

Walk 2.

The Heart of Hardy Country: A Return of The Native Walk (3+ miles)

(OS Explorer Map OL15) (CP = The Complete Poems ed. by James Gibson)

To fully appreciate the atmosphere – the true solitude - of Egdon Heath set out on this walk at daybreak or as dusk is falling; in the latter circumstance, allow for the fact that the it will take you 60-90 minutes to complete.

Begin at Thorncombe Wood Car Park (NGR SY 726 921) (1) near Hardy's Cottage – take the uphill path from the middle of the car park (signposted Hardy's Cottage), turning first right and then bearing left through the trees once parallel with the further end of the car park; heading for Rushy Pond you soon come into a beautiful glade of tall beeches – follow the path straight on and beside an old metal boundary fence to new wooden gate beside a notice board. (2) As you follow the path uphill from the gate you are crossing Black Heath - an area which has been extensively cleared – but, in the absence of grazing, young trees, mainly silver birch, are creating woodland again. You may well encounter the Heath-croppers here – the ponies which roamed the heath in Hardy's day – reintroduced to keep the scrub under control.

Pause for a moment on one of the benches beside Rushy Pond. (3) It is an idyllic spot - only a few hundred yards from Hardy's Cottage. This is an area which he knew intimately as a child. In *The Early Life*, Hardy describes taking the family 'big brass telescope' to a hill on the heath behind the house to watch an execution nearly 3 miles distance; the roofs of the prison being then clearly visible: *'The whole thing was so sudden that the glass nearly fell from Hardy's hands. He seemed alone on the heath with the hanged man, and crept homeward wishing he had not been so curious.'* The spot from which he watched the execution was here beside the pond; Thorncombe was then heath rather than woodland and there was an uninterrupted view towards Dorchester.

Cross the barrier behind the pond to follow the footpath along the Roman Road (4) – this is an overgrown but well-preserved raised section of the road which ran from Dorchester (Durnovaria) to Salisbury and ultimately onto London – cutting across

Egdon in a straight line to the hill-fort at Badbury Rings, west of Wimborne, where it turned sharply northward. 'The Roman Road runs straight and bare / As the pale parting-line in hair / Across the heath'. (CP 218). Somewhat ironically, the Roman Road is no longer a public right of way but rather a permissive route across the privately-owned Duddle Heath. Here also, the heath has been extensively cleared of trees and rhododendrons, allowing the bronze age Rainbarrows to re-emerge from the deep coniferous cover which had obscured them for fifty years. The downside of this clearance is that the next stretch of path, which used to be a well-defined route under the trees, is now hard to follow in the summer months.

After about 400 yards of Roman Road, (5) there is a path on the right beside a holly bush, which cuts down through some pines to the open heath; on reaching the heath turn left and follow the narrow path along the edge of the heath curving to your right – this should bring you past Rainbarrows one and two and on to the Rainbarrow number three which stands on the crest of the ridge, surmounted by a holly tree and is Eustacia Vye's Blackbarrow (1st Edition), subsequently amended by Hardy to Rainbarrow (plate 1.3). (6)

(If the path to the right off the Roman Road is not readily visible, follow the 'road' straight on to stile and turn right along the track; after about four hundred yards a small stile will appear in the fence on your right – cross this and follow the path ahead to Rainbarrow).

Diggory Venn stops to rest his tired ponies in the shadow of Rainbarrow:

The scene before the reddleman's eyes was a gradual series of ascents from the level of the road backward into the heart of the heath. It embraced hillocks, pits, ridges, acclivities, one behind the other, till all was finished by a high hill cutting against the still light sky. The traveller's eye hovered about these things for a time, and finally settled upon one noteworthy object up there. It was a barrow. This bossy projection of earth above its natural level occupied the loftiest ground of the loneliest height the heath contained.

On the summit of the barrow, Diggory notices a motionless form, Eustacia, scanning the horizon. Ahead of her, in the distance, the chalk downs obscure Osmington Bay, where 'hill hid tides throb throe on throe' (CP 563); to the left, on a clear day, there are extensive views to Purbeck Hills and right to the Hardy Monument on

Blackdown. Closer to and further to the right Kingston Maurward House dominates the middle-distance and beyond it the chimneys and spires of Casterbridge, the prison being clearly visible from here, at times magically illuminated by the early morning sun. Beyond Casterbridge lies the unsightly sprawl of Poundbury new-town. Sit down on the further (south) side of the barrow - spread before you is the Valley of the Great Dairies – you can see the cattle grazing in the water meadows and hear their intermittent disgruntled bellows. At ‘half-past four o’clock’ listen out for the ‘Waow! waow! waow!’ of the cows being driven to milking, for this is the enchanted land where Tess fell in love with Angel. The distinctive cream-coloured buildings ahead are the cottages at Norris Mill Farm, the model for Talbothays Dairy. Below here – and slightly to the left is Duck Dairy Farm, the site of Wildeve’s home, the Quiet Woman Inn.

