

‘They turned me inside out / for sand and stones and grit’: Representations of Quarries and Gravel Pits in the Age of Enclosure

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The acceleration of the enclosure movement in England in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century marked the final transformation from feudalism to capitalism in the English countryside. This article compares two early nineteenth-century artistic representations of quarries and gravel pits following enclosure: Kensington Gravel Pits, a painting by landscape and portrait artist John Linnell, and The Lament of Swordy Well, a poem by the labouring-class poet John Clare. The Lament of Swordy Well is one of the most powerful anti-enclosure poems ever written, and while the intended meaning of Linnell’s Kensington Gravel Pits is less clear, I will argue that the painting illustrates ecological despoliation and the proletarianization of rural labourers in a way that is remarkably similar to Clare’s poem.

Between about 1750 and 1830 over four thousand parliamentary Acts of Enclosure were enacted, involving six million acres of land, nearly a quarter of all agricultural acreage in England.¹ What enclosure meant was that what had been common land, used by those without ownership or tenancy rights, was given to private landowners and fenced in. The result was that landless cottagers and rural labourers no longer enjoyed the right to graze animals or to forage for fuel and food on common land or to farm in common ‘open’ fields. Enclosure was the most visible aspect of a far-reaching agricultural revolution in England and represented the emergence of capitalism in the English countryside.

Three types of common land were being enclosed under the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Parliamentary Enclosure Acts: open field farming, where villagers would band together to farm individual strips of land in open fields; common pasturing meadows; and ‘waste’ land, land deemed unsuitable for farming but used for

grazing animals, cutting turf for fuel, foraging, collecting sticks and wood and, in some cases, quarrying and collecting gravel. As this waste land became enclosed much of it was given to private landowners, to become part of their estates or turned into profitable, arable land, which had become possible by the early nineteenth-century as a result of new technologies and changing economic conditions.² Land containing quarries and gravel pits were, for the most part, turned over to local parishes, who were responsible for road building and maintenance, although some were given to large landowners as part of enclosure awards. As a result, what had been common waste land and available to commoners for both grazing, foraging, and collecting stones and gravel for their own use became enclosed and used by the parish or large landowners exclusively for commercial purposes. John Clare’s poem, *The Lament of Swordy Well* and John Linnell’s early landscape painting *Kensington Gravel Pits*, are both powerful artistic representations of quarries and gravel pits following enclosure and both illustrate the

¹ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, (London: Vintage/Penguin Random House, 1973) p.138.

² Michael Williams, ‘The Enclosure and Reclamation of Waste Land in England and Wales in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, No. 51 (Nov. 1970), 55-69 p.56.



Figure 1: John Linnell, *Kensington Gravel Pits*, 1811-12, oil on canvas, 71.1 x 106.7cm. London.



Figure 3: George Morland, *The Gravel Diggers*, date unknown but before 1804, oil on paint, 178 x 229 mm. Tate Britain, London.
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ecological destruction and human suffering resulting from it.

John Clare was from the Northamptonshire village of Helpston, a village which was enclosed between 1809 and 1820. Clare railed against enclosure all his life, comparing it, in his poem 'Remembrances', to the invasion of a foreign tyrant:

*Inclosure like a Buonaparte let not a thing remain
It levelled every bush and tree and levelled every hill
And hung the moles for traitors; though the brook is
running still
It runs a naked brook cold and chill*³

John Linnell's painting *Kensington Gravel Pits* (Figure 1) is more ambiguous in its relationship to enclosure. Linnell was a very successful portrait and landscape painter, technically brilliant, but not generally known for innovative or radical subject matter. As Catherine Usher remarked, in *VIDES* Vol 9, his later work followed 'accepted artistic and social conventions, while being influenced by religious and commercial considerations'.⁴ Yet, earlier in his career, Linnell had cared less about money and more about honing his artistic skills. He was one of the pioneers of 'plein air' painting, sketching and painting directly from nature. At age seventeen he began studying with John Varley, whose students included William Henry Hunt, William Turner of Oxford, and William Mulready. Varley's motto was 'go to nature for everything',⁵ and he and his students spent much of their time drawing and making watercolour paintings in numerous

outdoor locations around London. *Kensington Gravel Pits* was painted when Linnell was living in the village of Kensington Gravel Pits, which is now known as Notting Hill Gate, but was, at the time, a rural village on the outskirts of London. It is one of Linnell's few oil paintings from this period and appears likely to have been sketched outdoors and then finished in his studio. It was exhibited at the British Institute in 1813 to positive reviews yet did not sell.⁶



Figure 2: John Linnell, *Kensington Gravel Pits* – detail.

