



Press Release

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Felix Dawson crowned 2025 Fenland Poet Laureate

It was a night of celebration and literary excellence as the 2025 Fenland Poet Laureate Awards honoured the district's finest poetic talent.

With 71 entries across two age categories, this year proved to be one of the hardest to judge, reflecting the depth and quality of writers across Fenland.

But at the awards ceremony at March Town Hall on Friday (21 March), it was Felix Dawson who was unanimously crowned Fenland Poet Laureate, for his inspirational poem 'I know what the fizmer says'.

And in the Young Fenland Poet Laureate category it was Isla Jackson, from Wisbech Grammar School, who took the title with her poem 'When', which demonstrated skill and insight well beyond her 15 years.

You can read all the winning and shortlisted entries at:

www.fenland.gov.uk/2025FenlandPoetLaureate

The awards, which are recognised as one of the most prestigious literary accolades in Cambridgeshire, are organised by award-winning poet and Chair of Fenland District Council's Culture, Arts and Heritage Committee, Cllr Elisabeth Sennitt Clough, and Fenland District Council.

This year saw 34 submissions in the adult category and 37 in the Young Fenland Poet Laureate category, which is open to poets aged 17 and under.

The poems were shortlisted to six in each category by members of the Culture, Arts and Heritage Committee, and judged by Cllr Sennitt Clough and the outgoing 2024 Fenland Poet Laureate, Hannah Teasdale.

"Once again, it was an absolute delight to read the shortlisted entries", said Cllr Sennitt Clough. "Opening the anonymised folder of entries is like opening a treasure chest. It's so exciting not knowing what gems you'll find.

"The poems that really shone are the ones which evoked both a strong sense of place and a human emotional presence within that place. This year's shortlisted entries were overwhelmingly filled with original and sharply-observed detail in their

carefully crafted lines. I found myself mumbling the word psychogeography many times – that sense of self being intrinsically linked to the environment. The two winning poems were a unanimous choice.”

At the awards night, Hannah praised Felix’s winning poem, saying it inspired her to look differently at the world and then push beyond the limitations of her own writing.

“The language this poet uses and their attention to sound made this poem linger in our ears,” she said. “I adore a poem that is accessible in that it cleverly utilises everyday and familiar images and juxtaposes these with their specialist knowledge.

“A winning poem has to have an outstanding first and final couplet as well as a solid, well-crafted middle – and this poet strongly demonstrates their ability to deliver all of that – and more.”

Unfortunately, Felix was unable to attend the award ceremony to accept his award but look out for his name and work in the months ahead!

Felix, who grew up in The Fens, said it was a pleasure to be named the 2025 Fenland Poet Laureate.

“As someone who works in conservation, my relationship to the land is a big part of my identity and I explore that connection through my work and through writing. It feels great to have that connection recognised in my poetry,” he said.

“The poem itself is about that connection and is drawn from my memories of growing up in Fenland and my connection to all the people who did so before me.”

Runner-up in the Fenland Poet Laureate Awards was Toni Fell, with her poem, ‘Starter Home’, which evoked a vivid image of the Fenland landscape and experiences of a young couple starting out in their first property.

The third prize winner was Paul Dance with his poem, ‘Elysian Fields’, a powerful piece of work about the environment and natural world.

Shortlisted poets were Matthew Gilbert, for ‘I’m Home’; Betty Hasler, for ‘Fen Road’; and Catherine Blake, for ‘I say that I’m from Cambridge’.

In the Young Fenland Poet Laureate competition, it was Isla Jackson’s poem about a child’s powerlessness in the face of everything the world can throw at her which stole the judge’s hearts.

“This is a remarkable poem for a young person to have written,” said Cllr Sennitt Clough. “Not only is the poem elevated beyond a mere description of the Fen landscape by way of the poet’s emotional connections, detailed at various stages of their childhood, the poet creates a psychogeography linking the poem intrinsically linked to the poet’s environment.”

Isla succeeds the 2024 Young Fenland Poet Laureate, Lacey Vinn, a student from Sir Harry Smith Community College in Whittlesey.

