

Partly real, partly dream

A self guided walk in Thomas Hardy's Dorset



Follow in the footsteps of one of Britain's greatest writers
Explore the natural landscapes that inspired him
Discover how they have changed over the last 150 years
Find out how this rural area is adapting to modern times

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the stories of our landscapes
discovered through walks







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Partly real, partly dream

Explore the landscapes of Thomas Hardy's Dorset

It is hard to think about Dorset without picturing the evocative landscapes created by one of Britain's greatest writers, Thomas Hardy.

In his novels and poems Hardy created a "partly real, partly dream" county that he named 'Wessex'.

Hardy's Wessex was based on the places he grew up in and his writings captured a time when Britain's countryside was at the point of rapid change.



Bridge over the River Frome
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

This walk takes you through places at the heart of Hardy's Wessex including picturesque hamlets and working farms, humble cottages and grand manor houses, water meadows and heathlands, fertile fields and whispering woods.

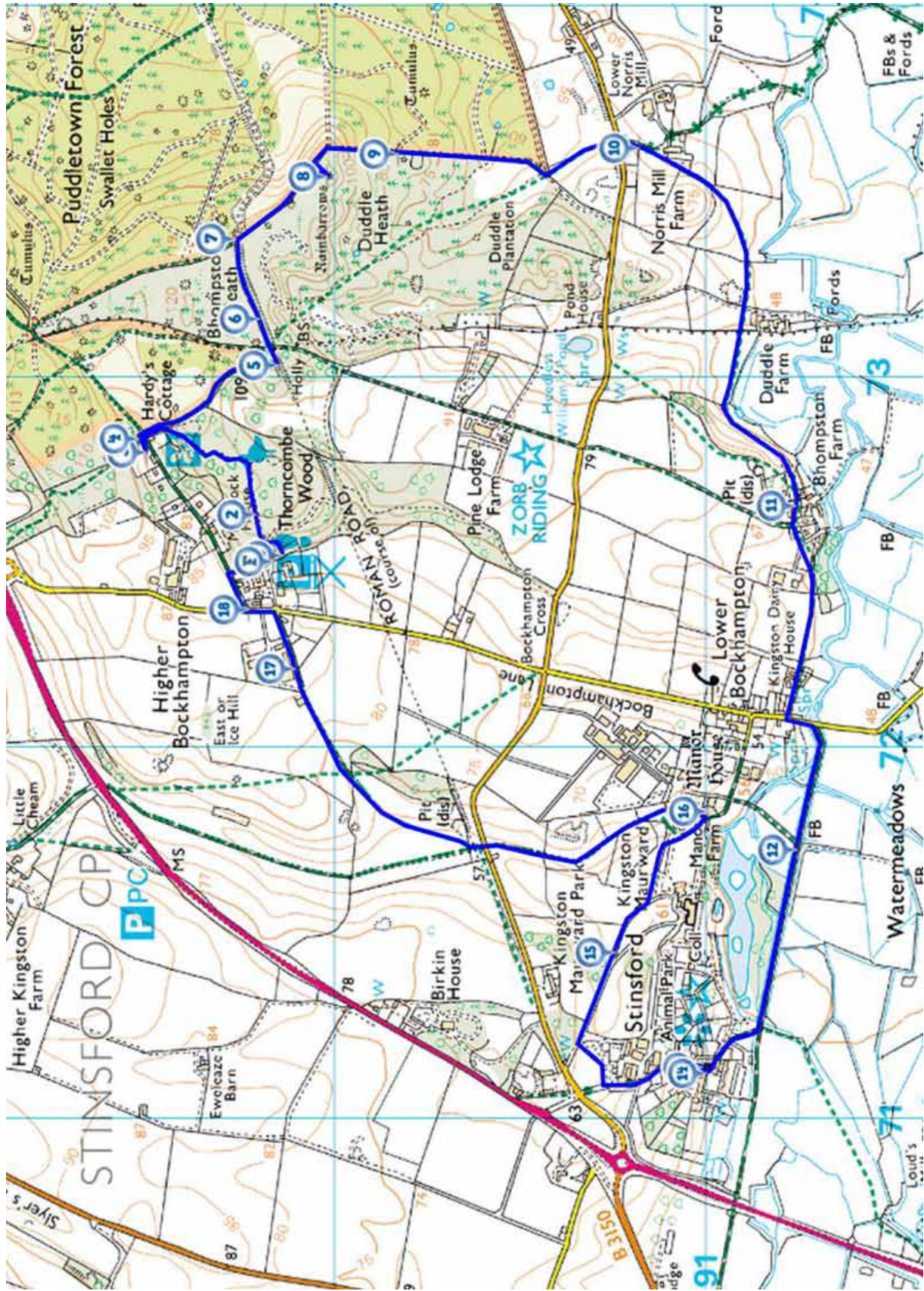


Springtime
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Discover how these natural and built landscapes inspired Hardy's fiction. Find out how they have and haven't changed since Hardy's time. See how this area of rural Dorset is adapting to changing times.

This walk was created by Dick Bateman, a retired geography teacher and author and Alistair Chisholm, Dorchester's prize-winning Town Crier and Blue Badge Guide.

