

Thomas Hardy Society – Walks

A Mellstock (Poems) Walk

(4 miles)

(OS Explorer Map OL15)

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

The best way to explore Hardy's Mellstock is to follow this gentle four-mile walk, which starts from Kingston Maurward, and visits Higher and Lower Bockhampton, to finish at Stinsford Church. Alternatively, all the main points on the route can be reached quite easily by car.

A good starting point is the Garden Centre (NGR SY 713 911) which is clearly signposted, and where there is car parking. Follow the path from here straight ahead to the imposing front of Kingston Maurward House, bearing in mind that until you reach the Old Manor House you are on private paths, forming part of the Kingston Maurward College Farm and Estate, rather than designated public rights of way. You are approaching Knapwater House in the opposite direction to Cytherea Graye in *Desperate Remedies* but Hardy's detailed architect's description still holds true:

The house was regularly and substantially built of clean grey freestone throughout, in that plainer fashion of Greek classicism which prevailed at the latter end of the last century ... the main block approximated to a square on the ground plan, having a projection in the centre of each side, surmounted by a pediment. From each angle of the inferior side ran a line of ... subsidiary buildings being half buried beneath close-set trees and shrubs. The natural features ... were of the ordinary, and upon the whole, most satisfactory kind, namely, a broad, graceful slope running from the terrace beneath the walls to the margin of a placid lake lying below, upon the surface of which a dozen swans and a green punt floated at leisure. An irregular wooded island stood in the midst of the lake ...

You will catch indirect glimpses of the lake and irregular wooded island during the course of this walk; swans still frequent both the lake and the adjoining Froom-side path. Poems associated with Kingston Mauward include 'In Her Precincts' (CP 411), 'Amabel' (CP 3) and 'To C.F.H. *On Her Christening-Day*' (CP 793). Follow the path on from the left corner of the house-front down some steps and past some new buildings and across a stretch of lawn to pick up the drive heading towards the Old Manor. This beautiful stone house, built by Christopher Grey in 1591, is described by Pevsner as 'the late Elizabethan E-plan manor house refined to a point of perfection'. In Hardy's day the Old Manor, that 'glad old house of lichened stonework' (CP 634) was in a very poor state of repair and subdivided into cottages – thus accurately forming the basis for Knapwater Old House.

In the 1880s a dairyman called Thomas Way moved from Toller Porcorum into the Old Manor, then a farmhouse, bringing with him his four daughters, the youngest of whom Augusta Way was spotted by Hardy as she milked the cows in the adjoining byre. Tom was fascinated by the beautiful teenager, who

became the model for Tess of the d'Urbervilles, and whose daughter Gertrude Bugler was later to play Tess on stage both in Dorchester and, subsequently in the West End. Hardy's original fascination with this place dates, however, from his childhood attraction to Julia Martin, in pursuit of which he attended a harvest-home held in a barn adjoining the Old Manor House, commemorated in 'The Harvest-Supper (Circa 1850), a poem which reverberates into *Far from the Madding Crowd*.

From the Manor House, turn left onto the way-marked bridleway through the farmyard – the Dog Grooming Salon and Animal Care Centre form the adapted remains of the byre where Hardy spied Tess milking the cows – the long brick walled enclosure attached at right-angles to the end of this building is all that remains of the barn where the 'Harvest Supper' was held. Follow this bridleway on to the track which curves between fenced fields to the lane at Hollow Hill. Cross the lane, and again following waymarked route bear right to stile at top corner of field beside copse, looking back for fine views of Kingston Maurward from this path. On reaching the stile you have joined Hardy's route – trudged daily as a young man - from Higher Bockhampton to school and then work in Dorchester. Hardy's path westward from here followed a higher trajectory than the one which you have just climbed – the old route, prior to a modern footpath diversion – ran straight ahead along the ridge past the clump of beech trees (Grey's Copse) to the far corner of the field where it joined the lane in front of Birkin House – from here Hardy would continue in a straight line along the road to Grey's Bridge and Dorchester. Just across the main road to the right of this path is Kingston Mauward Eweleaze, the setting of 'An Anniversary' (CP 407). Looking to the left – still with your back to the stile – read 'When Oats Were Reaped' (CP 738).