Kensington Gravel Pits was an unusual painting, unusual in its subject matter, a working gravel pit, and unusual in its realistic depiction of working men and women. David Solkin, in *Art in Britain 1660-1815*, calls it 'a radical exercise in naturalism' and remarks that 'while Linnell's viewers may have been used to encountering scenes of hard work in their daily lives, this was not something they wished to be confronted with in art, at least not so /directly'.⁷ Although it had become fashionable by this time to show labourers working in the fields,

³ John Clare, 'Remembrances', *John Clare – Major Works*, (Oxford University Press 1984) 258-261.

⁴ Catherine Usher, 'Pastoral perfection or tormented toil? contrasting views of rural labour in the second half of the nineteenth century, in works by Richard Jefferies and John Linnell', *VIDES*, Vol 9, (Spring 2021), p.147.

⁵ A.T. Story, *The Life of John Linnell*, reproduced in: <http://www.victorianweb.org/>. Information about John Linnell is taken from this reproduction of A.T. Story's biography of Linnell originally published in 1892 by Bentley and Son, London.

⁶ Lydia Chavez, 'John Linnell's Kensington Gravel Pits: A Landscape from the Edge of London', M.A. Dissertation 2016, Cortauld Art Institute, London, <https://lydiachavez.com/art-history/> (pages unnumbered).

⁷ David Solkin, *Art in Britain 1660-1815*, (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), p.277.

they were almost always shown contentedly working in harmony with nature. Linnell's workers defied this 'georgic' myth by showing the physical exertion of workers hard at work.⁸ The painting depicts, in astonishing detail, five men, two boys, and a woman (on the extreme right of the picture) working in a large open gravel pit. Painted in brilliant sunlight with deep foreground shadows, *Kensington Gravel Pits* is an early example of naturalism as it attempts to capture every detail of the landscape from the glint of the gravel to the details of the workers' clothing. To the modern eye at least the painting suggests the despoliation of a piece of land that had once been, on the evidence of the green patch at the left-centre of the painting, a meadow or heath. It is clearly being worked hard. Gravel is piling up, and on the top of the pit is a wagon with horses, waiting to haul away the next load. In looking at the detail (Figure 2) we see the obvious strain of the workers in digging, sieving, and loading the gravel.

In the early part of the eighteenth century, it is likely that the local villagers used the existing gravel pit to collect gravel, clay, and stones for their own use, as part of their 'common' rights. An act of Parliament in 1769, however, gave the turnpike trust that operated a nearby road the right to 'cut, dig, gather, and carry away material from the pit'.⁹ From then on, the gravel pit at Kensington Gravel Pits became the exclusive property of the Trust. It had, in effect, been 'enclosed' and become a commercial enterprise, no

longer accessible to the local villagers. Much the same situation is depicted in John Clare's poem *The Lament of Swordy Well*.

Clare's poem is about a piece of land that contained a local quarry in his home village of Helpston. The land had been a commons, a 'waste' land accessible to the villagers for grazing and foraging, as well as collecting stones and gravel for their own needs. Following enclosure in 1809 it was given to the local parish for its exclusive use. Clare's poem is remarkable for its use of prosopopoeia; it is written in the voice of the land itself:

*Im swordy well a piece of land
That's fell upon the town
Who worked me till I couldn't stand
And crush me now Im down
(l. 21-24)¹⁰*

The land remembers that before enclosure: 'I kept my horses cows and sheep/and built the town below' (l.69-70). It was proud of the work it did but now:

*they rend and delve and tear
the very grass from off my back
I've scarce a rag to wear
Gain takes my freedom all away
(l.138-141).*

In the poem Clare makes a direct connection

⁸ Tim Barringer, in a footnote in his book *Men at Work, Art and Labour in Victorian Britain*, called the painting 'among the frankest representations of labour ever made'. Tim Barringer, *Men at Work - Art and Labour in Victorian Britain*, (New Haven & London, Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, Yale University Press, 2005) p.343 n.140.

