

Thomas Hardy Society – Walks

Hardy's Weymouth (Budmouth) – by foot

(2 miles)

(OS Explorer Map OL15)

(CP = *The Complete Poems* ed. by James Gibson)

Start from Weymouth Railway Station yard, turn left past the magnificent Somerset pub *towards* Victoria's (50th) Jubilee Clock – on reaching the Esplanade, you are confronted by the beautiful blue bay stretching from the Cliffs of White Nose on your left to Nothe Fort on your right.

Turn left past Royal Crescent to Belvidere Terrace, at the further end of which stood the Belvidere Hotel (now probably The Langham) where Miss Aldclyffe interviewed Cytherea in *Desperate Remedies*. Then follows the far grander Victoria Terrace, occupied mainly by the magnificent Hotel Prince Regent (formerly the Hotel Burdon). Hardy records how in April 1869 - having just been interviewed by Crickmay, who had absorbed Hicks' architectural practice on the latter's death – he stood 'opposite the Burdon Hotel on the Esplanade, facing the beautiful sunlit bay' listening to the band playing a Strauss Waltz. Forty-eight years later this 'spot of time' resurfaced in a poem entitled 'At a Seaside Town in 1869 (*Young Lover's Reverie*)' (CP 447):

The boats, the sands, the esplanade,
The laughing crowd;
Light-hearted, loud
Greetings from some not ill-endowed;

The evening sunlit cliffs, the talk
Hailings and halts,
The keen sea-salts,
The band, the Morgenblatter Waltz

Whilst working for Crickmay, Hardy enjoyed all the pleasures of a summer seaside resort – swimming in the mornings from the shingle beach to the north of the bandstand and towards Preston – and rowing in the bay in the evenings.

Retrace your steps now along the front or on the beach with views ahead of the harbour with Portland behind, topped by the Verne Prison. Beyond the Jubilee Clock, stands the Royal Hotel, a Victorian rebuilding of the original Old Royal Hotel, past whose 'two semi-circular bays' Dick drives Fancy in *Under the Greenwood Tree*. In the Assembly Rooms here King George III and his daughters used to dance during their many visits to Weymouth, a red cord separating the royal party from the townsfolk.

On reaching the Tea Cabin, cross the road to inspect the recently-restored statue of King George, the lion and the unicorn - and his adjoining bathing-machine. In *The Trumpet-Major*, Bob Loveday, disappointed in love, was walking disconsolately along the esplanade when an episode occurs

which Hardy had carefully transcribed from a contemporary newspaper report:

The royal bathing-machine had been drawn out just as Bob reached Gloucester Buildings ... immediately that the King's machine had entered the water a group of florid men with fiddles, violoncellos, a trombone, and a drum, came forward, packed themselves into another machine that was in waiting, and were drawn out into the waves in the King's rear. All that was to be heard for a few minutes were the slow pulsations of the sea; and then a deafening noise burst from the interior of the second machine ... the condensed mass of musicians inside, striking up the strains of 'God save the King,' as his Majesty's head rose from the water ... a performance ... possibly in the watery circumstances tolerated rather than desired by that dripping monarch.

Bear diagonally right to walk down Westham Road, turning right into Park Street. The castellated Salvation Army citadel on the corner occupies the site of 1, West Parade where Hardy lodged in 1872. Turn left into Wooperton Street – Hardy lodged intermittently at No. 3 (see plate on wall) between 1869-71, here writing most of *Desperate Remedies* and many poems.

Continue past Hardy's lodging towards Westham Bridge, bearing left along the quayside path beside the marina – admire the boats and their names! On reaching the car park, follow the old railway track as it curves towards the bulk of Holy Trinity Church, then past the Sailor's Return, under the bridge and up the steps on your left onto 'The Harbour Bridge' (CP 742) – here Mlle V- collapses at the sight of Monsieur G- in 'A Committee-Man of the Terror', thus starting a troubled liaison. The Bridge also forms the setting for a relationship based on mistaken identity in 'The Contretemps' (CP 539):

'One pairing is as good as another
Where all is venture! Take each other,
And scrap the oaths that you have aforesaid made' ...

Weymouth harbour forms the likely setting for 'The Newcomers Wife' – the tale of another Matilda Johnson and her naive lover (CP 304).

Cross the Opening Bridge with extensive views over the harbour – follow the path along the further quayside. You are now in Weymouth proper, having until now (historically speaking at least) been in the separate resort of Melcombe Regis. Note the boat trips on offer, including a Whitewater Ride to Lulworth and back – but sadly not stopping there. Hardy's first definite reference to Weymouth is a diary entry dated 26/8/68 when he travels from Weymouth to Lulworth by steamboat with his sister Mary.

