



## West Dorset

### Hardy Country

Westcountry Walk - Hardy Country When I was young and moody I liked a little Thomas Hardy sprinkled among my southern downs and loved the sense of melancholy he could muster in a stanza, couplet or a weighty paragraph or two. But now middle-age has brought with it yearnings to be jolly-before-it-is-too late, and I prefer a light-hearted approach to my wanderings over hill and dale.

So it was with a misgiving or three that I stood, neck bent, in the tiny bedroom in which the poet was born. A thin gauze of rain fell outside and the forests loomed dark in the afternoon light, and I felt the soft burden of cheerless oppression descend like dust disturbed just once during a century in a long forgotten loft.

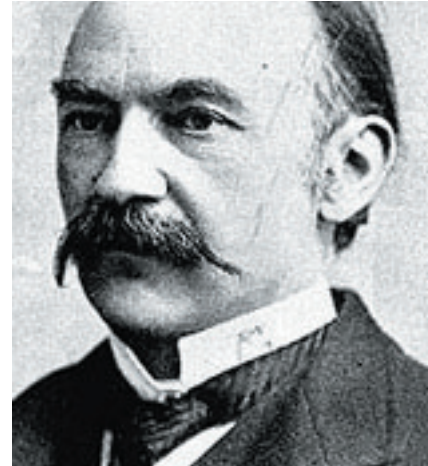
Thomas Hardy's Cottage was part of the Westcountry Icons series I've been writing for the Western Morning News and filming for ITV - and while I was out that way I thought I'd take a couple of walks to soak up the general Hardy-esque experience.

First to Casterbridge - I mean Dorchester - where young Thomas used to walk everyday to attend grammar school. Hardy by name, hardy by nature, for it is six long miles from the old family home at Higher Brockhampton to the county town.

The Tourist Information Centre at Antelope Walk (tel: 01305 267992) provides you with a leaflet called Roman Dorchester so you can explore what Caesar would have known as Durno-varia.

Basically the Roman walk leads up High West Street, turns right down The Grove (along the old Roman ramparts), right again into Northernhay where it meets the River Frome. Now a pleasant waterside path takes pedestrians around the edge of town until it meets High Street Fordington where, after a few busy yards there's a right turn to South Walks Road.

Actually, I gave up with the latter section of official walk and ducked and dived through a number of fascinating and picturesque Lilliputian alleys to make my way back to the centre of town. But you can do what you like - that's the thing about urban walks - it is easy to chop off a little of this or add a little of that to suit your needs, unlike the average moorland route-march where you're about the serious business of getting from A-to-B.



*Hardy's Cottage is open from April to 4th November - 11am to 5pm.*

*Dorchester TIC Tel: 01305 267992*

What can we see of Roman Durnovaria while on this circumnavigation of the town? Well, not as many Roman walls as Exeter can brag, for sure - in fact there's only one short section left above ground and that's a modest length near the crossroads called Top o' Town. But, to make up for this, there is the best preserved Roman town house to be found anywhere in Britain, tucked in a specially designed building just behind the ugly County Hall.

In fact Durnovaria once boasted everything a sophisticated urban Roman could wish for. There were public baths (just behind what is now Waitrose) and an amphitheatre at Maumbury Rings, not to mention an aqueduct, a military road, a forum and a basilica. Of course, much of this is beneath concrete, but you can get an excellent idea of what went on in town by visiting the County Museum in the High Street (10.00am - 5.00pm Monday - Saturday October - June - 10.00am - 5.00pm Monday - Sunday July - September. Entry: adult: £6.00 - concession: £5.00).

Having beaten at least some of the bounds and having decided that I would return one fine Wednesday when Dorchester holds its marvellous 500-stall open market - but now to Hardy's Cottage. The place is surrounded by fine walks through ancient woodlands and historic heaths and an interpretation board near to the actual cottage bears a map of all this interesting terrain, and you can walk a half-mile among the bluebells to the poet's old thatched home. You start near Higher Brockhampton, the village which Hardy called Upper Mellstock in his novels, and you end up descending through the trees to the rear of the cottage.

It's as rural as spot as you could wish to find, though I would like to have seen it in the days when it was known as Cherry Alley thanks to the lines of fruit trees which once flourished here. Hardy's Cottage (Higher Brockhampton, nr Dorchester, Dorset DT2 8QJ telephone: 01297 561900) is well worth the £3.50 National Trust entry fee, if only to feel that heaviness of homely, rustic oppression which I believe must have weighed so much on Hardy's ever-sensitive mind.

«The garden is still formal in design with its clipped evergreens and knot garden,» says the trust's blurb, «which is supposed to be the work of Hardy himself. The planting is informal in character with herbaceous plants, annuals, bulbs and shrubs mingling together to form a feeling of well-being and cheerfulness.»

Oh well, maybe I was in the wrong sort of mood. Or perhaps it was the rain. More likely still it was the words of John Betjeman in his poem *The Heart of Thomas Hardy* in which he lists: «Tess and Jude and His Worship, various unmarried mothers, woodmen, cutters of turf, adulterers, church restorers...» and he goes on about the poet's heart, which is buried all on its own in nearby Stinsford Churchyard, being like «A thumping little fig...»

The pint-sized beds in the wee rooms spoke of tiny lives lived out interminably all those sorry years ago here Under the Greenwood Tree, by the side of Egdon Heath where Tess of the d'Urbervilles once wept and where Gertrude in the ghostly

tale of the Withered Arm brought her horse up short by the edge of Rushy Pool.

After leaving the cottage we headed east into the large conifer forest which used to be Hardy's «untameable» Egdon Heath. Mapless and clueless we wandered hither and thither - always turning right until we found ourselves up at Rushy Pond on the edge of aforementioned Thorncombe Wood and had to make our way home as best we could reciting some of Hardy's finest as we went...

*Whither, O whither will its whim now draw me?*

*Up the cliff, down, till I'm lonely, lost,*

*And the unseen waters' ejaculations awe me.*

*Where you will next be there's no knowing...*