Route map

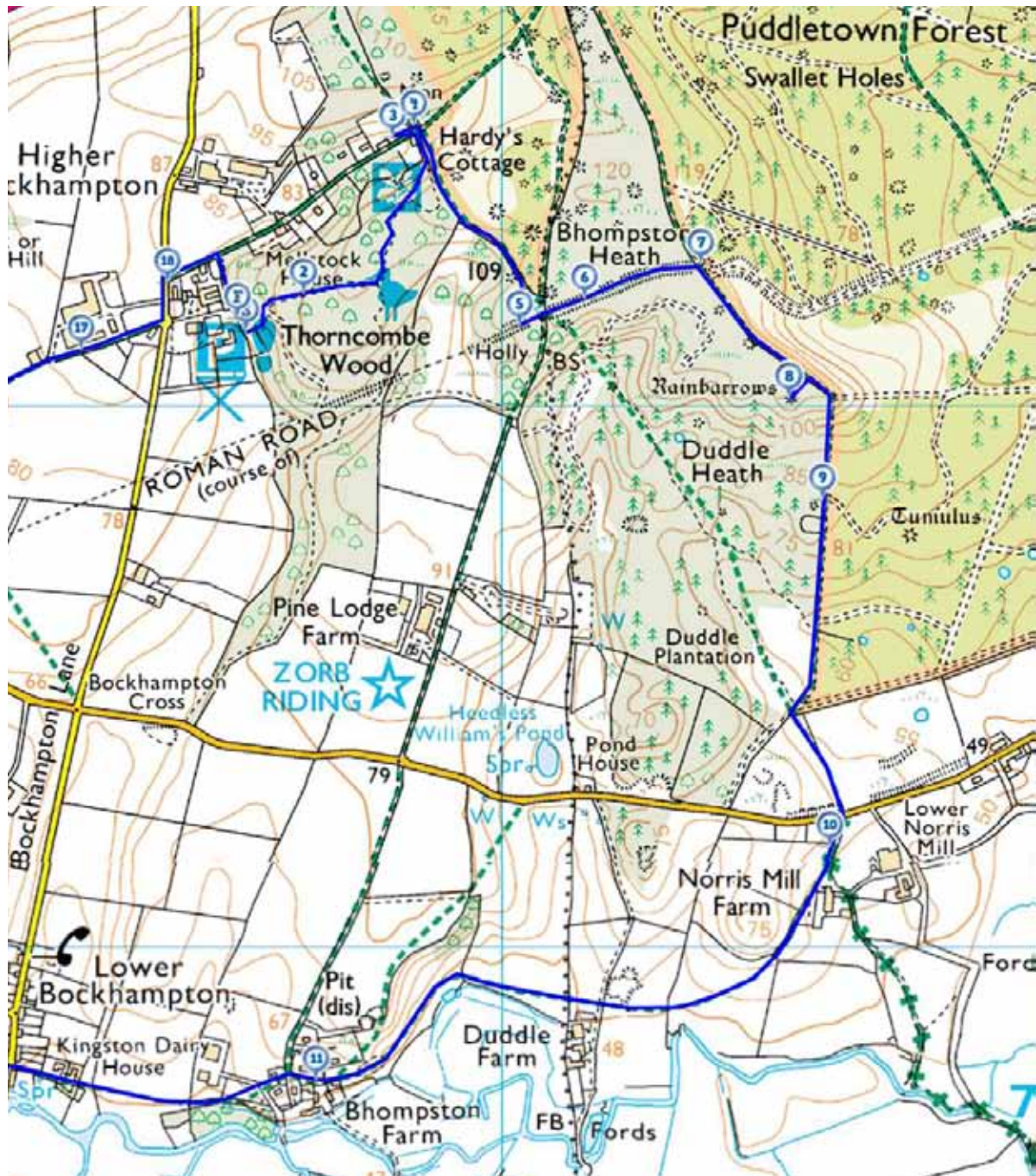


Practical information

Location	West Dorset, Southwest England
Start & Finish point	Thorncombe Wood car park, Higher Bockhampton, DT2 8QJ
Getting there	<p>Higher Bockhampton is three miles northeast of Dorchester just off the A35.</p> <p>Car - If travelling along the A35 from the northeast (Blandford Forum / Poole and Bournemouth) towards Dorchester, take the exit signed for Lower and Higher Bockhampton. Follow the country lane for about ½ mile then turn left down a lane signposted Higher Bockhampton and Hardy's Cottage. Follow the lane round to the right which leads to the car park in Thorncombe Wood.</p> <p>If travelling along the A35 from the southwest, exit at the roundabout signposted for Stinsford, Kingston Maurward, Bockhampton and Tincleton. Follow the road for about a mile then turn left at a crossroads signposted Higher Bockhampton and Hardy's Cottage. After ¾ mile turn right down a lane signposted Higher Bockhampton and Hardy's Cottage. Follow the lane round to the right which leads to the car park in Thorncombe Wood.</p> <p>Parking is free but donations are welcome.</p> <p>Train - The nearest stations are Dorchester South and Dorchester West (both 4 miles away).</p> <p>Dorchester South is served by trains running half-hourly between London Waterloo and Weymouth via Poole, Southampton and Bournemouth.</p> <p>Dorchester West is served by trains running hourly to Bristol via Yeovil and Bath.</p> <p>Bus - Local buses stop on the A35 at Kingston Pond (1 mile) and at Kingston Maurward College (1 mile).</p>

Distance	5 ¼ miles
Level	Moderate
Terrain	A mixture of woodland footpaths, heath tracks, field paths and rural lanes. Some ascents and descents plus gates and stiles to cross.
Conditions	Like most rural walks the ground can get very muddy in places after wet weather so wear suitable footwear.
Suitable for	Dogs - Must be kept on a lead on farmland and not allowed in Hardy's Cottage
Refreshments	<p>There are very few places to buy food on route so we suggest taking a picnic.</p> <p>There is a cafe at Kingston Maurward College (Stop 15) which is open to the public. However if you do visit the cafe please do not go into the College itself.</p>
Facilities	The only toilets en route are at Kingston Maurward College in the café.
Other info	<p>Hardy's Cottage is open Wednesday to Saturday from 11am to 5pm between March and October. The site is managed by the National Trust. Entry free to members; non members £4.75 (adults), £2.20 (children).</p> <p>Max Gate, Hardy's later home, is nearby on the A352 from Dorchester. It is also managed by the National Trust. For opening times and more information telephone 01297 489481 before visiting.</p>
Tourist information	Dorchester Tourist Information Centre , 11 Antelope Walk, Dorchester DT1 1BE. Tel: 01305 267992