From the Quay bear first-right up Trinity Street – on your right stands an early seventeenth-century house (see plaque), Hardy's Old Rooms Inn, a popular drinking place in *The Dynasts*. Here boatmen and burghers discuss Nelson's death at Trafalgar. Continue past the old cottages, left across the top end of Hope Square – past Brewers Quay – and straight on up the path ahead (Hill Lane) between walls, across Horsford Street, then up Look Out to the Nothe Gardens. This 'unique blend of recreation and wildlife areas' forms a wonderful and unexpected antidote to the bustling pressure of the town. Pause to breathe in the scenery.

In the cove below you Christoph waited with the boat he had stolen from the harbour to rendez-vous with 'The Melancholy Hussar of the German Legion', Matthaüs Tina on that fateful evening when Phyllis changed her mind. Beyond in Portland Harbour the Sailing events of the 2012 Olympics are scheduled to occur.

(From the cove, a diversion of one mile south along the coastal path – now shamefully temporarily diverted inland – brings you to the ruins of Sandsfoot Castle. This is Henry VIII's Castle, where Pierston and Avice failed to meet to 'carry out island custom in our courting' i.e. to ensure that Avice was pregnant before matrimony - principally because she 'does not think it good, even when there is property' involved. The castle is a picturesque cliff-top ruin, much eroded, and so securely fenced off as to render it virtually impregnable to the casual visitor – certainly no place to attempt 'island custom'!)

Otherwise, turn left, following the seaward path, then curving up to the greensward above Nothe Fort - originally commissioned in 1872 - now a Museum of Coastal Defence. Head inland – still on the upper (wooded) path above Barrack Road – from where there are fine views across Budmouth Harbour towards King George on his charger above the Bowleaze Holiday Park. On reaching the car park, turn right down steps to the quayside, where you can pick up the rowing boat ferry across the harbour. This is the original means of crossing the harbour; the ferrymen believe that their charter was granted by Queen Elizabeth for services in the war against the Spanish.

Once safely across, head straight to the beach and Esplanade – passing on your right the Pavilion Theatre where in September 1927 Hardy received a standing ovation at a dramatization of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. To your left admire Esplanade terrace leading round to the Baptist Chapel; ahead the beautiful curving sands are paralleled by curving façade of the houses. On this southern beach dogs are permitted all year round, there is sand sculpting, donkey rides and the funfair. This is the bright and lively seaside resort which throughout Hardy's writings appears the antithesis to sombre lonely Egdon. In the preface to *The Return of the Native*, Hardy wrote:

The date at which the following events are assumed to have occurred may be set down as between 1840 and 1850, when the old watering place herein called "Budmouth" still retained sufficient afterglow from its Georgian gaiety and prestige to lend it an absorbing attractiveness to the romantic and imaginative soul of a lonely dweller inland.

This is the Budmouth of the Hussar's Song from *The Dynasts*:

When we lay where Budmouth Beach is,
O, the girls were fresh as peaches,
With their tall and tossing figures and their eyes of blue and brown!
And our hearts would ache with longing
As we paced from our sing-singing,
With a smart *Clink! Clink!* up the Esplanade and down. (CP 930)

In Budmouth-Regis the young Pierston falls madly in love with a girl on horse-back who rides past and happens to smile at him – a reflection of Hardy's own experience aged 14, recounted in *The Early Life*. A number of poems recall Hardy's life as a young man (aged 30) in Weymouth including 'Her Father', 'At Waking', 'The Dawn after the Dance', 'At a Watering Place', 'An Ancient to Ancients', 'On the Esplanade' and 'Singing Lovers' (CPs 173,174,182,341,660,682 & 688). The latter two poems refer to boating on Weymouth bay; 'On the Esplanade' is one of a number of early poems which first surfaced as prose in *Desperate Remedies*. A boating accident at Budmouth-Regis is the sad conclusion to 'The History of the Hardcombes' – the bodies of the two lovers, mismatched in marriage, are washed up at Lulwind 'tightly locked in each other's arms, his lips upon hers ... in their death they were not divided'.

Turn away from the waterfront and cross the road to the further pavement – note Banus and the Dream-On Tea-Room on the corner of Bond Street – these mark the site of the Theatre Royal, visited by George III and where Matilda Johnson appears on stage in *The Trumpet-Major*. The rear night-club entrance to Banus in Bond Street still shows clear signs of the buildings original purpose.

Continue past King George to Moby Dicks Pub & Eating Place – this is Gloucester Lodge built by the King's brother in 1870 and used by George III as his regular summer residence for many years (see plaque). Hardy records in *The Trumpet-Major* how 'The fear of invasion was such that six frigates lay in the roads to ensure the safety of the royal family, and from the regiments of horse and foot quartered at the barracks, or encamped on the hills round about, a picket of a thousand men mounted guard every day in front of Gloucester Lodge, where the King resided'. 'High Limit Slots' now links Gloucester Lodge to the Royal Hotel (see plaque) - the old assembly rooms here are the setting for 'The Ballad of Love's Skeleton' (CP 915). Turn left beside Edwards Fish and Chip shop, bearing right to return to the Station.