John Clare is rightly thought to be a poet whose life and inspiration are inscribed within the landscape of his boyhood, a man who was disturbed by a small move of around two and a half miles from his native village of Helpston to Northborough, a man who later escaped from High Beech asylum in Epping to walk 100 miles to return to Helpston (John Clare: A Biography, Jonathan Bate, London, Picador, 2004, p457). Nevertheless a rail journey from York to Peterborough takes a traveller through countryside that resembles that of Helpston; flat, rich, agricultural land with few hills, countryside transformed by a series of social and cultural pressures extending from the Agricultural Revolution of the late eighteenth century to the mechanisation of agriculture that has intensified from the late nineteenth century to the present day.

This land is not a ‘landscape’ in the conventional use of the term. It has not attracted painters and writers looking for a nature untouched by man, instead it is the kind of man-created productive agricultural countryside praised by 18th century travellers such as Daniel Defoe and Celia Fiennes. It could be called a ‘workscape’ in so far as every feature has been artificially ordered to ensure maximum commercial return and allow the expanding cities of the 19th and 20th century to be fed. Consequently the landscape of almost any small village in the vast agricultural belt extending from the Vale of York to the county of Cambridgeshire around can be used to illustrate the transformations of the countryside Clare recorded. The ancient township of Heslington is typical of many, the main difference being that much of the township’s land has been diverted from agricultural to cultural exploitation as the two campuses of York University have caught the original village between them. However a walk southwards from the village explores agricultural land that shows many of the features Clare observed around Helpston and Northborough. In a Marxist perspective this material can be used to illustrate the relationship between economic base and cultural superstructure. Though the change in economic base was radical and permanent it has left little trace in the culture of either the labouring or owning classes. ‘Enclosure’ is not a theme to be encountered in traditional song or agrarian novel. Consequently it is clear that base determines the potential of the cultural superstructure; it does not govern how this potential will be realised. In a Romantic perspective this experience offers the modern reader the chance to walk into fields anywhere between the Vale of York and the hinterlands of Peterborough and bring Clare’s words to life by seeing the workscape through his eyes.

Editions Used.
A lot of Clare’s poetry appears online, for example at Poethunter, but not necessarily in versions that respect his wishes. For these pieces I have quoted from three modern editions that respect Clare’s spelling and minimal punctuation:

*John Clare: Northborough Sonnets*, ed. Eric Robinson, David Powell, and P.M.S. Dawson, Manchester, Carcanet press, 1995. {The best collection of Clare’s least compromised poetry}


{A good selection of many of Clare’s most powerful poems, sub-divided into useful categories.}


{A useful selection of Clare’s prose and poetry with attractive illustrations.}


{Contains the material Clare collected from traditional singers and players and pieces Clare composed in a similar idiom.}

None of these editions give line-numbers, so page numbers are used in subsequent references.
Dickson’s Tillmire: Prairie Field. Note the absence of ‘sublime’, ‘picturesque’ or ‘romantic’ features.

The so-called ‘prairie field’ is the typical construction of modern agri-business. Where the enlarged fields of Enclosure were of an optimum size to be worked by intense labour and horse or ox powered machinery, the super-large fields of the late twentieth century have removed sub-dividing hedges to allow tractors and combine-harvesters maximum room to manoeuvre and maximum space in which to plant mono-cultural crops.