Cross the stile and follow the path straight on to Bockhampton Lane. Pause on the further side of the lane at the gravelled entrance; note a stone gatepost straight ahead and then find its partner, transposed to a redundant position behind the magnificent wrought-iron gateway on your right. These are the gateposts of 'At Middle-Field Gate in February' (CP 421). The buildings in front of you form the Greenwood Grange holiday complex, at the heart of which is a brick-built quadrangle of barns, constructed by Hardy's father in 1849 for Francis Martin, then owner of the Kingston Maurward estate..

To adhere to public rights of way, head north up Bockhampton Lane, turning right at signpost for Hardy's Cottage. En route, look out for the gable at the end of the farm building with its brick inscription '1849 FPBM', commemorating Hardy's Squire. This was known as Higher Bockhampton Farm – 'the lonely barton by yonder coomb / Our childhood used to know' – the setting of Hardy's magical Christmas Eve poem 'The Oxen' (CP 403), written in the dark days of 1915. Follow the sandy track towards the Hardys' cottage. On page one of *The Life*, Hardy describes the 'quaint, brass-knockered, green-shuttered domiciles' scattered along the length of "Veterans' Valley" or "Cherry Alley" as the lane was dubbed in his childhood. He then laments how 'the quaint residences have been replaced every one by labourers' brick cottages and other new farm buildings, a convenient pump occupying the site of the mossy well and bucket'. The Hardys'

Cottage, built in 1800 by Thomas' great-grandfather John Hardy was the first dwelling in New Bockhampton and the only one to survive into the twenty-first century.

As you walk up the lane, the third house on your right is called Greenwood; this building was originally a pair of brick cottages, constructed by the Hardy family – similar in style to the pair of cottages set back diagonally opposite and built somewhat later by Henry Hardy. In Tom's childhood, abutting the lane in what is now the garden of Greenwood, there stood a thatched cottage –the home of William Keats, tranter, and Mary his wife – the models for Tranter Reuben and Ann Dewy in *Under the Greenwood Tree*. The Keats' romance is alluded to by Hardy in *The Life*. In the other half of this cottage lived Hardy's uncle, James, a stonemason, and family. James' daughter Teresa, four years Hardy's junior, never married but spent her entire life in Bockhampton, playing the organ at Stinsford Church for many years. The remains of the village well – the sole source of water for the Hardy household - can still be identified in the ivy-covered mound beside the lane to the right of the entrance to Greenwood. This was the well in which 'The Rash Bride' drowned herself (CP 212).

The appearance of Hardy's Cottage closely fits Hardy's description of the Tranter's: 'It was a long low cottage with a hipped roof of thatch, having dormer windows breaking up into the eaves, a chimney standing in the middle of the ridge and another at each end'. This cottage was also built as two separate dwellings – the original core extending from the central chimney stack to the lane – marked by the higher roofline is the house dating from 1800, carefully constructed, with two rooms above and one below. The extension southwards is of inferior construction and appears to have been built hastily, probably to provide accommodation for Hardy's grandmother Mary on the marriage of his parents in 1839. At a later date, possibly following her death in 1857, the two halves were joined together and the present off-centre front door with porch added. The second window from the left marks the site of the original entrance door, described in the poem 'The Self-Unseeing' (CP 135):

Here is the ancient floor,
Footworn and hollowed and thin,
Here was the former door
Where the dead feet walked in.

This original front door opened straight from the garden into the large parlour – the scene of the lively Christmas dance in both *Under the Greenwood Tree* and *The Return of the Native*. Hardy was born in the central of the three upstairs chambers; the room with a window seat (right-hand window) where Hardy is thought to have written his early fiction was originally in the separate "granny-annex". In his early years, Hardy slept in the left-hand bedroom which he shared with his sister Mary. The outhouses to the right of the main building were the scene of home cider-making as described in both *Desperate Remedies* and *Under the Greenwood Tree*, where Reuben taps his

cask 'a drop o' the right sort ... a real drop o' cordial from the best picked apples - Sansoms, Stubbards, Five-corners, and such ... and there's a sprinkling of they that grow down by the orchard-rails – streaked ones - rail apples we d'call 'em, as 'tis by the rails they grow, and not knowing the right name' – appearing also in 'Shortening Days at the Homestead' (CP 791).

