Spring came late in 2013. One of the first signs is blossom. The hedges of enclosure landscapes often contain some blackthorn, along with the hawthorn. Blackthorn blossom precedes its leaves and blooms before hawthorn.

Langwith Stray: Hedge with blackthorn blossom

Clare’s sonnet ‘Young Lambs’ mentions blackthorn but the main signs of coming spring are the new work it entails:

The spring is coming by many signs

The trays [hurdles, temporary fences] are up the hedges broken down

That fenced the haystack & the remnant shines

Like some old antique fragment weathered brown
The blackthorn occurs casually in line 8: ‘The edges of the blackthorn clumps’ (Robinson/Powell/Dawson, p9).

**White House Farm**

At White House Farm a pink cherry tree on the left grows above a large agri-business ‘prairie’ field, cleared of hedges to make it easier to plough by machine. In Clare’s day ploughing would have been carried out by horse or ox and ploughmen:

‘Here morning in the ploughman’s songs’

Here morning in the ploughman’s songs are met

Ere yet one footstep shows in all the sky

& twilight in the east a doubt as yet

(Robinson/Powell/Dawson, p12)

Typically the actual footsteps of a labouring man precede the metaphorical footsteps of the sun in the sky as the link between labour and light is foregrounded.
Apple trees and cherry trees are frequently part of field boundaries.

White House Far: Apple blossom and dyke

In poetic tradition spring is unequivocal; it is the time of new fertility and love. For labourers the season is a more mixed blessing. There is more light so there are more hours for work and fewer for leisure or love, but plants valued for their taste or medicinal value start to grow again after winter. Clare’s poems refer to constant hunger amongst the boys he describes.

In the autumn poem ‘The Hedgerow Fruit in Plenty’, the boys are shown competing with birds:

    In clambering for the crabs [crab-apples] the trashy taste
    Of boys leaves nothing for the birds to waste

    (Robinson/Powell/Dawson, p6)

    ‘Tis Pleasant on a Sunday Path’

    He eats the pethy nuts & gets the sloes
The gipsies are even more desperate for food and will eat hedgehogs:

‘The Gipsies Seeking Sheltering Woods’

The roasted hedgehog bitter though as gall

Is eaten up & relished by them all

Orwell reinforces the point. In 1939’s *Coming up for Air* the least ideal aspect of the hero George Bowling’s Edwardian childhood is the boys’ relentless need for food. Apple blossoms are beautiful enough but their fruit will not form for another three months or thereabouts but hawthorn leaves are starting The depth of rural hunger may be gauged by the nickname hawthorn leaves carried: ‘bread and cheese’. Try eating a couple of hawthorn leaves and you realise how desperate the hunger must have been that found any taste or nutrition in the experience.

Other unprepossessing plants offered more solid benefits.
Grimston Wood: Nettles and Jack-by-the-Hedge beside the track

Nettles can be made into soup and were a frequent resource of hard-up families. The more practical names of ‘Jack-by-the-Hedge’ include ‘Garlic Mustard’ and ‘Poor

Despite their nostalgia for boyhood, both Clare and Bowling recognise the casual cruelty of boys. Both describe boys who are keen on taking birds’ eggs and often killing fledglings:

‘The Schoolboys in the Morning’
Heres eggs they hollowed with a hearty shout
Small & round & blotched they reached & tore them out

*(Robinson/Eowll/Dawson, p24)*

‘The Develing Black as Coal’
Yet boys will dare where danger cannot rest
& walk upon the slates & get the nest

*(Robinson/Powell/Dawson, p36)*

‘The Partridge makes no Nest’
The boys will often throw the eggs abroad
& stay & play at blind egg on the road

*(Robinson/Powell/Dawson, p44)*

As adults they may take part in sports now banned in Britain, such as badger baiting:

Till kicked & torn & beaten out he lies
& leaves his hold & cackles groans & dies

*(‘The Frightened Women take the Boys Away’ Robinson/Powell/Dawson, p28)*

Clare is unusual for his day in deploring the casual cruelty shown to animals, though he realises the excitement this provides amidst dull and constrained lives:
& bait him all day with many dogs
& laugh & shout & fright the scampering hogs

(‘When Midnight comes a Host’ Robinson/Powell/Dawson, p27)

After all, at adulthood the rural labourer is given the life of an automaton with no function but to work. ‘With Hand in Waistcoat’ is Clare’s most pessimistic depiction of the dehumanisation that results:

He nothing wants to know and nothing knows
& wearys life along with little joy …

Hard labour is the all his life employed
His idlest leisure is to be employed

(Robinson/Powell/Dawson, p74)

Elsewhere Clare can be more optimistic. His labourers often sing whilst working:

‘The Ploughman hurries up by Crow of Cock’
The singing ploughman earnest laughs and talks

(Robinson/Powell/Dawson, p53),

and Clare was keen to collect the songs and tunes that circulated as a sub-culture amongst the rural labourers. These often show an appreciation of the beauties of nature, usually as the setting for a love song. A significant example is the one Clare entitled ‘taken from my father’s singing’:

The winter it is past
& the summers come at last
& the birds sing on every tree

(Deacon, p120)

Though Clare did not collect a version, one of the most widespread traditional love songs of the late 18th – early 19th century is ‘The Banks of Sweet Primroses’, where an encounter of lovers takes place in a spring setting like the one pictured below:

As I walked out one midsummer’s morning
For to view the fields and to take the air,
It was down by the banks of the sweet primroses
There I beheld a most lovely fair [maid].

