

FENLAND DISTRICT COUNCIL

PRESS RELEASE

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Hannah Teasdale awarded Fenland Poet Laureate honour

Poet Hannah Teasdale has described the moment she was named the 2024 Fenland Poet Laureate as nothing short of “surreal”.

Hannah, who was born in the Midlands and lived in the South West before moving to The Fens, also said receiving the honour felt like she was finally “at home”.

She was announced the sixth Fenland Poet Laureate at the Fenland Poet Laureate Awards ceremony, held at March Town Hall on Friday (15 March).

His Majesty’s Deputy Lieutenant of Cambridgeshire, Dan Schumann, who was among the guests at the evening, said the creativity and talent shown on the night was “truly remarkable”.

Hannah, who has recently published her third poetry collection ‘Indelicate Sundays’ and runs poetry workshops at local schools, won the appointment with her poem, ‘The Un-Coupling’, inspired by her winter sightings of migrated swans to the fields of Fenland.

Reflecting on her appointment, she said: “It feels so surreal, but I feel like I’m home. I’ve got lots of plans for the year ahead and can’t wait to get started.”

Award-winning poet and Chair of Fenland District Council’s Culture, Arts and Heritage Committee, Cllr Elisabeth Sennitt Clough, who organised this year’s awards in partnership with Fenland District Council, described Hannah’s poem as “a very worthy winner”.

Hannah succeeds Qu Gao, of Chatteris, a third-year undergraduate at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, who had been in the role since November 2022.

This year’s Fenland Poet Laureate Awards saw a total of 63 eligible entries – with 28 adult entries and 35 in the Young Fenland Poet Laureate category, open to those aged 17 and under. The vast array of entries included published poets and creative writing graduates to teachers and NHS staff, and budding writers just starting out on their poetry journey.

The poems were shortlisted by members of the Culture, Arts and Heritage Committee, and judged by Cllr Sennitt Clough and Qu Gao, who were captivated by the variety of forms of poetry employed and emotional depth conveyed in the submitted poems.

“Reading all of the poems, their variations, tonalities, and textures – all of the offerings that have arrived – has been a nourishing experience, demonstrating the growing popularity of poetry within Fenland,” said Cllr Sennitt Clough. “Ultimately, they reminded me of the importance of poetry and its hallowed place among the arts.”

Author and illustrator Pen Avey, a course director at the College of West Anglia in Wisbech, was the Fenland Poet Laureate runner-up with her poem, ‘transient’.

While third place went to Jonathan Moore for his poem, ‘A Fenland Ode’.

Shortlisted poets were Catherine Blake, for 'I Left You Once'; Judith King, for 'Moving to the Fens'; Laura Collins, for 'The Legend of the Lost'; Brenda Barber, for 'A picture of Fenland'; and Tony Trayford for 'Wisbech or Bust'.

In the Young Fenland Poet Laureate competition, open to those aged 17 and under, it was Lacey Vinn who was unanimously crowned the winner.

The student from Sir Harry Smith Community College in Whittlesey impressed judges with her poem, 'Christmas Truce', inspired by a Christmas Day football match from World War One.

Second place went to Wisbech Grammar School student Nathanael Wilson for his poem, 'River's Rest', and third place was awarded to Lydia Shillings, also from Wisbech Grammar School, for her poem, 'I the eel of Ely'.

Shortlisted poets in the Young Fenland Poet Laureate category were Frederick Fox-Brown, for his poem, 'Cricket'; Adriana Mauremootoo, for 'Song of the Fens'; Dadisai Honde, for 'The Wetland Secrets'; Phoebe Trew, for 'A Place of Our Own'; Oscar Wierzba, for 'Fenland Flatlands'; and Oliver Redding, for 'The Wanderer'.

All the winners and runners-up received a trophy, sponsored by the Etec Group, and have had their poems published in a Fenland Poet Laureate anthology, and on the Fenland District Council website at www.fenland.gov.uk/FenlandPoetLaureate.