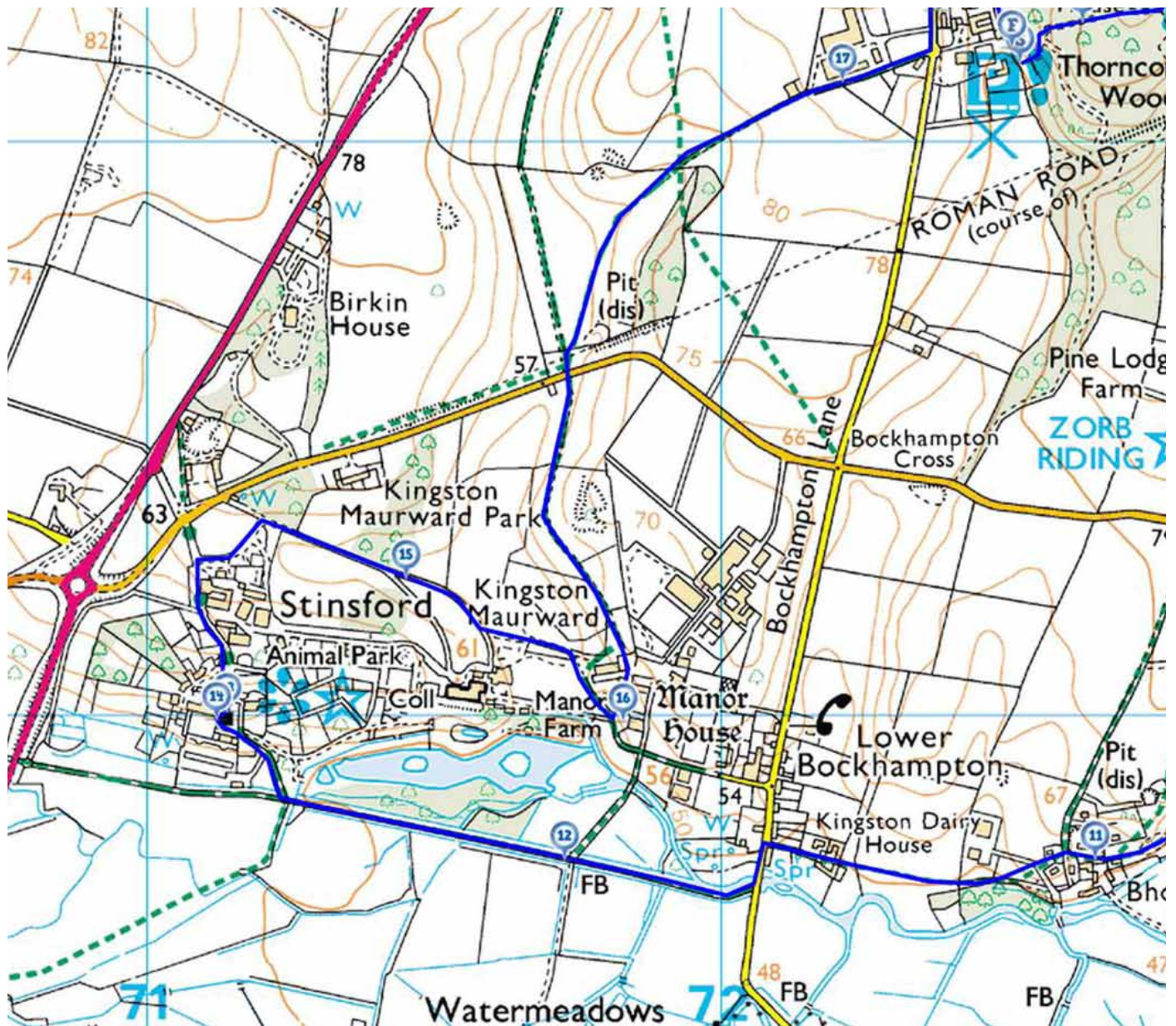
First and last part of route



Stopping points

1. Thorncombe Wood car park
2. Thorncombe Wood
3. Hardy's Cottage
4. The American Hardy Society Monument
5. Roman Road signpost near Rushy Pond
6. Bhompston Heath
7. Swallet hole, Puddletown Forest
8. Rainbarrows
9. Duddle Heath
10. Norris Mill Farm
- Hampton Farm Business Park
17. Hampton Farm Business Park
18. Chalk and flint houses, Higher Bockhampton
19. Thorncombe Wood car park

Middle part of route



Stopping points

- 11.** Bhomepston Farm
- 12.** Floodplain beside the River Frome
- 13.** Hardy's grave, St Michael's churchyard
- 14.** Inside St Michael's Church
- 15.** Kingston Maurward College
- 16.** The Old Manor House

1. Welcome to Hardy's Dorset

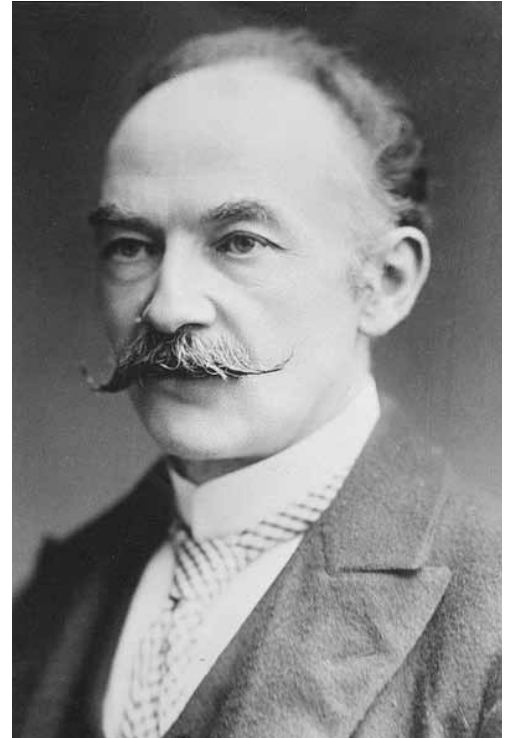
Thorncombe Wood car park

Welcome to this Discovering Britain walk in Thomas Hardy country. It explores how one of Britain's finest writers set his stories here in his home county of Dorset. It was created by Dick Bateman, a retired geography teacher and author who has loved Hardy's novels since he read them in the Sixth Form.

This magnificent landscape of woodland and parkland, heath and farmland, water meadows and picturesque villages features strongly in Hardy's novels and poetry but it was much more than just a poetic backdrop.

The landscape acts as a strong force on the lives of his characters, influencing their actions and their fate. The different landscapes are conjured up so magnificently that they almost become characters themselves.

On this walk we will read extracts from Hardy's writing that describe the landscapes he knew so well and consider how much of it remains as it was in the late nineteenth century when he wrote about them.



Thomas Hardy (c.1910)
Wikimedia Commons

We will find out how modern British landscapes do not just happen as if by magic but are actively managed. We will see some modern techniques of land management and compare them to the practices used in the times of Hardy's fiction.

We will also discover how literary connections are used to promote tourism and how this part of England, still known as 'Wessex', benefits from its literary benefactor.

This is a circular walk that starts and ends in the hamlet of Higher Bockhampton. It is an easy walk of about 5 ½ miles though there are one or two gentle gradients up through the farmland and woodland paths and down through the heath and plantations.

Directions 1

From the information boards in the car park follow the footpath up into the woods signposted 'Hardy's Cottage via woodland'. Follow the main path upwards. Stop where the path levels off.

2. The whispering woods

Thorncombe Wood

Pause for a moment here in Thorncombe Wood and take a good look around. At first glance it's easy just to see trees but if you look closely you'll see the woods are made up from different species including oak, chestnut, silver birch and beech. Thorncombe is designated as Ancient Woodland, meaning land that has had continuous woodland cover since at least 1600.

The lowlands of Britain were once almost entirely covered with broadleaved woodland like this but now just ten per cent is covered with trees and only two per cent is classified as ancient woodland. Later on the walk we'll see examples of conifer plantations which have been deliberately planted for commercial timber production.



The whispering woods
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Thomas Hardy would probably have been able to identify all the different tree species in these woods. As a child the young Hardy enjoyed quiet pursuits, spending time alone wandering the countryside, familiarising himself with the native flora and fauna of his home county. And who else but Hardy would have been able to identify the individual sounds of different trees? In the opening of his novel *Under the Greenwood Tree* he tells us that:

To dwellers in a wood almost every species of tree has its voice as well as its feature. At the passing of the breeze the fir-trees sob and moan no less distinctly than they rock; the holly whistles as it battles with itself; the ash hisses amid its quiverings; the beech rustles while its flat boughs rise and fall. And winter, which modifies the note of such trees as shed their leaves, does not destroy its individuality.

In our modern society, speeding from place to place, we rarely have time for such observations. Stop still for a moment here in these woods and take time to listen to the sounds of the trees.

Directions 2

Take the path to the left signposted 'Hardy's Cottage' and follow it through the woods. At a junction of paths, turn left downhill with a fence on your left. Hardy's Cottage is at the bottom. Turn left around the corner and stop outside the gate into the garden. You may wish to go inside the garden and cottage. It is owned by the National Trust and there is an entrance charge for non-members. Opening times vary throughout the year.