⁹ An Act of Parliament (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1769), p. 30. Quoted in Lydia Chavez, 'John Linnell's Kensington Gravel Pits: A Landscape from the Edge of London', MA Thesis, 2016, Courtauld Institute of Art, London, <https://lydiachavez.com/art-history/>.

¹⁰ John Clare, 'The Lament of Swordy Well', *John Clare- Major Works*, eds. Eric Robinson and David Powell, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984) p.147. All subsequent references are to this edition. Note: Clare tended to avoid using punctuation in his poetry.

between the experience of the land and the experience of the landless labourers following enclosure as both fall 'into parish hands' (l.36). 'Vile enclosure' (l.183) had not only left the land and the labourers overworked and impoverished but had taken away their freedom and left them dependent on the parish workhouse:

*There was a time my bit of ground
Made freemen of the slave [...]*
*Till vile enclosure came and made
A parish slave of me*
(l.178-185).

The Lament of Swordy Well was written sometime in the 1820s but was not published in Clare's lifetime since, as with many of his 'enclosure elegies', it was considered by his patron and his publisher to be too radical in its opposition to the prevailing ideology of agricultural improvement.¹¹ It is, perhaps, Clare's most explicitly political poem. Unlike many of his poems, in which he nostalgically recalls the pleasures of his childhood, *The Lament of Swordy Well* is, as Lauren Cooper suggests, 'a sustained engagement with the present devastation, instead of a recalled past'.¹² It reflects Clare's anger at the destruction of his home and the environment at the hands of the 'greedy pack' (l.137) of landowners and enclosers.

John Clare wrote a number of poems lamenting the loss of the commons and protesting enclosure, accusing 'accursed wealth' for the 'loss of labour and of bread' and for being 'the cause that levels every tree'.¹³ These lines are from an early poem

called 'Helpstone', first published in 1820 but subsequently revised as his patron, Lord Radstock, objected to the 'radical and ungrateful' denunciation of 'accursed wealth' and demanded that these lines be removed.¹⁴ Clare's publisher complied with the patron's demand and most of Clare's subsequent anti-enclosure poems were not published in his lifetime. Clare became ever more despondent, ending his life in a Northamptonshire mental institution.

While the meaning of Clare's *The Lament of Swordy Well* is clear, the motivation and meaning of John Linnell's painting is more ambivalent. There is nothing in Linnell's subsequent career to suggest that he was politically or ecologically motivated to paint *Kensington Gravel Pits*. In 1817, in order to support his growing family Linnell turned away from landscape painting to the much more lucrative practice of portraiture. By the 1840s Linnell had accumulated enough wealth to buy himself a large country estate in Surrey and he returned to landscape painting. Most of these later landscape paintings were romantic idylls, designed to appeal to the expanding commercial market for pastoral or picturesque paintings of the English countryside. The buyers were no longer primarily the aristocracy but the new manufacturing class, the urban bourgeoisie. This class wanted picturesque, nostalgic views of the English countryside peopled by contented labourers, and John Linnell and his dealer understood this perfectly. As Barbara Pezzini writes in the *Journal for Art Market Studies*, Linnell was 'fiercely entrepreneurial'.¹⁵ Linnell's art dealer

¹¹ Enclosure elegies is a term used by Johanne Clare for John Clare's anti-enclosure poems of the 1820s. See Joanne Clare, *John Clare and the Bounds of Circumstance*, (Kinston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987).

¹² Lauren Cooper, 'John Clare's "Lament of Swordy Well" as Wasteland', *The Wordsworth Circle*, Vol.52, No.3 (Summer 2021) p.402.

¹³ John Clare, 'Helpstone' *Major Works* p.4.

¹⁴ Jonathan Bate, *John Clare, a Biography*, (New York, Farrer, Straus and Giroux, 2003) p. 198.

¹⁵ Barbara Pezzini, 'The 'art and the 'market', *Elements of the Art Market: John Linnell, William Agnew and Artist-Dealer*

William Agnew often commissioned work directly from him or advised him what to paint, based on his knowledge of what was likely to sell. Consequently, Linnell's later landscapes were popular and profitable but not particularly inventive or subversive.