**Poetry, Politics and Patronisation**

Though one of Clare’s aristocratic backers Lord Radstock complained of the ‘radical Slang’ of Clare’s attitude to enclosures (Bate, p219), Clare’s political outlook lacks an ideology, caught between the old millennial radicalism that was based on a revolutionary interpretation of the Bible and the new varieties of socialism that dominated 19th century working class political movements. E. P. Thompson shows Blake to be one of the last thinkers to keep alive the political strand of Antinomian resistance to authority that had inspired radicals of the British Civil War (*Witness against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law*, Cambridge, Cambridge University press, 1994), whereas Clare’s German contemporary Heinrich Heine was recognised by
Marx as a kindred spirit. Whether Clare’s work would have developed a more revolutionary tone if he had worked with working class organisations, such as the Chartists, as his near-contemporary Ernest Jones did, is a moot point. Marx and Engels acclaimed Jones as the most powerful poet whose work reached the working class; Jones ‘Song of the Low’ circulated sung to the popular tune of ‘My Old Friend John’ (The Penguin Book of Socialist Verse, ed. Alan Bold, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1970, p520). Though Clare shared the spoken and written dialect of Northamptonshire rural labourers, they were not his intended audience; Bate discusses the difficulties he had being appreciated by his parents or friends (pps 90-92). It was only through the patronage of the local aristocracy that his work reached a poetry-reading subculture amongst the educated classes. He was marketed as ‘The Peasant Poet from Northampton’ but his dialect and grammar was ‘corrected’ by patrons who patronised him in both a positive and a negative sense. The result was that Clare was culturally alienated from his fellow labourers without being securely integrated within the economic and political framework of his patrons. Unlike Stephen Duck, the ‘peasant poet’ of the 18th century, who experienced royal patronage followed by a job as a chaplain, Clare had no career apart from his poetry, which fell out of fashion after his first two volumes. He was eventually confined to a lunatic asylum, suffering from depression, delusions and multiple personality. The outcome of the multiple alienations he experienced is explored by his asylum poem ‘I Am’:

I am – yet what I am, none cares or knows

(Robinson/Summerfield, p195)

Nevertheless his is one of the most powerful voices to be raised on the human cost of enclosure and the extent to which the landscape of eastern England is formed by labour, not nature; indeed he anticipates modern ecologists by pointing out how human needs displace the needs of native fauna and flora.

Poetry and Labour

Clare’s poetic response to the workscape is consistent in its awareness of the effect of the seasons on the land and of the constant labour necessary to establish and maintain the output of the land. His response is dominated by a mythology of fall. Personally this is expressed by nostalgia for the unclouded vision of a child: ‘there is nothing but poetry about the existence of childhood’ (Robinson/Summerfield, p18); socially this is expressed by an awareness of the effects of what he calls ‘Inclosure’, which is more generally called ‘Enclosure’. Put simply the ‘Enclosure’ movement, gaining momentum from the Early Modern period to the nineteenth century, enclosed and turned over to private use that land traditionally designated as ‘Commons’, land that had been used for communal agriculture, mostly the feeding of beasts. Like Clare, Marx’s Capital
Volume 1 sees the event as being the most significant and irreversible change inflicted upon the feudal remnants of England especially the anachronistic categories of ‘peasantry’, ‘yeomanry’ or ‘freeholders’ and Capital responds with forceful scorn: ‘The philanthropic English economists, such as Mill, Rogers, Goldwin, Smith, Fawcett, etc., and liberal manufacturers like John Bright and Co., ask English landed proprietors, as God asked Cain about Abel, “Where are our thousands of freeholders gone?” But where do you come from, then? From the destruction of those freeholders.’ (Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1, Intr. Ernest Mandel, Trns. Ben Fowkes, London, Penguin, 1990 [1867] p913)

Clare could express himself with equally anger: ‘Inclosure like a Bonaparte let not a thing remain’ (‘Remembrances’ Robinson/Summerfield, p175) but he knew that this was not the language that would be easily accepted by his patrons and reviewers. By 1835 Clare had learned what his readers wanted. His collection *The Rural Muse* was designed to be a best seller, presenting the English landscape through the mask of Arcadia. The hardships of rural life were concealed by Neo-classical tropes of ‘harps’ and ‘swains’. Simultaneously he was writing a collection of sonnets, often unconventional in rhyme scheme, which used dialect words and direct observations to replace the Georgic conventions that dominated the ‘cultured’ view of agriculture. At the time both projects failed. *The Rural Muse* was sympathetically reviewed but did not sell well and the sonnets were unpublished during Clare’s lifetime, being collected and published as *The Northborough Sonnets*, by Eric Robinson, David Powell and P.M.S. Dawson in 1995. It is no coincidence that it is the least commercial of Clare’s work that will be quoted most frequently in these pieces.