3. A humble cottage

Hardy's Cottage

Thomas Hardy was born in 1840 here in this rather humble, thatched cottage in the middle of the woods. Nowadays it has become a much trod mecca for fans of the writer but this wild and remote place was a lonely spot when the Hardy family first moved here. Hardy's oldest surviving poem, written when he was just 16, conveys that loneliness:

*Our house stood quite alone, and those tall firs
and beeches were not planted. Snakes and efts
swarmed in the summer days, and nightly bats
would fly about our bedrooms. Heathcroppers
lived on the hills, and were our only friends;
So wild it was when first we settled here.*



Hardy's Cottage
Dick Bateman © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Although the cottage was isolated and lonely people did visit. It is said that Hardy's grandfather allowed smugglers to use the cottage as a place to store their contraband.



The back of Hardy's cottage
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Dorset was a rural and sparsely-populated county.

Many people who worked the land were very poor. Importing goods, usually liquor, from cross-channel boats under the cover of darkness in order to flout excise regulations could be a lucrative sideline.

Here, within a few miles of the coast, it was a temptation that some families could not overlook. There is still a peep hole by the door from which the Hardy family could keep watch for the customs men!

Directions 3

From the cottage gate, return to the crossroads of tracks. Stop by the stone obelisk.

4. Life loyalties

The American Hardy Society Monument



The American Hardy Society Monument
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Hardy is without a doubt one of our most popular and best-loved writers. Though his work is deeply entrenched in the English countryside he is loved and admired all over the world.

In fact this area of Dorset is something of a literary mecca for Hardy fans, attracting visitors from every corner of the globe, supporting a lively and lucrative tourist industry. This monument, erected in 1931 with funds raised 'by a few of his American admirers', is a reflection of his worldwide appeal.

Here 'under the greenwood tree' it is tempting to dwell on the clichéd image of Hardy as a lone figure out wandering the woods or striding across the heath; a man more at one with nature than society. But this romantic view of him wouldn't be accurate.

Although the following poem begins with Hardy escaping to the wood 'city opprest' he soon recognises that nature is not a passive, peaceful place from which to shelter from the world.



Inscription on the monument
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

*Heart-halt and spirit-lame,
City-opprest,
Unto this wood I came
As to a nest;
Dreaming that sylvan peace
Offered the harrowed ease--
Nature a soft release
From men's unrest.*

*But, having entered in,
Great growths and small
Show them to men akin -
Combatants all!...
Sycamore shoulders oak,
Bines the slim sapling yoke,
Ivy-spun halters choke
Elms stout and tall.*

*Since, then, no grace I find
Taught me of trees.
Turn I back to my kind,
Worthy as these.
There at least smiles abound,
There discourse trills around,
There, now and then, are found
Life-loyalties.*



Trees in Thorncombe Wood
Jenny Lunn / Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

In our popular imagination and in the tourist brochures Dorset tends to be a benign and picturesque land of rolling hills and cream teas but as we'll find out later on Hardy wasn't afraid to contemplate the harsh truths of this rugged landscape.

Directions 4

Retrace your steps uphill with Hardy's Cottage on your right. At the top turn left along the footpath signposted 'Rushy Pond'. Follow the path through the woods with a fence on your right. At the next signpost go through the gate. Walk round Rushy Pond keeping the water on your right. Look for a wooden entrance/stile to your left in the bushes bearing the words 'Roman Road'. Stop beside this track.

5. Roman motorway

Roman Road signpost near Rushy Pond

Look at the signpost here and you will see that it says Roman Road. It was built nearly 2,000 years ago to link London and Exeter. The road was built on an earthwork 15 feet high and 85 feet across but was hidden for many years by the dense forest. It was only uncovered when the Forestry Commission began clearing the conifer plantations in order to restore the natural heathland.

The Roman Road is now a scheduled ancient monument. This section was built to link Dorchester with Badbury Rings, a local Roman hill fort. Evidence suggests that it was built as a show road, designed to flaunt the impressive might of the marching army to their best advantage.



A cleared section of Roman Road
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain



The Roman Road cuts a path across the heath
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Despite the popular belief that all Roman roads are straight some of them were built with curves and bends. This road, however, goes straight up steep slopes whereas it would probably have been much easier to build a snaking road through these hills.

Taking into consideration that the landscape would have been much more open than today, it would have been a spectacular sight to see the large Roman army, their armour glinting in the sunlight, marching in unison up the hill. The local people who saw them would have been absolutely in awe of the might of the Roman military.

Directions 5

Turn left and go through the tunnel of bushes and out onto a broad, straight path which is signposted 'Roman Road Permissive Path'. This path passes through a mixture of heathland and forest plantation. Stop in a convenient place to admire the open heathland.

6. Manmade landscape

Bhompston Heath

One of the most prominent features in Hardy's great novel *The Return of the Native* isn't a human figure but a physical place: Egdon Heath.

This area, Bhompston Heath, was part of it and is a good place to stop and contemplate the heathland landscape that was hugely inspirational for Hardy.

Many of the novel's main events happen on and around the heath and each character in the story has their own special relationship with this landscape. You could even argue that Hardy endowed the heath with human characteristics.



Views across the open heath towards conifer plantations
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

It was at present a place perfectly accordant with man's nature – neither ghastly, hateful, nor ugly; neither commonplace, unmeaning, nor tame; but, like man, slighted and enduring; and withal singularly colossal and mysterious in its swarthy monotony.



Colourful gorse
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

What do you think of this landscape? Do you find it 'colossal and mysterious' like Hardy? Your attitude probably depends a lot on the season, time of day and weather. The heath can appear bleak and desolate in dull weather but if the sun is out and the gorse is in flower it will feel quite different.

At first glance it might seem that nothing much grows here. A heath is characterised as 'a tract of open and uncultivated land; wasteland overgrown with shrubs.' The thin, sandy soils let rainwater drain away most nutrients, leaving only hardy plants like heather, gorse and the odd scrubby birch tree able to tolerate the dry conditions and poor soil.

Though this might seem like a natural landscape it's actually entirely manmade. Heaths like these were actually created by humans during the Bronze Age when the original native woodlands were cleared for farming and settlement.

The heath would have been used for grazing cattle and ponies and the heather turfs and gorse that grow here were an important source of fuel.

For Hardy the heath was a permanent, unchanging landscape as captured in this description: *the great inviolate place had an ancient permanence, which the sea cannot claim.*



View over Bhompston Heath towards Duddle Heath
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain



Removal of conifer plantations
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Around 70 per cent of heathland has been lost since Hardy's time. Much of the heath was destroyed in the 1950s and 60s when the area was planted with conifer trees.

However, at the time of creating this walk, a project to clear one of the existing plantations and allow the regeneration of the heathland was underway.

You'll hear more about this land management when we stop at Duddle Heath a little further on.

Directions 6

Continue along the Roman Road for about 300 metres until it kinks to the right. Take the right fork in the track and pass through the kissing gate. Stop by the deep hole on the opposite side of the track.