Cllr Elisabeth Sennitt Clough said: "The Fenland Poet Laureate Award is a wonderful opportunity to celebrate and showcase the talented writers living, working, or attending school in Fenland. It has been recognised as one of the most prestigious awards of its kind in Cambridgeshire, and you can see why when you look at the literary talent that emerges year after year.

"Congratulations to our winners and runners-up and all the shortlisted finalists for their inspiring work. Our winners can expect a rewarding year ahead as true advocates of poetry and creative writing in Fenland and beyond.

"I would also like to thank Qu Gao for her work over the past year, championing and promoting poetry locally, and for supporting me with judging this year's entries and hosting the awards ceremony event."

Qu Gao said: "Although all the poems varied greatly in tone, topic and structure, every single poem offered a fascinating perspective on the people, histories, and landscapes of Fenland. As a current undergraduate at Cambridge University, where the people and stories that are celebrated tend to be famous and glamorous (think: distinguished academics, Nobel Prize winners, big-screen actors, political leaders), judging the entries for this year's Fenland Poet Laureate competition - reading poems depicting very ordinary and down-to-earth facets of Fenland life, yet with extraordinary creativity and passion - was a truly refreshing and enjoyable experience."

His Majesty's Deputy Lieutenant of Cambridgeshire, Dan Schumann, who gave closing remarks at the ceremony, said it was an "enormous privilege" to be present at the event on behalf of The King.

"As an office, you can imagine there are many more invitations to events than there is the opportunity to attend them," he said. "However, The King and Queen are huge supporters of the arts, in particular poetry, so in keeping with his priorities, it was only right and proper that I came here tonight.

“To find such creativity and talent in such a small area is hugely impressive and I think it’s amazing that the district council and all the supporters continue to put this event on in tough and challenging times when arts are often the first thing to go.”

Cllr Chris Seaton, Fenland District Council’s Portfolio Holder for Arts, Culture and Heritage, added: “I’d like to say an immense well done to all our finalists and congratulations to our winners! The standard of entries was incredible, and we would like to thank everyone for taking part.

“We’re looking forward to working with Hannah and Lacey over the coming year as they share their love for poetry far and wide and attract even more people into the world of creative writing.”

Fenland Poet Laureate finalists

First place: The Un-Coupling, by Hannah Teasdale

The Un-Coupling

(Inspired by my Winter sightings of the migrated swans to the fields in Fenland)

I cannot hear her through the interjection
of wild-life and traffic. I tread

on the damp-hope of finding less barren land
where in our hundreds we winter-gather

But even in this light-whisper of dark,
I cannot see. The moon – our gift

has turned its back on me. No sanctuary,
no space left in its wisp of crescent. I am blind

to life without her. It is I who should provide
but already I am nothing without her side of reason.

I miss her hiss of protection when others’ young
come on weekends, stand too close

to the edge with offerings of stale bread, tantrums,
melting ice-creams and good intention

The air smells more of spoiled crops than open waters
Perhaps the icy fingers have lost her discretion –

the wind blows in the wrong direction. The cold
refuses not to rise. A hint of presence in the mirk

Spider-web traces are all I find. I wish
for once, to feel her sharp beak bite.

Runner-up: transient, by Pen Avey

transient

My life begins on meadow, drained from salt bog long ago.

Clay laid first to hold me fast, then wooden joists
hoisted high by flat-capped men, encasing bones in Battenburg brick.
A smiling door, vermilion to match my step,
complementary bright brass fixings all topped off
with terracotta tiles and a chimney pot.

The first two come.
He works black Fenland earth through windswept days,
she turns a handle; runs up floral curtains.
I shut my glassy eyes a while to owl hoots and cat fights.
Her belly swells four times –
Three succumb to sickness, yet one remains.

The whirlwind boy climbs an apple tree Father planted out back.
Slips and lands in Mother's arms –
his laughter drifts through summer nights.
He ages well but marries not;
lives out his dotage in one stark room,
hunted by a tallow moon.