*Autumn*

*Passages from Feudalism to Capitalism; Heslington Village.*

Precisely because the Victorian era was moving from being a society of rank to a society of class, so vestiges of aristocratic power and feudal dependence were idolised. As Marx pointed out, the dominant social organisation of the 19th century was determined by money that had divided society into classes of shared economic power and interest not inflexible ranks of positions dependent on birth. The primary school in Heslington has nostalgia for feudalism, patronage and rank literally built into its fabric. The school is called ‘Lord Deramore’s’:
Heslington Village: Lord Deramore’s Primary School

It is built in a picturesque ‘Olde Englishe’ style, with mock-Tudor chimneys, a spire/belfry, pointed gables and has its sponsor’s coat of arms embedded in the wall:
The implicit message is literally spelled out in another tablet:
Clare certainly realised that the education of his class was a privilege not a right. His autobiographical fragments record his desperation to learn to read and write and his gratitude for any reading matter than came his way: ‘I savd all the pence I got to buy them [6d Pamphlets]’ (Robinson/Summerfield, p100).

Heslington is not an estate village, built in a uniform style by a landowner, like the villages of Sledmere (see http://www.cave-kids.com/hist_data/sledmere.htm) and Harewood (see http://www.flickr.com/photos/jcw1967/sets/72157627503287406/detail/) but it is sufficiently tucked away from the front of Heslington Hall to suggest it was encouraged to grow up out of sight of the hall itself. The view from the front of the hall is of ‘natural’ field and heavily Victorianised church:
Any villager walking into town along Heslington Road would pass between the Hall and the church, being reminded of what governed the village’s material and spiritual life. Though the surviving cottages of Heslington look prosperous and may have been kept up to a high standard by the benevolence of Heslington Hall, frequently such dwellings were crowded and insanitary.
**Heslington: cottages, south end of the village.**

By analogy with Harewood these cottages might have housed two families, one upstairs and one downstairs, making about 14 people in all, depending on an earth-closet in the back yard for sanitation. Their waste, known as ‘night soil’, would be spread on the village fields to intensify their fertility. York’s Castle Museum contains a loving reproduction of an earth-closet, though not of its stench.

The mediaeval fields of Heslington would have been thin strips, known as ‘rig and furrow’, ploughed by oxen. They can still be seen adding a few hazards to the university end of Fulford Golf course:
Fulford Golf Course: rig and furrow near Clubhouse. The trees are taking on autumn colours.

The field strips are seen clearly here as wave-like humps, smoothed out by years of erosion and, probably, later ploughing.

The medieval landscape would have been dominated by the manor houses of the feudal land-owners to whom the peasantry owed labour service. Langwith Lodge is a Victorian farm built on an old site inside a medieval moat. These moats may have provided some defence against robbers but their main function might have been to imitate the prestigious castles of the gentry.
Langwith Lodge: its moat still contains water.

South along Out Gang: An Enclosure Landscape

Walking along Out Gang, to Heslington Tillmire (Common) explores a landscape that shows the typical features of enclosure. Out Gang runs in a straight line between geometrically regularised fields to provide a direct way between Heslington and the newly enclosed fields of 1762. Enclosure continued throughout the nineteenth century along with improved drainage. (see http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=23008)
Out Gang: Surface

Out Gang has been reinforced from time to time to cope with increasingly heavy carts and machinery. This part of the track uses wooden beams laid down in a corduroy fashion.
The low-lying flatlands of the Vale of York, like the lands around Helpston, need to be drained to allow crops to grow. Ditches like this would have originally been hand-dug
and keeping them clear and free of silt was one of the hardest tasks that faced rural
labourers. According to Clare they are attractive sites from village children but his
sonnet ‘The Old Dyke full of Flags [iris plants]’ points out an unexpected use of such
features:

The cowboy goes & dabbles in the shade
& pulls his shoes & stockings off to wade
& hiding in the land where no one sees
Goes there to sit & eat his stolen peas

(Robinson/Powell/Dawson, p35)

Clare’s landscape is not the deserted fellscape favoured by Wordsworth but a heavily
peopled countryside where owners and their representatives constantly police their
rights. At a time when woods were guarded against poachers with spring-guns and
mantraps, a dyke might be the safest place to find privacy in a landscape of private
ownership and restricted access. The site
http://library.la84.org/SportsLibrary/Outing/Volume_41/outLXI06/outLXI06n.pdf contains an
illustrated article with pictures of mantraps and spring-guns, many being Yorkshire
examples.