Yet Linnell's earlier work, especially *Kensington Gravel Pits*, was a radical departure from the picturesque. It is not just the subject matter that places this painting outside the sphere of the picturesque but the perspective. It is possible to paint a gravel pit in a picturesque, even pastoral manner as George Morland, in his undated painting, *The Gravel Diggers* (Figure 3), shows us.

In Morland's painting the gravel pit is pictured as part of the natural landscape and appears to illustrate villagers having lunch after digging gravel for their own or their community's use. That Morland's painting is of a commons is emphasised by sheep grazing on the hill above the gravel pit. The labourers in this painting are relaxed and in harmony with their surroundings in contrast to the workers in Linnell's painting who are straining to extract as much gravel as they can.

It is entirely possible, of course, that Linnell was simply intrigued by the play of light and shadow on the gravel and focused on depicting the workers in as naturalistic a way as possible. David Solkin suggests, in *Art in Britain 1660-1815*, that at this time Linnell, 'had begun seeking workaday sites that fell quite outside the realm of the picturesque, and to depict them in watercolours

from the motif'.¹⁶ Linnell was living in the village of Kensington Gravel Pits at the time, and this gravel pit was certainly one of the 'workaday sites' where he could practice painting directly from nature and home-in on the naturalistic details of the sparkling gravel and the workers' tools and clothing. Yet, it appears that this was no mere exercise. Linnell turned his sketch into a finished oil painting and exhibited it at the British Institute exhibition in 1813. Though admired for its technical virtuosity, the fact that *Kensington Gravel Pits* did not immediately sell is perhaps what convinced Linnell that if he was to make a respectable living as an artist then he would have to paint more commercially acceptable paintings.

We cannot, of course, know what Linnell intended in painting *Kensington Gravel Pits*, or what meaning he attributed to it, if any. I would argue, however, that Linnell's intentionality is not particularly relevant for us. The iconography (or perhaps more accurately, the iconology) of *Kensington Gravel Pits* is evident, and though it was painted several years before Clare wrote *The Lament of Swordy Well*, the parallels with Clare's poem are quite striking.¹⁷ These lines in Clare's poem seem to describe exactly what we see happening in Linnell's painting:

*they turned me inside out
For sand and grit and stones
And turned my old green hills about
And pickt my very bones*
(l.61-64)

Relationships in Nineteenth-Century Britain', *Journal for Art Market Studies* no. 4, (2018) p.5.

¹⁶ David Solkin, *Art in Britain 1660-1815*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, Pelican History of Art, 2015) p.276

¹⁷ 'Iconology' is a term used by Erwin Panofsky to denote an analysis of the 'intrinsic meaning' of a work of art 'by ascertaining the underlying principles which reveal the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion. See Stephen Daniels and Denis Cosgrove, 'Introduction; iconography and landscape', *The Iconography of Landscape* (Cambridge Studies in Historical Geography 9, Cambridge University Press, 1999) p.2.

And, just as Clare connects the aggressive exploitation of the land with the situation of rural labourers, Linnell too makes the labourers a focus of his painting. The workers in *Kensington Gravel Pits* are not merely distant objects harmoniously embedded in their natural surroundings, as in many of, for example, John Constable's paintings or indeed in George Morland's *The Gravel Diggers*, but are a major subject of Linnell's painting.¹⁸ They are clearly wage labourers, visibly straining in their efforts to excavate the gravel. Linnell's workers represent not the 'georgic' vision of the contented rural labourers of Constable, Morland and later Linnell but the proletarianization of rural labour after enclosure and the triumph of the market economy.

This article has examined two works of early nineteenth-century art, both of which defy the predominant ideology of the picturesque English landscape. John Clare's poem *The Lament of Swordy Well* documents the ecological destruction of the land and the dispossession of both humans and non-humans as a result of enclosure. What had once been common land, open to all for a myriad of uses, has become an overworked quarry whose 'very bones' have been 'pict'. John Linnell's *Kensington Gravel Pits*, painted during a time when the outskirts of London were undergoing rapid expansion, is likewise a stark and naturalistic depiction of the despoliation of land that had once been a common resource for local villagers. Following enclosure, it is being aggressively exploited to provide material for new road building and the expansion of England's capital city.

¹⁸ Elizabeth Helsinger, 'Land and National Representation in Britain', *Prospects for a Nation*, suggests that 'labourers were commonly the objects but not the subjects of the landscape gaze' p.17.

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