown' being one of Clare's favourite ways of describing his neighbours, or indeed himself (when he ventured into polite company, mud of the fields on his boots). The clowns have ambled off into Fenland murk. The village is deserted. And betrayed. Clare is nostalgic about nostalgia, the old wound, the site from which he has been expelled – but where he still lives. Lost muse (two miles down the road in Glinton). Lost childhood (always present but out of reach). A cliff at the end of the world. The pit beyond the horizon out of which all evil things come.

Our weary trio, the latest cultural pirates, attempting to force meaning from the standing monuments of a future suburb, abandon the cottage and move away down the village street, Woodgate, past the Blue Bell (where young Clare worked and later drank), towards St Botolph's Church. We are conscious of trespassing in a heritage zone: the Clare memorial with its dates and anodyne verse, the Market Cross, the road out.

We try a little unconvinced sitting around on a bench under the

trees, celebrating the fact of our walk's conclusion, then we creak to our feet. There's a lovely passage towards Glinton spire, a post-enclosure road that wasn't there in the days of Clare's schooling. The old track meandered through the fields towards Etton. Nothing is resolved and not much has been learnt. The four-day walk, pushing us hard, has been one of the best. With luck, Anna will be waiting with the car. Otherwise, we'll have to carry on to Crowland, Boston. The wind at your back, there is nothing to stop you, this side of the North Sea.