Clare went poaching once but his companion’s gun exploded and he did not try again
(Bate, p99). However, as he realised, even being mistaken for a poacher could be
dangerous: ‘in one of these rambles I was in a narrow escape of being taken up as a
poacher’ (Bate, p109). Conviction for poaching between 1788 and 1857 could have led
to transportation to some part of Australia. [http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/candp/punishment/g09/g09cs1.htm]

concentrates on Queensland, where transportation continued until 1867, and gives some
idea of how many people were shipped out. It is the theme of many traditional songs,
circulating in the 19th century, many of which survived into the 20th century, for
example in the singing of Walter Pardon of Knapton, Norfolk
[http://www.eatmt.org.uk/walter_pardon.htm]. The songs Pardon kept alive include
‘The Poacher’s Fate’, where poachers get released from prison and ‘Van Diemen’s
Land’ where they are transported. Clare’s own collection of traditional songs does not
include any poaching songs but, as George Deacon points out, Clare incorporates lines
of a poaching song in one of his own poems (p59).
Langwith Stray: Dyke dredging

What had originally been a long, arduous job for labourers is now accomplished by machine.
The dykes of the south part of Heslington Township are deep and straight, fitting into the landscape of enclosure that enclosed the small strips of medieval farming and turned them into large, regular fields.

Out Gang: Rectangular Enclosure field

To demark these fields, quick-growing hedges were planted. The chosen plant was hawthorn, rendered as ‘awthorn’ in Clare’s dialect:

Oer common fields the journey lay

& awthorn hedges all the way

(Robinson/Powell/Dawson, p50)

Hawthorns are actually small trees that need annual trimming to be maintained at hedge-height. The work of planting and maintaining would originally have been of high-intensity, as Clare’s ‘The Woodman’ shows:

Now evening comes and from the new laid hedge
The woodman rustles in his leathern guise

(Robinson/Summerfield, p105)

The leather protects him from the thorns of the hedge. The anti-Arcadian nature of this landscape is emphasised by the worker having to hide his tools from thieves:

Hiding in dyke ylined with brustling [bustling] sedge

His bill and mattock from theft’s meddling eyes

(Robinson/Summerfield, p105)

This landscape is not filled with classical shepherds and nymphs flirting with each other but with work and want. Nonetheless the hedger is not dehumanised:

And in his wallet storing many a pledge

Of flowers and boughs from early sprouting trees

And painted pootys [snails] from the ivied hedge

About its mossy roots his boys to please

(Robinson/Summerfield, p105)
Langwith Lodge: Oak tree and machine-trimmed hedge

Trimming is now done by machine but in Clare’s day the hedger would have been one of the busiest workers. Clare’s sonnet ‘The Hedger Burning Hot’ shows hedgers as
being constantly at work, warmed by their labours on days that made bystanders shiver:

    The hedger burning hot when passers bye
    Knock their numbed hands agen their sides for cold
    Brustles the bushes down & sings for joy
    & looks up but to laugh to hear it told
    How cold the day – the heat of his employ
    Makes winter summer.

(Robinson/Powell/Dawson, p11)

Fulford Golf Course: Birch copse

The natural tree-cover of the sandy and damp soils of Heslington would probably be birch forest. This has been replaced by stands of timber that provide more cover for game birds or quick-growing conifers for commercial logging.
Dickson’s Tillmire with Whin Covert, Cooper’s Plantation and Keys Plantation on skyline

These plantation woods provide cover for game-birds to nest and grow and a windbreak to protect the soil from being blown away in a landscape that is not sheltered by hills. In some moods Clare found the vast skies that dominate flat enclosure lands oppressive: ‘Decay’:

The sky hangs oer a broken dream

(Robinson/Summerfield, 183)
The difference between planned and spontaneous woodland is seen at Gipsey Corner. A tangle of assorted species, including hawthorn, birch and willow, are growing where they can on the edge of a planned wood. ‘Autumn’ celebrates:

Every bough
Burns with thy mellow touch
Disorderly divine

(Robinson/Summerfield, p137)

Commercial utility, rather than disorderly divinity characterises the conifer woods that have been grown for profit since WWI.
Grimston Wood: Planned, commercial woodland, Gipsey Corner.