7. A sinking feeling

Swallet hole by the Roman Road

This deep crater beside the path is called a swallet hole. A swallet or sinkhole is a hollow in the ground that forms when water dissolves the surface rock. Acidic rainwater gathered underground here dissolves the chalk rock and ultimately weakens it until it collapses in on itself. There are said to be more than 370 swallet holes in this area of the Puddletown Forest.



The landscape is pock-marked by swallet holes
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The enormous swallet hole by the path
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Thomas Hardy uses a swallet hole as the setting for a scene in *Far From the Madding Crowd*. In a chapter called 'The Hollow Amid the Ferns' he uses the swallet hole as a stage on which to set the burgeoning love affair of Troy and Bathsheba. His description of the hollow is very similar to the one we can see here and might well be the direct inspiration for this scene.

The pit was a saucer-shaped concave, naturally formed, with a diameter of about thirty feet, and shallow enough to allow the sunshine to reach their heads. Standing in the centre, the sky overhead was met by a circular horizon of fern.

If you feel brave enough, climb down into the swallet hole and look up at the sky for a different point of view.

Directions 7

Turn right along the track keeping the fence on your right. After about 250 metres where the path starts to go downhill, look for a gate in the fence on the right. Go through the gate and follow the path for about 30 metres to a rounded mound. Stop on top of the mound to take in the view.

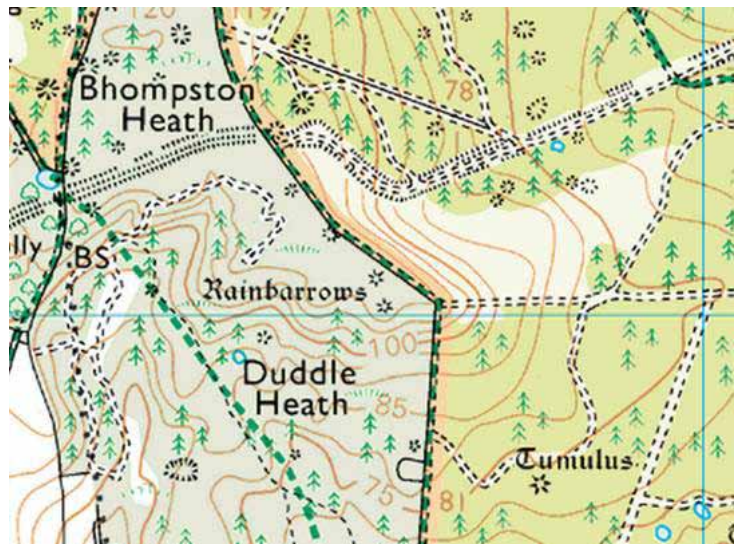
8. Rounds and hollows

Rainbarrows

If you look at the map, you'll see the words Rainbarrows and Tumulus, as well as the symbol for the latter which is like a small star.

The rounded mound of earth you're standing on is an ancient burial mound also known as a barrow. There are three barrows grouped here, known locally as Rainbarrows. They were built by Bronze Age people three to four thousand years ago to bury their dead.

It is estimated that there were around 2,000 round barrows in Dorset but many have been destroyed, mostly excavated and damaged by people searching for grave goods.



Map showing rainbarrows and a series of tumuli on Duddle Heath
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This barrow was excavated by Edward Cunnington in 1887 and he discovered cremation urns which he gave to the Dorset County Museum.

Hardy exploited the symbolism of the Rainbarrows in his novels. In this scene from *The Return of the Native* the landscape becomes nightmarish and threatening with death all around:



One of the rainbarrows

© Nigel Mykura, Geograph (Creative Commons License)

...she followed the path towards Rainbarrow, occasionally stumbling over twisted furze roots, tufts of rushes, or oozing lumps of fleshy fungi, which at this season lay scattered about the heath like the rotten liver and lungs of some colossal animal. The moon and stars were closed up by cloud and rain to the degree of extinction. It was a night which led the traveller's thoughts instinctively to dwell on nocturnal scenes of disaster in the chronicles of the world, on all that is terrible and dark in history and legend...

Hopefully your own experience of this landscape is not quite so terrible!

On a clear day there are breathtaking views across the Frome valley below. In fact you're standing in the footsteps of Tess D'Urberville, Hardy's tragic heroine in the novel of the same name. She stops here to gaze out over the fertile valley:

...she found herself on a summit commanding the long sought for vale, the valley of the Great Dairies, the valley in which milk and butter grew to rankness ... the verdant plain so well watered by the river Var or Froom.



View from the Rainbarrows into the Frome Valley
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Directions 8

Retrace your steps back to the gate and turn right. Follow the path downhill keeping the fence on your right. Where the path forks, keep right and follow it down through the trees. After the steep descent the path levels off and there is a track off to the left. Stop at this junction.

9. Hardy's heath

Duddle Heath

Here at Duddle Heath we can see how the commercial plantations of conifers from the 1950s and 60s have been cut back and the heathland restored, reinstating the landscape that Hardy himself would have been familiar with.

The heathland may look scruffy and abandoned but this is actually its natural state. This kind of landscape is known as a 'mosaic' and you'll find gorse, different varieties of heather (including cross-leaved, bell heather and ling) bracken, holly, oak and birch trees. This unique habitat is home to adders as well as rare birds including the Dartford warbler, yellowhammer and nightjar.



Heath ponies like to nibble the gorse
Jenny Lunn © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

You might also spot ponies grazing on the heath. They were deliberately introduced to help manage the scrub habitat. They graze on grasses and new shoots of brambles and birch trees but avoid the heather, effectively allowing the heathland plants to prosper and grow. Without this land management system the area would turn to scrubland and become poor secondary woodland and the fragile ecosystem of the heathland would be lost.

Hardy would have been familiar with the ponies or 'heath croppers' as he called them. In his day they were used as workhorses but now retired ponies are used and they have nothing more arduous to do than graze the scrub. However, they provide a neat link to the landscape that Hardy was familiar with and are a pretty sight to behold.

Directions 9

Continue straight down the track ignoring the track off to the left. At the next junction (where another track goes off to the left) carry straight on over another rise. At the next corner the main track goes to the left and there is a stile to the right. Do not take either but go straight on through the bushes on a waymarked path. After a very short distance cross a stile into an open field and walk to the left, keeping to the fence. Cross the stile onto the lane and go straight across to the farm track. On the brick building is a sign 'Public footpath to Bockhampton and Dorchester'. Stop after the farmhouse looking out over the outbuildings and fields of the farm.

10. Land of milk and butter

Norris Mill Farm

The modern grey cattle sheds belong to Norris Mill Farm whose cows graze these low-lying fields.

Dairy farming is usually associated with drained floodplains like these because the damp, rich alluvial silt left behind after the river floods grows nutritious grass which in turn provides spring, summer and autumn food for cattle.

Though you might be lucky enough to spot cattle grazing today this area is no longer the 'Vale of Great Dairies' that Hardy wrote about.



