

John Clare Countryside



Our joint vision for a heritage landscape with nature at its heart

Summer 2026 Update

It's been a busy time in the John Clare Countryside with new publications launched, large areas of woodland planted, nature reserves expanded and information trails opened.

The project's new brochure was launched in the Knight's Chamber, Peterborough on 5 February 2026, with a full house representing local communities, organisations and public bodies. Both local MPs joined us, alongside Mayor of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, Paul Bristow and Leader of Peterborough City Council, Shabina Qayyum. With Tony Juniper, Chair of Natural England, they all spoke passionately about the opportunity the JCC offers to Peterborough and the surrounding area – in terms of nature recovery, climate adaptation, visitor economy and health and wellbeing.



Toby Jones (photo by Seamus Ryan)

John Clare Countryside Patrons

We have been delighted to announce the appointment of a board of Patrons to help spread the word about the John Clare Countryside.

There are currently ten Patrons from a wide range of backgrounds and careers, offering us advice and experience to take the project to the next stage. They are

- **Carry Akroyd**, Painter and Print Maker, author of *Found in the Fields*
- **Mark Cocker**, Writer, author

of *Birds Britannica*, *Crow Country* and *Our Place*

- **Adam Frost**, Gardener, Seven times Gold Medal Winner at the Chelsea Flower Show
- **Toby Jones OBE**, Actor, *Detectorists*, *Alan Bates v The Post Office*, *Captain America*
- **Tony Juniper CBE**, Chair, Natural England, author *Just Earth – How a Fairer World Will Save the Planet*
- **Martha Kearney**, Journalist and broadcaster, host of Radio Four's

The World at One for 11 years

- **Tom Naylor Leyland**, Managing Director, Fitzwilliam Estates
- **Dame Fiona Reynolds DBE**, former Director General of the National Trust, author, *The Fight for Beauty*
- **Michael Warren**, Writer, author of *The Cuckoo's Lea*
- **Nic Wilson**, Writer, author of *Land Beneath the Waves*



Adam Frost (photo by Jason Ingram)

! Nature Reserve Doubles in Size

As part of the John Clare Countryside project, an existing Langdyke Countryside Trust site, Christ's College Pits Nature Reserve, is set to double in size, creating more space for wildlife including Glow Worms, Small Copper butterflies, ducks, egrets and owls. This expansion is a partnership with Fitzwilliam Milton Estate and Tarmac.

Christ's College Pits Nature Reserve was established in 2024 when the Trust purchased the site from Christ's College, Cambridge who had owned the land since the 16th century. Immediately south of the existing reserve are two pits with a similar history and wildlife potential. These have now been combined into a single 50-acre

nature reserve, comprising all four pits, which the Trust will manage, initially as part of a three year agreement, with the aims of increasing biodiversity and helping visitors understand more about the heritage and wildlife of the site.



Volunteer at work
(photo by Steve Zealand)

The Heritage & Wildlife of Maxey Cut & Westings Meadow

Art Pop-Up's latest artist-led project The Heritage & Wildlife of Maxey Cut & Westings Meadow is a collaboration with artist Kathryn Parsons.



From March to November 2026, the project will be reconnecting community memory and place through shared storytelling and exploring the heritage of this remarkable site. There will be free events including guided walks, online talks and a mini heritage festival for local primary schools. This project is made possible with The National Lottery Heritage Fund with thanks to National Lottery players alongside the Environment Agency.

“...reconnecting community memory and place...”

! Maxey Cut Information Trail

A new information trail was opened on the Maxey Cut on Friday 1 May by local MP, Sam Carling. The trail, funded by the Environment Agency, and designed and installed by the Langdyke Countryside Trust is designed to help people discover more about the history of the Cut, its role in flood defence and the thriving natural world around it.

The information trail stretches along the length of the Cut from the railway crossing at Lolham Bridges to Nine Bridges in the West and consists of six new information boards. As well as the information boards, two new sets of steps have been installed to help walkers descend from the banks of the Cut into viewing points over the Christ's College Nature Reserve. New off-road

parking has separately been put in place on the reserve at Etton Maxey Pits, just north of the bridge over the Maxey-Etton road.

In addition, JCC partner, PECT, is delivering biodiversity enhancements at Maxey Cut on behalf of the Environment Agency, with 2,500 trees being planted in total. Final gap filling planting is scheduled for later this year.



Opening of the Maxey Cut information trail (photo by Richard Astle)

! Helpston Heath

A partnership between Fitzwilliam Milton Estate, the Environment Agency and Langdyke Countryside Trust is creating a new nature reserve on the site of the former Helpston Heath.

The existing reserve and historic John Clare site at Swaddywell Pit will now be linked to the neighbouring Ailsworth Road and Ben Johnson Pits (both also

former landfill sites).

Works to help cap pollution from the Ailsworth Road pit are planned for this Summer, and the field will then be restored with wildflower seed, oak tree planting and seasonal swales to capture run off from the cap. Ben Johnson Pit already boasts considerable habitat for nature, and is home to Nightingale, Green Hairstreak



*Black Hairstreak butterfly, Castor Hanglands
(photo by Matt Webb)*

and Grizzled and Dingy Skipper butterflies. It is the site of the EA's remediation plant. There will be no public access to this site, but a combined management plan for all three sites will help nature thrive.