Iron railings flake with rust.
Floral curtains rag to dust.
Greasy soot belches from my oak-mantled hearth.
Above, a sweeps brush pushes up to sky –
darkened, ominous as
metal birds drone by.

A single lady, sharp, refined
adopts me. Spends her waking time
stripping walls and planting pansies.
I shine with pride when dawdling strangers
stop to admire my smart facade.
A blackbird sang the night she passed.
My newest family dwells snug within.
I love them much as they love me –
Affection edged in melancholy.
Knowing they'll move on, one way or another
and leave me bare. Pining for
a transient lover.

Third place: A Fenland Ode, by Jonathan Moore

A Fenland Ode

I've lived in the Fens since I just don't know when
So my toes are all a bit webbed

My wellies have holes, our garden has moles
And our dog is only three legged

Our house has two beds for our seven large heads
So I share my small bed with my sisters

We all share our shoes and fight hard to choose

The pair that don't give us blisters

My Pa catches eels to provide for our meals
And now and again pays the rent

My Ma singles beet for gangmaster Pete
Who everyone knows is quite bent

Everyone pens that us folk from the Fens
Are interbred and doolally

But it's just not that fair cause our teeth all have hair
And my brother just married Aunt Sally.

Young Fenland Poet Laureate finalists

First place: Christmas Truce, by Lacey Vinn

Christmas Truce

A far away chant
A whisper of a song
A recognizable voice
A place where they belong

A sudden light appears
The carols start to get loud
But they continue with their song
So young yet so proud

Silence fell upon the night sky
No more missiles or gun
Now just birds tweeting
And a distant sound of fun

He risks it all in a few seconds
But two nations learn to trust
Commanders get angry
But soldiers state it's Christmas we must

The sun rose as the fun begun
Exchanging pictures and a story
Both countries would whisper
"I wish we both could have the glory"

As fast as you know it
Both countries play a game
Foosball slash football
As soldiers enjoy the fame

Hours go by
Laughing and talking
Every soldier rests their legs
As they've been doing so much walking

A far away thunder
Falls upon them all
They say goodbye and leave
An explosion "there goes the ball"

All the magic
Of Christmas past
Both country's soldiers
Praying it wasn't the last

But a secret exchange
A sausage for a treat
A heartwarming gift
Wishing the end was down the street

Proof no soldier wanted to be there
Wishing it was more than a Christmas Truce
They get forced to shoot again
Thinking hard to find an excuse

In the end the battle continues
The soldiers forced to put friends aside
Pow! Boom! Goes the guns
Both country's only fighting for pride

Second place: River's Rest, by Nathanael Wilson

River's Rest

Willow, consumed by blazing scarlet, as weaving
River runs its course. Through softly spoken, whisper
Thin ripples, glides swan, a silent listener.

Grouse clatters, thunder rumbles, as adder
Slinks and slithers. Sparse Fen, ice flecked
Peat, its voyage checked.

Day breaks, dew dances, as heron hunts
And damselfly darts. Above the pools, on fragile stems
They perch, living gems.

Night falls, owl calls, and still the willows
Standing tall. Amidst the reeds, of hissing sound.
Amidst the flotsam run aground.

Water soothes these moonlit banks, as nightjar cries
And lapwing stutters. Across the lake, on pondweed bed
A single moorhen rests its weary head.

Third place: I the eel of Ely, by Lydia Shillings

I the eel of Ely

I the eel of Ely.
I slither and slide,
I ebb and glide.
Through the murky marsh of the fens.
I the eel of Ely.
I hunt the stickleback in my home,
But they're more compact since the farmers have sown.
Sown the crops on the fields they've drained.
I the eel of Ely.
I'm driven closer, closer than ever before,
To the muddy banks and the dry shore.
As more and more water is taken away.
I the eel of Ely.
I'm amongst the fishermen, all around,
My heart misses a beat as I'm scared by the sound.
The sound of the nets rising up from the bed.
I the eel of Ely.
Oh yes, I the eel of Ely, but,
I slither and slide,
I ebb and glide,
No more.

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Notes to Editors

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