Here read 'Domicilium' (CP 1), Hardy's Wordsworthian earliest surviving poem; as Mary Hardy tells her grandson in the poem 'change has' indeed 'marked the face of all things' but the surrounding heath (since the recent clearances), the Cottage, the garden have altered very little in appearance since Hardy's childhood. On a winter's evening 'The Fallow Deer at the Lonely House' (CP 551) is a beautiful poem to read here as are three of Hardy's poems of memory and regret: 'Logs on the Hearth' – his simple but poignant elegy for his sister Mary (CP 433), 'Night in the Old Home' (CP 222) written on 9th October 1924, when Hardy was eight-four years old – and 'Concerning His Old Home' (CP 839) published posthumously in 1928.

On a happier note and to put a spring in your step as you leave the birthplace read 'When I Set Out for Lyonesse' (CP 254), Hardy's recollection of his first magical trip to Cornwall, which started so inauspiciously with a four am waking and starlight walk down Veteran's Alley to catch the train for Cornwall from Dorchester West station:

When I set out for Lyonesse,
A hundred miles away,
The rime was on the spray,
And Starlight lit my lonesomeness
When I set out for Lyonesse
A hundred miles away.

(Monday 7th March 1870)

From the cottage, pause by the American monument and then follow the path signposted 'Rushy Pond' behind the cottage and into Thorncombe wood – as you ascend the slope watch out for the small wooden sign directing you to the left onto the path which runs through the trees to Rushy Pond. In 'At Rushy Pond' (CP 680), the 'half-grown moon' illuminating 'the frigid face of the heath-hemmed pond' reminds the poet of the break-up of his relationship with a woman whom he had 'once, in a secret year' called 'from across this water, ardently – and practised to keep her near'. Here also read 'Moonrise and Onwards' (CP 517), another Egdon elegy directed to Diana 'the Wan Woman of the waste up there'.

Follow the path on the open (west side) of Rushy Pond onward over exposed heathland and down to a ferny crossways with picnic bench; on a sunny spring day, this makes a luxuriant green resting place. An ideal spot to read 'Childhood Among the Ferns' (CP 846), another late poem based on an early experience. Cross the stile beyond the picnic bench and follow the path straight on between fenced cow pastures to Pine Lodge Farm – glance back from this path for fine views of Rainbarrow (half-right). Pine Lodge is an excellent stop for refreshments; Heedless William's Pond is enshrouded in the clump of trees below - to the left of the farm drive.

Cross the lane and continue on the track towards Bhompston Farm. On reaching the farm, follow the signposted track to your right (a deviation onto the path to your left will take you across the water-meadows to Norris Mill: Talbothays = Tess territory) – bear left over stile and follow the waymarked path diagonally across (down) this meadow to gate in corner by osier coppice – continue straight ahead across next field towards Kingston Dairy beyond. This path affords a fine perspective of the Frome as it meanders through the water meadows from Bockhampton Bridge: if the cattle are not grazing these meadows, deer may often be spied, taking advantage of their absence.

Follow the path through the dairy to emerge on the lane in Lower Bockhampton; this southern end of the village with its mellow thatched cottages has changed little in appearance over the last hundred years but has changed significantly since the time of *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1830). The thatched house on your left as you turn up Bockhampton Lane (Bridge Cottage) originally doubled as both Blacksmith's and village beer shop, whilst opposite it ran a lane, now completely vanished, populated by 'several old Elizabethan houses, with mullioned windows, and doors, of ham hill stone', the first of which is thought to have been Farmer Shiner's 'queer lump of a house' where the quire were subject to unexpected abuse.