*JCC Patron Michael Warren leads a
Nightingale Walk around Castor Hanglands
on 15 May (photo by Brian Lawrence)*

National Nature Reserves

The two National Nature Reserves at Castor Hanglands and Barnack Hills and Holes are natural jewels in the JCC crown. Something strange happened at the Castor Hanglands National Nature Reserve with the frogs this year, with only one patch of frogspawn on site in an unusual place, but the toads were in attendance in their masses with lots of toadpoles in the main pond. Nightingales are back in good numbers again this year. A 'dogs on leads' policy has been put in place across the reserve following several incidents with attacks on deer, and livestock worrying.

One of the compartments at Hills and Holes is closed until the sheep return in September. This is part of a project with Leeds Beckett University on responsible recreation.

! Community Nature Recovery

The parishes in the JCC area continue their local programmes of nature recovery. In **Castor**, PECT delivered the Royal Forestry Society's Young Foresters' Award at Castor Copse, with the support of Castor Parish Council.

Now in its fifth year, the project introduces Year 6 and Year 7 pupils to forestry and local ecosystems through engaging, hands on learning. The Wildlife Trust are working with **Bainton**, **Ufford** and **Southorpe** parishes on a variety of meadow, hedgerow and road verge projects.

PECT has also supported wildflower creation across the

area. In **Maxey**, over 100 linear metres of ground have been turf cut in preparation for future sowing. In **Clinton**, more than 150 linear metres were turf cut near the A15 roundabout. In **Northborough**, over 300 sqm was turf cut on the community field and near the community centre, with seeding organised by Northborough Parish Council. **Ailsworth PC** is working with Nene Park Trust to manage a 16 acre field for nature and the community. As part of a partnership with the Environment Agency, a new 150m hedge alongside Heath Road, **Helpston** is another new landscape feature.



Nightingale (photo by Sarah Lambert)

New Woodlands

It's been a winter of planting across the John Clare Countryside with long stretches of hedgerow being planted along the Langley Bush Road south of Southey Woods, along the Glington Road and south of Helpston. Fitzwilliam Milton Estate have extended the existing woodlands south of Southey Woods and near Marholm as well as in the Park itself. Christ's College Cambridge, another significant local landowner have planted an entirely new 60 acre wood south of Helpston. Burghley Estate are half way through the planting of a new 25 acre woodland extension around the edge of Burghley Park, under-sown with a wildflower mix; currently a sea of colour and alive with pollinators. Amongst other initiatives across the Estate, Burghley have restored two ponds in the last 18 months within the Whitewater valley.

Restoring the Whitewater Valley

As part of the John Clare Countryside project, the Environment Agency is working with Southampton University to look at the restoration potential of the Whitewater Brook. Using a combination of desk-based and field assessments, the study will look at the interplay between surface and groundwater, geology, ecology and land management, set within the historical context of the valley, to develop a strategic restoration plan for the brook along its entire length. Having an over-arching strategy means that landowners can make informed decisions about the most beneficial actions they can take to contribute towards the restoration of the Whitewater Brook as a whole.

! Health & Wellbeing Walks

Partners in the John Clare Countryside project held the first in a series of health and wellbeing walks on 14 May, when community organisation, Protect Rural Peterborough, welcomed a group from Mindspace, Stamford. PRP led a 90 minute walk designed to help a wider audience appreciate how this landscape provides easily accessible opportunities for local people to get close to nature and enjoy its restorative powers. The walk will be



View over St Kyneburgh's Church taken on the recent Health and Wellbeing Walk (photo by Richard Moon)

followed by similar walks hosted by Sacrewell Farm, the Langdyke Countryside Trust, Milton Estate, Natural England and PECT.



Scarce Chaser (photo by Sarah Lambert)

! New Partners

Riverford Organic Farmers have recently joined the Partnership. Riverford Organic Farmers is the UK's largest organic veg box provider and is celebrating its 40th year in 2026 (Riverford Organic Farmers - Organic Fruit & Veg Box Delivery).

The company was founded in South Devon, and since 2007 has also had a farm and base at Sacrewell Farm. Sacrewell is around 200ha and has the Whitewater Brook on its eastern boundary and the Wittering Brook running through the bottom half of the farm. Riverford grow a range of vegetables here including brassicas, leeks, salad and beans, but there is also plenty of space for nature- including wildflower-rich grasslands, traditional orchards, hedgerows managed sympathetically for wildlife and some recently dug ponds. Riverford is excited to be a

part of the John Clare Countryside Project and is looking forward to working with the partners in the coming months and years.



The National Trust are also now a project partner. Oli Burke, Assistant Director, said, "The John Clare

Countryside project offers a vision of a future nature rich landscape, embracing heritage, communities and farming. It's a vision that the National Trust shares and is delighted to be one of the partners making it happen."

SAVE THE DATE

This year's John Clare Festival takes place in Helpston on **Saturday 11 July.**

It is the centrepiece of a weekend of celebrations that feature talks, poetry readings, and music that also involves the John Clare Cottage and a Northborough event. Dr David Stewart of Northumbria University is the keynote speaker on Saturday afternoon and Peterborough Choral Society will be performing at St Botolph's Church that evening.

All welcome - full details are on the Society's new website - www.johnclaresociety.org

CONTACT

For further information on how to get involved, contact:
Richard Astle, chair, John Clare Countryside Partnership -
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Or visit our website www.johnclarecountryside.co.uk