(A Song for every Season, Bob Copper, St Albans, Paladin 1975, p218)

Grimston Wood: Bank of primroses on the slopes of the boundary dyke
Grimston Wood: Primroses beside the track

Clare’s ‘Open Winter’ celebrates

    Sheltered spots – primroses when they get
    Behind the woods old roots where ivy shields
    Their crimped curdled leaves will shine and hide

(Robinson/Powell/Dawson p15)

At Gipsey Corner the process known as ‘greening’ can be observed:
‘Greening’ simply means the growing of new foliage. As the photograph shows the small trees start first. In a normal season small trees start to acquire leaves mid-April in the Vale of York and the larger trees follow by the end of April. In the small trees of Gipsey Corner greening is well underway for the trees in this picture and almost complete for the ones in the second picture:
By contrast an oak tree close to Grimston Wood is still in its catkin (flower) and young leaf stage.
Clare’s sonnet ‘Wood Pictures in Spring’ laments that he is not an artist:

My heart aches for the dower
The pencil gives to soften and infuse
This brown luxuriance of unfolding hues

The ‘brown luxuriance’ imagines a painting that followed the advice of the connoisseur Sir George Beaumont; a landscape should have the dusky tones of ‘an old Cremona violin’. Even in the 1840s the artist Frederick R. Lee was criticised for ‘making his landscape too green’ [http://www.markmitchellpaintings.com/frederick-r-lee-1798-1879-river-landscape-2/]. By the end of the poem Clare is recognising two factors that challenge Beaumont’s ideal:

- The sunshine threading through these broken rails
  In mellow shades – no pencil eer conveys
  And mind alone feels fancies and pourtrays

  (Robinson/Summerfield, p127)
The first is that brown is not the natural hue of spring woods; Constable was making the same point in the 1820s, when he placed a violin on Beaumont’s green lawn. (Constable: The Painter and his Landscape, Michael Rosenthal, London, Yale University Press, 1983, p175). The second is that a living landscape is constantly changing and the ‘pencil’, whether writing poems or drawing sketches, will be left behind. Once more Constable provides an analogy through his swift sketches of landscapes, particularly of changing clouds. http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/c/constables-oil-sketches/

Bluebells grow from bulbs to colonise shaded spots in woodlands and verges. Britain has up to 50% of the world’s bluebells. http://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/en/our-woods/visiting/best-woods-for/pages/bluebells.aspx#.UhXayhushbw. The native flower, which can be recognised, once fully grown, by its bowed head, is being threatened by the upright Spanish bluebell; imported as a garden flower it has spread into the wild and can form a hybrid with the native species or displace them.
Grimston Wood, Track: Crosswort (small, greenish-yellow flowers close to the stem) and opening bluebells. Their heads are just starting to lean over.

In damp areas, such as the drainage dykes of Walmgate Stray, cuckoo flower appears.
Walmgate Stray: Cuckoo Flower growing in a drainage ditch

Like the cuckoo the flower’s appearance foretells summer. The flowers are white or mauve and can be added to salads; some authorities say the leaves can be eaten as well (Field Guide to the Wild Flowers of Britain, p.57). They are also known as ‘Lady’s Smock’ and ‘Milkmaids’. Clare mentions them in ‘Poesy a Maying’

There children too have pleasures all their own

A plucking lady smocks among the meadow

The little brook sings loud among the pebbles

(Robinson/ Summerfield, p128)

It is a convincing and realistic depiction of innocence but, as Clare’s oeuvre shows, this is only one aspect of country childhood and can only take place whilst the children are too young to work or when they are not working. Despite 19th century Romantic idealisations of childhood innocence and females as domestic angels, the women and children of rural labourers were called on to work the land. As Mary Collier’s bitter poem of 1739 ‘The Woman’s Labour: an Epistle to Mr Stephen Duck’ points out, frequently women will work all day on the harvest and then have to catch up with the domestic labour of feeding the family and cleaning the house.

http://www.usask.ca/english/barbauld/related_texts/collier.html
Duck had aroused Collier’s anger by depicting women as mere chatterers idling round the work-fields but Clare appreciates the variety of work performed by rural women. He celebrates the domestic skills of home-makers:

‘The cake turned oft’

The cake turned oft till both sides brown – awaits

The supper hour as some are out till late

(Robinson/Powell/Dawson, p15)

He glimpses those who work as servants:

‘Tis Pleasant on a Sunday Path to Talk’

Tis pleasant on a sunday path to talk

& see the many that go out to walk

The servant maids in their best gowns go bye

& young & beautiful to every eye

(Robinson/Powell/Dawson, p18)

Women’s work is never described in a derogatory fashion; it is accepted as part of the workscape:

‘Close where the Milking Maidens pass’

Close where the milking maidens pass

In roots and twitches drest

Within a little bunch of grass

A ground lark made her nest

The maiden touched her with her gown

& often frit her out

& looked & set her bucket down

But never found it out

(Robinson/Powell/Dawson, p32)
The distinction Clare makes is between the eye of leisure that has the time to look for larks and the eye of work that cannot afford to be distracted for long.