As you climb Bockhampton Lane, the thatched cottage on your right opposite the lane now known as Knapwater was until recently the Village Post Office. 'Geographical Knowledge (*A Memory of Christiana C-----*)' (CP 237) commemorates the postmistress with scant understanding of local geography but with a global sense of direction, gleaned from her sailor son, Frederick Coward. This is also the setting of 'The Thing Unplanned' (CP 763). Opposite the Post Office stands the School, endowed by Julia Martin and opened in 1848 where Hardy was 'the first pupil to enter the new school-building, arriving on the day of opening, and awaiting tremulously and alone, the formal entry of the other scholars from the temporary premises near' –recalled in 'He Revisits His First School' (CP 462).

The schoolhouse formed the second halt for the Mellstock Quire 'Going the Rounds' – directed towards the upstairs window there 'passed forth into the quiet night an ancient and time-worn hymn, embodying a quaint Christianity in words orally transmitted from father to son through several generations down to the present characters, who sang them out right earnestly:

Remember Adam's fall,
O thou Man:
Remember Adam's fall
From Heaven to Hell.

The school survived until 1961 when it sold by auction and sympathetically converted in the house, as now stands. Beyond Yalbury Cottage, modern dwellings have replaced the ancient cottages. The last house on the left 'Martins' marks the site of Robert Penny's workshop:

Mr. Penny's was the last house in that part of the parish, and stood in a hollow by the roadside so that cart-wheels and horses' legs were about level with the sill of his shop-window. This was low and wide, and was open from morning till evening, Mr. Penny himself being invariably seen working inside ... facing the road, with a boot on his knees and the awl in his hand ... rows of lasts, small and large, stout and slender, covered the wall which formed the background ...

This workshop which belonged to Robert Reason did not survive Hardy's lifetime, being replaced by 'The Mellstock Hut', a reading-room and club opened by Hardy in December 1919 as a memorial to the 75 men of Stinsford Parish who fought in the Great War. The hut in turn was demolished as unsafe in 1957 and Stinsford was once more without a village hall. The lane runs due north from here to Bockhampton Cross and Higher Bockhampton – the setting of 'To Louisa in the Lane' (CP 822): 'Meet me again as at that time / In the hollow of the lane'. This poem published posthumously in 'Winter Words' (1928) is an expression of Hardy's long-lasting devotion to Louisa Harding, who father farmed at Stinsford Farm (just north of the church and now absorbed within the college). A year younger than Tom but socially his superior, they never exchanged a word but as late 1859 he travelled to Weymouth, where Louisa was at boarding school, in the hope of catching a glimpse of her in church. Louisa never married but spent her whole life in Stinsford, where she is buried in an unmarked grave, which Hardy would often visit in old age. The poem 'The Passer-By (L.H. recalls her Romance) (CP 627), is written from Louisa's perspective, implying that her failure to marry was the result of having fallen in love with her silent admirer who then passed by no more! A subsequent poem 'Louie' (CP 739) links her death with Emma's – 'Long two strangers they and far apart; such neighbours now!'

Bockhampton Cross is also the setting of 'By Mellstock Cross at the Year's End' published in December 1919 but – possibly in view of the implications of its personal content – relocated to

Henstridge in Somerset (with explanatory headnote) when the poem was collected. Retrace your steps down through the village, remembering as you go the other local Hardy characters such as Jude who started life here and Mop Ollamoor 'musician, dandy and company-man' who 'lodged awhile in Mellstock village', most probably at Bridge Cottage. Pause on Bockhampton Bridge, looking downstream, to imbibe the atmosphere of the Valley of the Great Dairies, then take the sign-posted footpath beside the stream.