Head westward from Rainbarrow along narrow path just behind the tumulus to cross stile in stock fence and turn left along track, heading back into the heath; continue straight on beside the fence for about 500 yards – passing the end of the Roman Road path – then take the next track on your right, (7) and when it forks after less than 100 yards, turn left – follow this path gently downhill through woodland, cross the track at the bottom and continue on gently uphill until you meet a broad gravelled trackway (8) – turn left and follow this curving track up hill. As you approach the top of the hill, the likely site of Mistover Knap is on your left. (9) Hardy describes Mistover Knap as a ‘small hamlet’ consisting of two cottages and ‘the only remaining house – that of Captain Vye and Eustacia, which stood quite away from the small cottages, and was the loneliest of lonely houses on these thinly populated slopes’. There is no evidence of there ever having been permanent dwellings on this part of the heath – however this area would have been known intimately by Hardy, lying as it does on the ridge behind his home. On damp winter mornings, one can quite often see the mist clinging to the ridge at this point, strongly suggestive of Mistover Knap. The Knap stood beside a pond – the only immediate candidate for which is Green Hill pond which can be reached by carrying straight on ahead on the semi-metalled track across the junction at the top of the hill, follow until it descends round a corner and the pond lies appears on your right - a pond indeed nowhere near a hilltop so it does not match Hardy’s description. (10)

Retrace your steps back to the five-ways junction (11) – here take the grassy track straight ahead through the birch trees (this represents a sharp first left from the original track from Rainbarrow). Beside this track is a low earthen wall – the common boundary markers on the heath – and a small permanent pond in the path, surrounded by a crescent of water reeds, suggesting that this was once a larger pond. The low wall behind the house, separating it from the pond is clearly described in the text so this seems as reasonable a place as any to imagine Mistover Knap. There is a significant swallet hole here also which could well be a pond. The slope to the south of the path is covered in young pine trees; seven years ago, when it was clear of vegetation, it formed an excellent viewpoint straight down the valley and giving clear views of Rainbarrow to the right: this is how it would have appeared in Hardy's lifetime when the whole area was open heathland. This is as close as one can get to the description Hardy gives of Mistover - as Eustacia waits for Wildeve to respond to her November 5th signal:

Before going on her walk again the young girl stood still on the bank for a few instants and listened. It was to the full as lonely a place as Blackbarrow, though at rather a lower level; and it was more sheltered from wind and weather on account of the few firs to the North. The bank enclosed the whole homestead, and well protected it from the lawless state of the world without; it was formed of thick square clods, dug from the ditch on the outside, and built up with a slight batter or incline, which forms no slight defence where hedges will not grow because of the wind and wilderness, and where wall materials are unattainable. Otherwise, the situation was quite open, commanding the whole length of the valley which reached to the river behind Wildeve's house. High above this to the right, and much nearer than the Quiet Woman Inn, the blurred contour of Blackbarrow obscured the sky.

When in due course, the Forestry Commission fell their timber, we may once more be able to experience Hardy's Mistover.

As you emerge from the trees at the next junction – also a five-ways, take the second left – straight on slightly uphill, often a bit muddy and still following the boundary wall. (12) At the next junction (13) take the main path slightly right and follow on downhill ignoring all turnings – you emerge onto open heathland with the rear of the Hardys' Cottage a white blob behind the trees in the distance. (14) This is the situation – if not the exact orientation - of the Yeobright's home, Blooms-End, as first encountered by

Eustacia Vye on a reconnaissance mission, descending the hill from Mistover, she observes: *'a row of white palings which marked the verge of the heath in this latitude ... beyond the white palings was a little garden; behind the garden an old, irregular, thatched house, facing the heath, and commanding a full view of the valley'*.

Imbibe the atmosphere of his cottage, if you are lucky enough to find it open; then take the clearly signposted path behind the cottage up through Thorncombe Wood and back down to the Car Park – alternatively follow 'Cherry Lane' straight ahead from the cottage.