Foresting has felled the trees in the foreground. New saplings have been planted in the middle distance but the foreground is dominated by quick-growing ferns and Himalayan Balsam. This is not a wild flower Clare mentions because it escaped from late Victorian gardens to become a threat to local flowers sometime in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

The name ‘Gipsey Corner’ and ‘Gipsey Wood Farm’ probably records that this was a regular camping spot for travellers engaged in seasonal labour.
Clare was free of the prejudice many held about gipsies. He was taught fiddling by gipsy fiddlers ‘I usd to spend my sundays & summer evenings amongst them learning to play the fiddle in their manner by ear’ (quoted Deacon, p27) and seriously considered leaving his village and becoming a traveller (Deacon, p301/Bate, p97). It was with the slightly unreliable help of gipsies that he left High Beech and set off back to Helpston (Bate, Chapter 20). Nevertheless he refused to romanticise gipsy life:

‘The Gipsy Camp’

The Gipsy knocks his hands and tucks them up,
And seeks his squalid camp, half hid in snow….
The stinking mutton roasts upon the coals,

The last line jolts expectation with each word:

‘A quiet, pilfering, unprotected race.
(Summerfield, p212)

‘Quiet’ suggests ‘causing no trouble’, whereas ‘pilfering’ confirms suspicions that gipsies are thieves, yet the word ‘unprotected’ shows them as a people living beyond the shelter of society, exposed to nature and social hostility.
**Heslington Tillmire: Looking north towards the trees of Fulford Golf course**

Heslington Tillmire is the remains of common land attached to Heslington township. The land called Heslington Common is now part of Fulford golf course, starting at the treeline in the photograph. Though the Tillmire was enclosed in 1760, it has escaped ploughing over the years and is now a Site of Special Scientific Interest, where birds loved by Clare, including lapwings, snipe and larks, nest. [see http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/domesday/dblock/GB-460000-447000/page/13].

‘The Sky Lark’

The skylark flies

And o’er her half-formed nest with happy wings

Winnows the air – Till in the cloud she sings

*(Summerfield, p104)*

‘The Pewit’s [lapwing] Nest’

The Pewet whirred in many whewing [rushing] rings
And ‘chewsit’ screamed and clapped her flapping wings

(Summerfield, p106)

‘To the Snipe’
Lover of swamps
The quagmire overgrown
With hassock tufts of sedge – where fear encamps
Around thy home alone
(Summerfield, p111)

Characteristically Clare shows their vulnerability to man, most clearly in the last quotation.

Heslington Tilmire gives some idea of what the undeveloped commons praised by Clare in poems like ‘Emmonsales Heath’ would have been like:

Grasses that never knew a scythe
Waves all the summer long
And wild weed blossoms waken blythe
That ploughshares never wrong
Stern industry with stubborn toil
And wants unsatisfied
Still leaves untouched thy maiden soil
In its unsullied pride
(Summerfield, p83)

Though Clare finds the Heath a place where he can experience ‘solitude’, most commons were well used by villagers. ‘Remembrances’ talks of the uses made of Langley Bush:

When beneath the old lea close oak I the bottom branches broke
To make our harvest cart like so many working folk

(Robinson/Summerfield, p174)

Most frequently this land was used to graze animals:

‘The Mores’

Cows went and came with evening morn and night

To the wild pasture as their common right

And sheep unfolded with the rising sun

Heard the swains shout and felt their freedom won

(Robinson/Summerfield, p170)
One of the deep dykes used to drain Heslington Tillmire (left) and Dickson’s Tillmire (right)
Walmgate Stray, the open land to the west of campus, is still used for grazing cattle and sheep:

Walmgate Stray: Sheep grazing. This is Freeman’s land, belonging to the Freemen of York; though public access is allowed, public grazing is not.