Here you will often find a pair of swans nesting, alongside coots and moorhens. You are retracing the midnight steps of the quire who 'crossed Mellstock Bridge, and went along an embowered path beside the From towards the church and vicarage, meeting Voss with the hot mead and bread-and-cheese as they were approaching the churchyard'. Somewhat bleak in winter, this path is at its most luxuriant in early summer, teeming then with nature, the water crystal clear. On wintry days, this is an appropriate place to read 'She Hears the Storm' (CP 228) and as you near the turning up to Stinsford 'The Third Kissing-Gate' (CP 895), set on the continuation of this path back to Dorchester. The original kissing gates have decayed and disappeared - the third kissing gate was in the field-boundary just beyond the thatched dwelling, now enlarged into 'Three Bears Cottage'. This path, often frequented by the young Hardy on his daily walk to-and-from Dorchester lost much of its charm with the construction of the A35 viaduct. At the junction of paths by the brick bridge, turn right towards the church. The left-hand path beside the stream sign-posted 'St George's Road' will take you across the water-meadows to Max Gate and was the route used by Hardy when walking from his home to Stinsford Church. As you follow in Hardy's footsteps, read the opening lines of 'The Dead Quire' (CP 213). The poem starts on the Church-way where you are now walking - the dormered inn is the beer-house at Bridge Cottage, 'the Quick pursue the Dead / By crystal From' along the path which you have just taken to the graves ahead 'by gaunt yew tree' and 'ivied wall'. Enter the lower graveyard by the gate on your left, immediately beyond the cottage drive, and follow the grassy path beside the hedge into the main churchyard - the first grave which you encounter on your right is that of Fanny Hurden, with lettering restored through the generosity of the late Dr James Gibson (plate 3.4). She is the first of Hardy's 'Voices from Things Growing in a Churchyard' (CP 580) - 'These flowers are I, poor Fanny Hurd, / A little girl here sepultured. / Once I flit-flitted like a bird / Above the grass, as now I wave / In daisy shapes above my grave'. Hardy was much attracted to Fanny, a fellow pupil at Lower Bockhampton. One winter's day he accidentally pushed her against the school-room stove burning her hands - an action for which he never forgave himself, particularly following Fanny's premature death in 1861 at the age of 20.

There is a memorial to 'Bachelor Bowring, 'Gent',' within the church on the south wall of the gallery. Squire Audeley Grey (6th stanza) is commemorated twice in the church – most strikingly in the monument on the north wall with its skull and two weeping cherubs in pale Purbeck marble. This gothic display left a deep impression on young Thomas Hardy, who is reputed to have learnt the inscription by heart on those long 'afternoons of drowsy calm'; as he 'stood in the panelled pew' watching the swaying branches of the 'gaunt old yew tree' under which he and so many of his family were subsequently to lie. This memorial, which is taken to be the source of the name 'Angel' Clare, also refers to George Trevelyan, the family name of Eve Greensleeves (Stanza 5), as explained in Hardy's own footnote to the poem. The grave of Voss, the character who takes care of the refreshments for the Mellstock Quire, can still be identified near to the Hardys'. The proud Lady Gertrude alone remains unidentified.

From Fanny's grave, inspect the gargoyles on the southern aisle – the most grotesque is the one on the south-east corner – the exact position on Weatherbury tower of the gargoyle which caused such damage to Fanny's Robin's grave. Walk up past the east end of the church to the Hardy graves – *en route* you pass the gray slate memorial to C. Day-Lewis, poet laureate and former Professor of Poetry at Oxford, now at rest beside his much-admired fellow poet – see Day-Lewis' 'Birthday Poem for Thomas Hardy'.

Here nestling in the shade of an ancient yew Tom's heart lies buried between the remains of Emma and Florence, flanked on the right by the grave of his parents and to the left by the shared grave of his siblings, Mary, Henry and Kate. The line extends with the graves of his paternal grandparents, his uncle James and then that of Aunt Jane and her daughter, Teresa, the organist, who survived her more famous cousin by exactly eight weeks – all undergoing such wonderful natural 'Transformations' (CP 410): 'Portion of this yew / Is a man my grandsire knew ...'. Here also visit 'Friends Beyond' (CP 36), a poem which includes a number of characters from *Under the Greenwood Tree*, and remember 'The Choirmaster's Burial' (CP 489) that story of the burial of Thomas Hardy I, Hardy's grandfather.

Throughout his life, Hardy was a regular visitor to his 'Friend's Beyond' - as reflected in the poem 'Paying Calls' (CP 454) – especially after Emma's death as explained in 'Rain on a Grave' (CP 280) for 'I have brought her here, / And have laid her to rest / In a noiseless nest / No sea beats near' ('I Found Her Out There' CP 281) and 'If You Had Known' (CP 593), written 50 years after their first meeting or as viewed from the dog's perspective in 'Why She Moved House' (CP 806).