Fertile fields on the lower-lying land below the heath
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

In the nineteenth century dairy farming was a very lucrative business and, for Tess d'Urberville, life as a dairymaid was a respectable profession. This description of milking the cows suggests another age from our own:

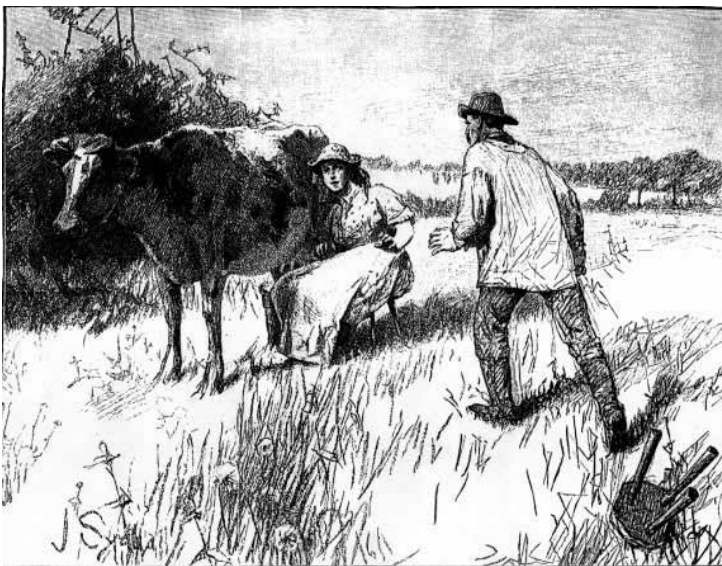


Illustration from *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891)
showing Hardy's heroine at work as a dairy maid
[Wikimedia Commons](#)

The red and white herd nearest at hand, which had been phlegmatically waiting for the call, now trooped towards the steading in the background, their great bags of milk swinging under them as they walked . . .

The milkers formed quite a little battalion of men and maids, the men operating on the hard-teated animals, the maids on the kindlier natures. It was a large dairy. There were nearly a hundred milchers ... all told...

Unlike Hardy's red and white herd of Dairy Shorthorns now nine out of ten dairy cows in Britain have the black and white markings of the Holstein-Friesian breed. This breed is preferred because they're bigger and produce much more milk.

Milking methods have also changed greatly. Milking by hand has now gone and instead dairy herds are milked by machine, some even by robotic machines where cows are free to wander in for milking when they choose.

'A hundred milchers' would have been quite a large herd for Hardy's time. Nowadays the average herd size is 113.

Compare this to the 'mega dairies' in countries like the United States that house up to 15,000 cows in a completely indoor, mechanised environment.



Cows at Norris Mill Farm
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

There is a danger that Britain might follow suit. Competitive supermarket pricing and the centralised way in which we buy our food is pushing two dairy farmers out of business every week. Can you imagine the English landscape without the sight of cows grazing on it?

Directions 10

From Norris Mill Farm continue straight along the farm track which is signposted as a public footpath. Go over the rise in the track and under telegraph wires into a field. Walk diagonally right across the field heading directly towards Duddle Farm, an imposing brick building with white windows.

Cross a stile through the hedgerow and head across the next field heading for the right hand end of the farm's barn. Cross another stile onto a track and straight across over another stile which leads 30 metres to a pair of stiles (one with a 'your dog can scare or harm farm animals' sign). The path leads downhill with telegraph wires running in parallel on the left.

At the bottom of the slope go over the stile by the gate and follow the footpath to the left. After wet weather it may be very muddy here so you can walk parallel to the path higher up the valley side. After about 250 metres follow the path round the right hand side of the first building. Stop by the stile.

11. Return of the native?

Bhompston Farm

You are now within a small complex of buildings which comprise Bhompston Farm. It is thought to be what Hardy called Blooms-End Farm, the family home of the Yeobrights in *The Return of The Native*.

The farm used to sit at the edge of what Hardy called Egdon Heath. In *The Return of the Native* this is an important place where the furze (or gorse) cutters who worked on the heath met the farmers of the vale.



Workers furze cutting open heathland (c.1885)
Wikimedia Commons

In 1986 Bhompston was recorded as having 120 acres of grazing land and keeping 100 beef cattle but times have changed.

Nowadays you'd be hard pressed to find many working farms in the Frome Valley. Bhompston is still a working beef farm run by the Wakely family. It has been handed down through five generations and they are still managing to make ends meet.



Eustacia watches Clym cut furze
Illustration by Arthur Hopkins for the first
edition of *The Return of the Native* (1878)
Wikimedia Commons



Young calf
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Many of the farms we pass on this walk have been bought as second homes. Here the main old Bhompston Farmhouse belongs to a family from London who use it as their summer home.

Second homes are common in the south west of England as it's a picturesque and generally sunny part of the country. But when many local people can't afford a home of their own holiday houses are a controversial issue. On the flipside old farmhouses do make attractive homes and you could argue that it's far better that the original building is preserved, lived in and loved rather than allowed to go to ruin.



Signs to the different buildings within Bhompston Farm
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Directions 11

Make your way up the track between the cottages of Bhompston Farm. Where the track bends round to the right signposted 'Thorncombe Wood' go straight on between the farmhouse on the left and some stables on the right. After about 20 metres go through the gate signposted 'Lwr Bock'ton'.

Follow the path across the field, over a stile and through a gate. There may be cattle grazing in the next field so take care and keep dogs on a lead. Cross the field to the next farm buildings and go through three gates which take you through the outbuildings of Kingston Dairy Farm and onto a lane.

At the T-junction turn left down the hill, past a lovely thatched cottage and over a bridge (Don't damage it, you could get "Transported For Life").

After the bridge turn immediately right along the footpath at the side of the stream. Continue along the footpath with the stream on your right until a farm track crosses at right angles, with two metal gates. Stop here and admire the view across the fields on your left and right.



12. Riverside ramble

Floodplain beside the River Frome

We've just been walking along part of the drainage scheme for the River Frome. The flat fields you can see on both sides are the river's floodplain.

Although Hardy is known for his romantic – you might even say spiritual – relationship with the landscape he also understood the physical processes that shaped it. In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* he tells us that the River Frome:

... had stolen from the higher tracts and brought in particles to the vale all this horizontal land; and now, exhausted, aged, and attenuated, lay serpentine along through the midst of its former spoils.



River Frome and watermeadows
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain



Drainage channels on the floodplain
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Hardy uses some lovely imagery but to put it more 'geographically' the valley plain was formed when the rocks of the uplands, broken into pieces by frost, were washed into streams.

There they knocked and jostled against each other to form minute and rounded grains of silt which the River Frome then carried down into the lowlands.

When the Frome floods it deposits the silt on its riverbanks and nearby fields, to form the flat flood plain that we see today.

Silt forms very fertile soil and so the grass grown on the floodplain is highly nutritious. But farmers can't risk growing expensive crops here in case of flooding so they graze sheep and cows which benefit from the rich grass.

