

## Thomas Hardy Society – Walks

### Military Manoeuvres: *The Trumpet-Major & The Melancholy Hussar of the German Legion* -

a downland walk

(5 miles)

(OS Explorer Map OL15)

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

Start from The Springhead pub beside the millpond in Sutton Poyntz (NGR SY 707 837):

Immediately before her was the large, smooth millpond, over-full, and intruding into the hedge and into the road. The water, with its flowing leaves and spots of froth, was stealing away, like Time, under the dark arch, to tumble over the great slimy wheel within. On the other side of the millpond was an open place called the Cross, because it was three-quarters of one, two lanes and a cattle-drive meeting there. It was the general rendezvous and arena of the surrounding village. Behind this a steep slope rose high into the sky, merging in a wide and open down, now littered with sheep newly shorn.

From The Springhead, walk round the northern end of the millpond, the Cross, then follow path down west side of pond and past lower mill to rejoin Sutton Road – head south, turning right into Puddledock Lane; after the farm on your right, take footpath straight ahead along upper boundary of two fields (ignoring path to right), then turn sharp right uphill and follow obvious waymarked track through downland pasture to reach stile at Coombe Valley Road. Cross road and follow waymarked path ahead over rough steep field to pick up the South-West Coast Path across a field and then along an easy chalk track to Bincombe – your tranquillity disturbed by the builders of the Weymouth Relief Road determined to defy Hardy's assertion that 'Here stretch the downs, high and breezy and green, absolutely unchanged since those eventful days. A plough has never disturbed the turf, and the sod that was uppermost then is uppermost now'!

As the track descends into Bincombe to a gate under some trees, the irregular plot on your right is all that remains of Dr Grove's house and garden where Phyllis sat on the wall, awaiting Mattheus Tina. Remember Hardy's statement that 'Phyllis told me the story with her own lips. She was then an old lady of seventy-five, and her auditor a lad of fifteen'. Bincombe - unlike its neighbours – has managed to keep the modern world at bay – no hideous development – it remains a jewel – a tiny tranquil piece of old Dorset – church and farm and cottages and 'village square'. Although half-a-mile away the monstrous earth-movers have destroyed the downland to construct another highway to nowhere, Bincombe remains safely hidden behind its protective Knoll. The Church and tree-lined graveyard diffuse a true religious serenity – calming and restorative. The registers record two burials:

Matth: Tina (Corpl.) in His Majesty's Regmt. of York Hussars, and Shot for Desertion, was Buried June 30th, 1801, aged 22 years. Born in the town of Sarrbruk, Germany.

Christoph Bless, belonging to His Majesty's Regmt. of York Hussars, who was Shot for Desertion, was Buried June 30th, 1801, aged 22 years. Born at Lothaargen, Alsatia.'

Hardy reports that 'their graves were dug at the back of the little church, near the wall. There is no memorial to mark the spot, but Phyllis pointed it out to me', adding that 'Phyllis lies near'. Despite Hardy's assertion that the graves are unmarked, two small flat slabs of Purbeck stone to the south-east of the graveyard near the wall are believed to mark the soldiers' graves. Archaeologists, however, date these stones from the twelfth-century. Phyllis' last resting-place cannot be identified.

From Bincombe Church retrace your steps to the stile onto Coombe Valley Road – cross over but now take the path on your left – round the southern side of Green Hill. Cross Plaisters Lane on an uphill diagonal to take the South-West Coast Path straight ahead – admire the horned cattle though watch for the bull – climb the ridge with the path to join the track from Came – the ruined barn to your left here could well have been the hospital-barn pointed out by John Loveday.

Two hundred yards beyond this junction divert right to the tumulus in the middle of the field – this is the summit of East Hill (520 ft) – on 'a clear day' with 'a little wind stirring' one of the best viewpoints in the county, as witnessed by Anne Garland:

The eye of any observer who cared for such things swept over the wave-washed town, and the bay beyond, and the Isle, with its pebble bank, lying on the sea to the left of these, like a great crouching animal tethered to the mainland. On the extreme east of the marine horizon, St. Aldhelm's Head closed the scene, the sea to the southward of that point glaring like a mirror under the sun. Inland could be seen Badbury Rings, where a beacon had been recently erected; and nearer, Rainbarrow, on Egdon Heath, where another stood: farther to the left Bulbarrow, where there was yet another. Not far from this came Nettlecombe Tout; to the west, Dogberry Hill, and Black'on near to the foreground, the beacon thereon being built of furze faggots thatched with straw, and standing on the spot where the monument now raises its head.

In the next field turn right down the permissive path beside the right-hand boundary – pause again to admire the view and remember Hardy's account:

Here stood the camp; here are distinct traces of the banks thrown up for the horses of the cavalry, and spots where the midden-heaps lay are still to be observed. At night, when I walk across the lonely place, it is impossible to avoid hearing, amid the scourings of the wind over the grass-bents and thistles, the old trumpet and bugle calls, the rattle of the halters; to help seeing rows of spectral tents and the impedimenta of the soldiery. From within the canvases come guttural syllables of foreign tongues, and broken songs of the fatherland; for they were mainly regiments of the King's German Legion that slept round the tent-poles hereabout at that time.

As you descend from the Ridgeway you encounter King George on horseback, riding away from his troops. Towards the end of *The Trumpet-Major*, John Loveday tells Anne that men are 'cutting out

a huge picture of the king on horseback in the earth of the hill. The King's head is to be as big as our mill-pond and his body as big as this garden'.

Walk down with care over horse and rider or take the rather irregular footpath descending to the east of the down, regaining the well-defined path through the trees at south-western corner of the field – follow diagonally straight across the next field (watching out for deer) to junction of paths in far corner - carry straight on towards Overcombe – the path joining from your right is the 'zigzag path down the incline from the camp to the river-head at the back of the house' built rapidly by squads of soldiers on the day the cavalry arrived – to give their horses access to the mill-pond where 'the thirsty animals drank, stamped, flounced, and drank again, letting the clear, cool water dribble luxuriously from their mouths'. Your footpath becomes White Horse Lane, which joins Sutton Road, where the waterworks and old mill-house are to your right, the Springhead and millpond on your left.