Stinsford Church, described by Hardy as being 'of various styles from Transition-Norman to late Perpendicular', is mainly thirteenth-century in structure. Hardy's romantic vision of his parents' first encounter is described in the sonnet 'A Church Romance (Mellstock: circa 1835)' in which his mother Jemima Hand, newly arrived at Stinsford 'turned in the high pew, until her sight / Swept the west gallery, and caught its row / Of music-men' one of whom responded with 'a message from his string to her below, / Which said: 'I claim thee as my own forthright!' (CP 211). After approximately 115 years without a west gallery, a splendid new structure was erected in 1996, complete with modern organ which occupies the space needed for the choir. Displayed on the west wall below the new gallery stairs is Hardy's plan of the West Gallery – circa 1835 'Shewing Positions of Choir', including the four musicians – Thomas Hardy I and his two sons, accompanied by James Dart on violin. Nearby is the brass tablet put up by Hardy with its Latin inscription commemorating 'Thomae Hardy patris Jacobi et Thomae filiorum' (1903). At the back of the Nave is the restored Norman Font - found broken up and buried in the churchyard – but repaired in 1920, with a new base designed by Hardy, at the instigation of Mrs Cowley, the Vicar's wife as a memorial to her two brothers, one of whom Captain Cecil Prowse is also commemorated in Hardy's poem 'The Sea Fight' (CP 782).

On the north wall, admire the Grey monument with its morbidly realistic skull, mentioned by Hardy in both *Desperate Remedies* and *An Indiscretion*. On the south wall of the chancel is the memorial tablet, with its 'two joined hearts enchased there' (CP 239 'The Noble Lady's Tale) to William O'Brien and Lady Susan, whose mortal remains are buried below in their special vault for two. In *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, Hardy transferred this tomb to Cornwall, where it became the model for the Luxellian family vault.

As you pause by the chancel, read that sadly prophetic poem 'Channel Firing' (CP 247) published just three months before the onset of the Great War – for here at Stinsford 'The mouse let fall the altar crumb'. The south aisle is dominated by the Hardy memorial window, showing Elijah on Mount Horeb (plate 3.8). The glass illustrates the earthquake, wind and fire from I Kings 19, Hardy's favourite biblical passage, which continues 'after the fire a still small voice'. This passage is reflected in several poems, notably 'Quid Hic Agis' (CP 371). To the right of the memorial window is a tablet to William Harding Gent, the grandfather of Louisa, whose unmarked grave Hardy tended in later years.

As a young man in London in the 1860s, Hardy began to doubt his religious faith – see 'The Impercipient' (CP 44) but he remained, in his own words, 'churchy; not in an intellectual sense, but so far as instincts and emotions ruled'. The poem 'Afternoon Service at Mellstock (Circa 1850)' (CP 356) suggests that Stinsford offered Hardy the possibility of sentimental reminiscence over childhood religious security.

In his later years, particularly after the death of Emma in 1912, Hardy turned back to Stinsford Church as a source of tranquillity, continuity and tradition in a rapidly changing world – as a central focus, second only to the cottage on Egdon, of his fiction, his poetry and his imagination. Also increasingly as the place where so many of his family, friends, neighbours and girls, whom he might have wished to marry, were laid to rest. In the poem 'Looking Across' (CP 446), written shortly after the death of his sister Mary in 1915, Hardy bereft of sleep in the small hours, looks across the Frome valley from Max Gate towards Stinsford. There beneath the yew tree lie the first four – his father, his mother, Emma and Mary; number five is the poet himself. Hardy chose to be buried at Stinsford for this was the resting place of so much (and so many) that was close to his heart. Perhaps appropriately, though contrary to his wishes, only his heart was allowed to remain in the yew-enshrouded spot. To complete the walk, head up the road from the church-yard gates, bearing right back to the nursery either through the farmyard, currently designated the 'Casterbridge Training Centre' or else along the drive beyond.