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John Clare knew the will-o'-the-wisp: 'Will with a whisp, Jack Whisk, Jack with a lanthorn.' His village, Helpston, to the west of Peterborough lay close to the meres and fenland that clung on, still partially undrained and intact, into the beginning of the nineteenth century, and he had seen strange lights, as he describes here with typical accuracy and precision in his journal:

- I have seen several there myself one night when returning home from Ashton on a courting excursion I saw one as if meeting me I felt very terrified & on getting to a stile I determnd to wait & see if it was a person with a lanthorn or a will o whisp it came on steadily as if on the path way & when it got near me within a poles reach perhaps as I thought it made a sudden stop as if to listen me I then believed it was some one but it blazd out like a whisp of straw & made a crackling noise like straw burning which soon convinced me of its visit the luminous haloo that spread from it was of a mysterious terrific hue & the enlargd size & whiteness of my own hands frit me the rushes appeard to have grown up as large & tall as whalebone whips & the bushes seemd to be climbing the sky every thing was extorted out of its own figure & magnified the darkness all round seemd to form a circular black wall & I fancied that if I took a step forward I shoud fall into a bottomless gulph which seemed yawning all round me . . .

Clare's Swordy Well became a landfill site for a time. Swordy Well was an area of limestone grazing land that had established itself around the remnants of an old quarry, and for Clare it was a place of work (looking after livestock), but also idle play, indolence