Since dairymaids of Tess's time stood here the landscape has certainly changed. The open fields which Hardy described as *stretching from east to west as far as the eye could reach* have become enclosed into smaller, hedged fields so that now you can only see as far as the next hedge.

Hardy set his novel in the early nineteenth century at a time when landowners were still 'enclosing' the land. Previously there was an open field system in which villagers were allocated a number of strips of land for subsistence farming. The Enclosures Act divided up land for rich landowners to buy, taking away poorer people's right to common land and many livelihoods but arguably making British farming more efficient.

The enclosed fields aren't the only physical change in this landscape. Some parts of the stream, such as this one we are walking along, have been straightened by landowners to help drain the floodplain and make it more productive.



Straightened section of the River Frome
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Directions 12

Continue straight ahead through a tunnel of trees with drainage streams on both side of the path. Shortly after crossing a low brick bridge over a wider stream, take the footpath on the right signposted 'Stinsford'. Go through the gate into the churchyard, walk past the church and stop by Hardy's gravestone which is near the top gate.

13. “I left my heart...”

Hardy’s grave, St Michael’s churchyard

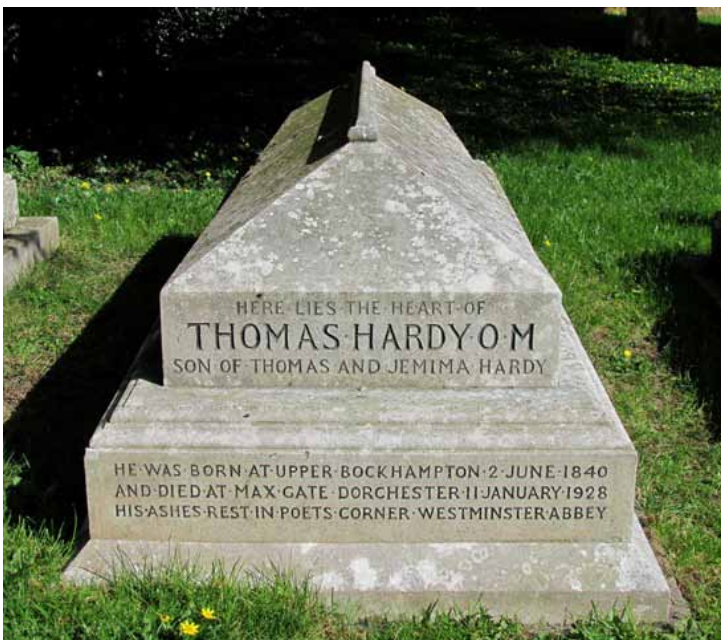
I shall sleep quite calmly at Stinsford, whatever happens.

So said Thomas Hardy of this peaceful spot. His heart was duly buried here when he died in 1928.

St Michael’s in Stinsford was Thomas Hardy’s parish church. His father and grandfather came here every Sunday to worship. They also played violin and cello in the church band. Hardy came to regard it as *the most hallowed spot in the country* - it was important to his sense of history and family. He and his family wanted his remains to be laid to rest here in this churchyard but it was not to be.



St Michael’s Church
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain



The grave where Hardy’s heart is buried
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

As one of England’s greatest novelists many called for Hardy to be interred in Westminster Abbey with other notable authors such as Dickens, Tennyson and Chaucer. Stinsford’s local vicar, Rev Cowley, came up with a compromise: that his heart be buried in Stinsford and his ashes in Poet’s Corner, Westminster Abbey.

Like many other graves of literary figures this humble churchyard is a much-visited spot and it has become an essential stop on the Hardy tourist trail. Another famous poet is also buried here: Cecil Day-Lewis, Poet Laureate from 1968-72, and grandfather of the actor Daniel Day-Lewis. He specifically asked to be buried here close to Thomas Hardy.

Directions 13

Walk back down the path to the church and enter through the main door.

14. Mellstock Church

Inside St Michael's Church

St Michael's Church, its choristers and congregation were immortalised by Thomas Hardy in *Under the Greenwood Tree* where it was re-named 'Mellstock'.

The novel centres on the characters of the Mellstock parish choir who would have stood and sung down to the congregation from the gallery.

The gallery of Mellstock church had a status and sentiment of its own. A stranger there was regarded with a feeling altogether differing from that of the congregation below towards him ...



The organ and choir loft
Jenny Lunn © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

The gallery too, looked down upon and knew the habits of the nave ... and had an extensive stock of exclusive information about it; whilst the nave knew nothing of the gallery folk ... beyond their loud sounding minims and chest notes.

Parts of the original Quire Gallery were taken down in 1843 and 1908 but recently the gallery has been restored. Other than that the church hasn't changed much at all from when Hardy wrote about it.

What is different now, though, is the number of people from all over the world who now seek out this little church to pay homage to the great author. At the bottom of the gallery steps is a Visitors' Book. It's quite an interesting read. When we created this walk visitors had come from USA, Wales, Germany, Poland, France, Norway, Canada and New Zealand in the previous month.

Directions 14

Leave the churchyard by the upper gate and walk up the road with cottages on the left and farm buildings on the right. Follow the road over a rise then take the first road off to the right. Pass three entranceways on the right including Stinsford Farmhouse and the entrance to a farmyard and the end of a tarmac road. Take the next right turn which is the main driveway of Kingston Maurward College. There is no footpath and it can be busy with vehicles so please take care. Continue ahead, passing a road on the right marked no entry which leads up to the main house. Find somewhere safe to stop on the next stretch of the driveway looking towards the main house.

15. Farming today

Kingston Maurward College

This impressive Georgian mansion was built by George Pitt, cousin of Prime Minister William Pitt the Elder, who had dominated English politics in the eighteenth century.

It also features in Hardy's first published novel *Desperate Remedies* as Knapwater House.

Today the building is Kingston Maurward College, a higher education institution training the future Giles Winterbournes, Tess Durbeyfields and Gabriel Oaks in how to make a living from the Wessex countryside.



The impressive Kingston Maurward College building
Jenny Lunn © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Farming has seen many changes since Hardy's time. Different breeds are now selected for maximum yield. Earlier we saw the black and white Holstein-Friesians which Hardy wouldn't have recognised. Pig and sheep breeds have changed too. The Wessex Saddleback pig, which once grazed the forests, is now a rare breed. The Large White, a hardy breed with large litters, is the most popular pig in commercial breeding.



Many breeds of farm animal are looked after at the college including some Hardy wouldn't have recognised
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Most sheep will only come into season in the autumn in order to lamb in Spring but the Dorset breeds are particularly unusual in that they can lamb at any time of year. Usually it would be too cold in December for lambs to graze but here in Dorset frost was kept off the water meadow pastures by flooding them with a very thin layer of chalk stream water.

Once upon a time there would have been full-time employees on farms like the Kingston Maurward Estate whose job it was to keep the drainage channels and the dams dug out so that warm(er) water could be channelled across the grass to feed the lambs.