Second place went to Wisbech Grammar School student Meredith Killick for her poem, 'Nighttime Mystery', which used vivid imagery to give the piece "a regal, mystical and almost fairytale life of its own".

Third place was awarded to fellow Wisbech Grammar School student Tilly Myers for her poem, 'SKYSCAPE', a partially rhyming piece which leaves the reader with "a beautiful and delicate image to linger in their mind".

Shortlisted poets were Luka Kant, for 'Fenland'; Shyla Brown, for 'Kindness'; and Lydia Shillings, for 'Four seasons stargazing'.

All the winners and runners-up received a trophy, sponsored by Clarion Futures, and have had their poems published in a Fenland Poet Laureate anthology.

The evening's guest of honour, Leader of Fenland District Council, Cllr Chris Boden, who gave a welcome address and closing remarks, said it was an honour to be part of such a wonderful event.

"Poetry is often underrated in terms of its importance and has a false impression of exclusivity," he said. "But we can find it in song lyrics, in football chants and many of us grew up with it as it's used to teach children through nursery rhymes. It exists all around us in our everyday lives...and is for everyone."

Fenland Poet Laureate finalists

First place: I know what the fizmer says, by Felix Dawson

I know what the fizmer says

When I was young, the plough would turn huge clods
of earth, their shining sillion faces cut
like marble cake as big as drums. We'd heave
the lumps and stack them tall and dress the ugly
jagged men with scarves and hats.

Once, I met
a boy with a maggot on a string, 'diddling' for eels
by the banks of the Lark. You can see their little lips,
he says, poking out the holes (- I can't). You don't need
a hook for eels, he says. They won't let go the maggot.

At Lakenheath, a bittern whoompf!s about the air,
so cold it nearly stalls. The frigid river, turgid, swells
and I stand on the riverbank, surveying all the reclaimed
land beneath the long, long open skies.

On the breeze,
below the tip of my nose is a definite whiff of gorgeous,
gorgeous, wind-blown, peat. Stern like cocoa, soft like coal,
rich like coffee and EARTHY like the black mud I know

it is, it lingers in the frisky air. Sweet, like iced tea.

I smile and run to ground the earthworks dug and swept into
a tall new bank, black as dunes and fine as powder snow.
I lift a handful, sift a handful, like I'm winnowing the wheat.
I lift a handful, squeeze a handful, that clags a ball like clay.
I giggle as I lift a handful, FILL my mouth full suck the dirt between my teeth!

It cinches down around my gums like when you bite down
at the dentists on that blue mould that casts your teeth.
It's soft and thick and light and black and fades to grains
like candy floss. It melts away like chocolate, tastes like
rust and earth and snow. I spit the pips and hear the fizmer say,
you're home.

Runner-up: Starter Home, by Toni Fell

Starter Home

A road pocked with houses,
caked in mud and mangled potato,
rattled by tractors at five, quiet at ten,
agitating the dog.

We built it, brick by brick,
the house that the sand-soil blew in.
Choking orange seasoned the windowsills
and the underside of curtains.

We planted our garden,
broccoli heads creaked first words into Fenland wind, English plums with
skin mottled pink like yours
and dark pits for eyes like mine.

Then came the blight and rot,
seedlings withered away.
Plums fell, bruised and decaying,
crying pesticides.

Third prize: Elysian Fields, by Paul Dance

Elysian Fields

This bucolic view of England
Haystacks in the field
Like fives on a playground.
Horses, heads down
Stubbs imitating Giacometti
And corn ripening hundreds of acres,
a slow blonding of England

All this is perpetual mirage,
the nettles, stinging, ugly
put iron in the fields' souls
The daisies the pretty opportunists of nature
Growing where the grass assets have been stripped

The corn, the farmer's bondage
To the land
The hay his gamble on the weather
Which plays with him, threatening rain
Always at just the wrong moment

The nimble nimbus pose in summer's shooting skies
And, in a while, the autumn
The mud, wind and shortdays
until the mirage again
next summer

Young Fenland Poet Laureate finalists

First place: When, by Isla Jackson

When

When you're nine, you worry about who will play ponies with you, and who can do the most cartwheels.