Spring lambs
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Directions 15

The walk route continues straight along the road and through the car park following signs for the Old Manor. However, you may wish to bear right into the courtyard to the left of the main house where there is a café and some toilets. Please do not walk elsewhere in the college other than on public rights of way.

If you do not wish to go to the café, continue straight along the road through the car park. Follow it as it bears round to the right. Stop in front of the Old Manor House.

If you do go into the café, leave the courtyard and go down the steps into the car park. Follow the gravel path which leads across grass then turn right onto the road in front of the Old Manor House.

16. Imaginary county

The Old Manor House

This magnificent Elizabethan manor house, once described by the architectural scholar, Nicholas Pevsner, as 'refined to a point of perfection', was originally built in the 1590s.

When the Georgian building that we saw at the last stop was commissioned in 1700, this older house became subordinate and then run-down as the estate passed through various owners.

It featured in Hardy's first published novel, *Desperate Remedies*, in 1871 in what he might have called 'reduced circumstances':



The Old Manor House, now lovingly restored
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

...that's the old manor-house-or rather all that's left of it [...] tis now divided into three cottages. Respectable people didn't care to live there [...] tis so awkward and unhandy [...] much of it has been pulled down, and the rooms that are left won't do very well for a small residence [...] dismal, too, and like most old houses stands too low down in the hollow to be healthy.

Dorset County Council bought The Old Manor House in 1947 and converted it into five private residences for council tenants. By the late 1950s it had fallen into disuse again and was left derelict. It was scheduled for demolition but then saved and lovingly restored. It now functions as a luxury hotel complete with four-poster beds and beauty treatments.

The hotel describes itself as 'located in the heart of Thomas Hardy's Wessex countryside'. The idea of 'Wessex' or 'Hardy Country' is still a big draw for visitors and is heavily promoted by the Dorset tourist industry. Rather like the Lake District, Bath or even the Kent Marshes these landscapes are bound up with the writers who immortalised them. Whether Hardy, the Lakeland poets, Jane Austen or Charles Dickens our relationship to these places is often shaped by the way they have been conjured up in literature.

Visitors can drink tea in the Casterbridge Tearooms in Dorchester and sleep in a hotel room named after characters from *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. If you came by train you might have arrived on the Wessex Scot or the Thomas Hardy Flyer. Tourism now accounts for a large portion of the local economy.



Thomas Hardy's Ale, the Original Thomas Hardy pub in Dorchester and The Mayor of Casterbridge locomotive on the Heart of Wessex Line
Wikimedia Commons / © Roger Templeman via Geograph / © Chris McKenna via Wikimedia Commons

Directions 16

In front of the Old Manor House turn left between college buildings. Where the road bends up to the right go straight on signposted 'Higher Bockhampton and Waterstone Ridge'. Go through the gate, cross the track and through another gate onto a path between grazing paddocks.

When you reach a road go straight across. After passing through two gates take the footpath which goes diagonally right up the field signposted 'Higher Bockhampton'. At the crest of the hill follow the fence, through a gate and up the left hand side of the next field. At the next gate turn right along the track. Stop beside a side gate on the left hand side looking into new barn-like buildings.

17. A new lease of life

Hampton Farm Business Park

Stop here for a moment and look around at this collection of farm buildings and units. It looks like a farm; the barns and outbuildings are recognisable but where are the animals?

In fact this used to be a chicken farm but when the farmer could no longer make a living from it, the farm became derelict until it was converted into individual business units and reborn as Hampton Farm Business Park. In one barn are vintage cars; in another is a hi-tech acoustics company. It's a far cry from chicken farming.



Hampton Farm Business Park
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain



There are more units available
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

You might not expect your walk to take you to a modern business park but this is reflective of how the way we work is changing. As many traditional jobs are disappearing the number of self-employed people and new businesses are growing. Improved digital communication also means that business can be based almost anywhere.

This kind of change would have been hard to imagine in Hardy's time. Though his novels celebrate rural traditions, he himself lived in a world which was rapidly changing. Fields were being enclosed, farming was being mechanised and people were flocking to jobs in town and cities leaving the countryside behind.

The Wessex he depicted, in which people's lives were tied up with and dependent on the land, represents a time at odds with the industrialisation and urbanisation of late Victorian England.

Directions 17

Continue along the track and turn left when you reach the road. Stop outside the two flint houses on the right hand side.

18. Chalk and flint

Flint houses, Higher Bockhampton

As we near the end of our walk stop and admire the pair of flint houses. At a distance you might mistake them for old cottages but in fact they are newly built. They blend with the landscape and seem 'natural' because they were made using flint, a local building material.

Flint was a traditional building material in places underlain by chalk rock (like Dorset) as it is made of hard silica and weathers slowly.

Had he stood here Hardy too might have stopped to admire these houses. Before finding success as a novelist he had trained as an architect.

His father was a stonemason so he knew a fair bit about building materials. In the novel *Jude the Obscure* Hardy makes the main character a stonemason.

Later in life he had his own house built – Max Gate – a turreted red brick building in Dorchester and a far cry from the humble two-bedroom cottage of his childhood.



The two new flint cottages
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Directions 18

After the second flint house turn right down the lane signposted 'Higher Bockhampton and Hardy's Cottage'. At the bottom of the slope turn right along the lane to Thorncombe Wood car park where we started.

19. Hardy Country

Thorncombe Wood car park

I hope this walk has allowed you to enjoy a range of landscapes – woodland, parkland, heathland, farmland, water meadows and picturesque villages.

Thomas Hardy's depiction of rural landscapes still enchants us but he also introduced his readers to the realities of life in the countryside which I hope this walk has also shown you.

During the walk we discovered how the some of the landscapes such as the woods seem unchanged since Hardy's time, while others such as the 'Vale of Great Dairies' have changed as dairy farming becomes less profitable and old farmhouses have been sold for property development.

We also found out how the land is actively managed and found parallels with techniques used in Hardy's time. We even came across some landscapes being changed back to what they once were, such as Duddle Heath where conifer plantations are being cleared to extend the area of 'natural' heathland.

Tourists come from around the world to see the landscapes and buildings that Hardy described. Dorset has become a literary mecca and 'Hardy Country' is a shorthand for this part of Southwest England. While tourism is vital to the economy this is still a working, and productive landscape that (as in Hardy's time) still provides a livelihood for thousands of people.



Partly real, partly dream...
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Further information

Find out more about the walk story and places of interest along the route:

The Thomas Hardy Association

www.thethomashardyassociation.org

The Thomas Hardy Society

www.hardysociety.org

Kingston Maurward College

www.kmc.ac.uk

The National Trust - Hardy's Cottage

www.nationaltrust.org.uk/hardys-cottage

The Nature of Dorset - Puddletown Forest

www.natureofdorset.co.uk/sites/puddletown-forest

The Nature of Dorset - Thorncombe Wood and Duddle Heath

www.natureofdorset.co.uk/sites/thorncombe-wood-and-duddle-heath

St Michael's Church, Stinsford

www.achurchnearyou.com/st-michaels-stinsford

Visit Dorset

www.visit-dorset.com

Credits

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