You don't worry about safety, and the dangers your home life may offer.

You don't worry about ailments, and quarantine, and hygiene.

When you're nine, you relocate, away from the bustling, craziness, the hubbub –
To a tranquil, vast and continuous land. A land of solitude and privacy.

When you're ten, you don't know if online learning will ever be enough, and if you will ever be able to make friends,

You look out the frosted window, to see the deer bounding joyously across the fields,
And hear the birds warbling, a harmony that inspires peace.

When you're flying down the road on your scooter, playing imaginary secret agent games with your sister, and posing for artistic photoshoots led by your older brother,
And realise that it will all work out in the end.

When you're eleven, you start your new school, which is scary.

But it's okay, because on the way there, you soar down the bumpy roads, windows down

Watching all the nature – deer, kestrels, voles, rabbits, hares, horses

And the landscape – rolling fields, glistening rivers, crimson trees, rain droplets, fluffy clouds

It's peace, and brings you joy that quiets your nerves.

When you're twelve, you start to struggle,

To glimpse the fissures through other people's facades. They hurt you, and you think they hate you.

But it's tolerable, because you've got a quaint town,
Where cars are tractors, and houses are barns, and a road is footpath,
And the sky is the limit.

At thirteen, school starts the threats:

Exams this, exams that. And everyone expects you to achieve the highest grades, to fly above them all,

Like the kites that circle above their prey,
Except, you are the prey, and the girls are the ones circling.
It's all about fame and popularity,
Not frosted fields and rainy mornings.

At fourteen, you find your true friends,

The ones that believe in you, and like you for you,
But they don't.

It's like watching piglets with their mother; the runt is always left behind.
You are the runt, the one left to suffer in silence, and eventually die.

You're fifteen now, and have been through more than any fifteen year old should have to go through.

You've loved, lost, helped, and hurt.

Everyone scrolls past those who are struggling –

Merely because they are bored. But if they stopped

And glanced over their screens, they would realise that life isn't about the likes and the comments,

But about solidarity, and friendship, and joy,

And that joy is shown through nature,

The foxes, badgers and hedgehogs all survive in the same space without destruction

–

So why can't we?

Runner-up: Nighttime Mystery, by Meredith Killick

Nighttime Mystery

As the sun sets across the plains,

Darkness rules over as queen.

While night takes the reins,

All forms of life leave the scene.

Not a sound is heard across the marsh,

As the shadows of all forms, tree, crop and roadkill stand tall.

The moon beams send light through the roads,

The Nocturnals wake up and start sending their codes.

Hoots and howls echo across the fields,

Natural or supernatural is what no one knows.

Are the rustle of leaves across the hayfield fox or other?

A glimpse of movement across the miles of flatness blur with the shadows
All while the stars above send their flashes of warnings to those who can see them.

As dawn comes, the mist rolls over,
The fog blocking out the morning,
Wildlife becoming silent as if in mourning.
What happens at night in the fens will always be a mystery,
Apart from the supernatural who were there.

Third prize: SKYSCAPE, by Tilly Myers

SKYSCAPE

An abundance of land,
as far as the eye can see.
The great absence of rolling hills,
as the heavens unfold above me.

Orange and magenta paint the sky,
elegantly embellished with a sparse stippling of white.
Beautifully intricate patterns decorate the view,
with swirling mists from day till night.

Rugged roads that twist and turn,
Chased by snaking, flowing rivers and streams.
The spewling fields surround me,
the farmers' hard earned crops swaying in the breeze.

Early morning sunbeams reflecting on the water,
Swirling, glistening diamonds sparkle across the surface.
Gentle, warm breezes and billows of cold wind,
and small gentle raindrops that fall at my feet.

- All the winning and shortlisted poems are available to read on the Fenland District Council website at: www.fenland.gov.uk/2025FenlandPoetLaureate

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Notes to Editors

For media enquiries, please contact the Fenland District Council press office on 01354 622226 or email: communications@fenland.gov.uk