

Hardy's Landscape Revisited

Thomas Hardy's Wessex in the Twenty-First Century

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mill f the waterfowl. Cross the footbridges over the
 mill downstream to reach the road at the medieval
 Tow towards the market square. The first turning
 on y ch. This was the setting of the poem 'The To-
 Be-F , the most published Sturminster poem, the idyll having
 retrospectively turned morbid. The next right, Ricketts Lane, leads to the
 recreation ground. Follow the path along the top border and after it bends
 right; the house behind the wall is Riverside Villa.

The Hardys lived in the northern half, currently painted cream and bearing a blue plaque. Here he wrote *The Return of the Native*, whilst enjoying splendid views of the water meadows, commemorated in 'Overlooking the River Stour' (CP 424). 'The Musical Box' (CP 425) indicates retrospective regret at his neglect of Emma as he walked alone beside the river, his mind preoccupied by the *Egdon* of the formative novel. Follow the path on beyond his home, bearing left after 200 yards (180 metres) to Colber Bridge, the setting of the next poem, 'On Sturminster Foot-Bridge' (CP 426). From here retrace your steps downstream, past the villa and the spot where Hardy 'rowed on the Stour in the evening', gathering water-lilies, which is fortunately unchanged. Then take the path across the meadows back to the mill, where flour is still ground in the traditional way. Stourside Mill is the setting of that wonderful 'little poem about an experience that comes to many of us with time, 'The Second Visit' (CP 880). In the poem Emma was the woman on the bridge and it recalls when Hardy returned to the scene with Florence and his sister Kate in 1916, forty years after that 'happiest time'. Whilst living at Riverside Villa, Hardy walked the three miles (five kilometres) due north to Marnhull. Today you can retrace his route up the road, or alternatively continue through the water meadows along the clearly waymarked 'Stour Valley Way'.

A Walk Around Marlott (Marnhull)

The Home of the Durbeyfields

By foot (one-and-a-half miles/two-and-a-half kilometres)

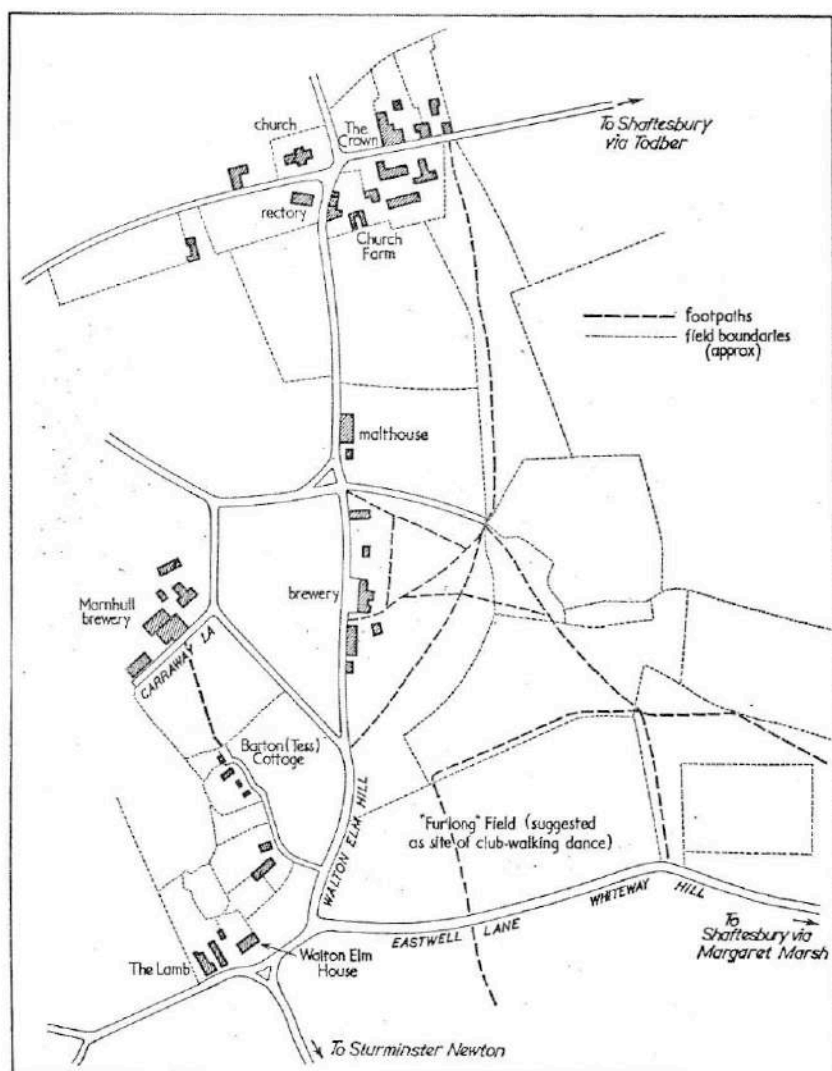
Desmond Hawkins questioned why Hardy decided upon Marnhull as Tess's birthplace, Marlott, since it was a completely atypical village, the largest in Dorset and 'nearer a federation of detached wards than an organic entity'. (2) Approached from Sturminster, the first ward one encounters is Walton Elm. This hamlet, as close as one can guess, was the home of the Durbeyfields. If you turn left at the staggered crossroads at the south end of Walton Elm, the third

house on your right, 'Lamb Inn House', is believed to have been the site of 'Rolliver's inn, the single alehouse at this end of the long and broken village, which could only boast of an off-licence'. A short distance further ahead on the main road, turn left (on foot) up the un-named no through road (there is a lay-by just opposite beyond the post box). Follow this 'crooked lane or street' straight ahead and you are soon confronted by a five-bar gate labelled Tess's Cottage with the thatched building itself beyond. Walk up the drive (it is a public footpath) and admire the cottage. You will unfortunately then have to retrace your steps because at present the far end of the path is obstructed (plate 7.6).

From the cottage, there are fine views to the north towards the village church and eastward over the *Vale of the White Hart*. Half a mile (800 metres) further on by road or footpath, one reaches the crossroads in the village centre. Here stands the church of St Gregory, its graveyard well tended; there is no sign today of Sorrow's grave, 'that shabby corner of God's allotment where He lets the nettles grow, and where all unbaptized infants, notorious drunkards, suicides, and others of the conjecturally damned are laid'. On the other side of the crossroads stands the expensively restored Crown Inn, which confirms its connection with the novel by maintaining a 'Pure Drop' bar (map 7.1).



7.6 Tess' cottage, Marlott



Map 7.1

The Slopes

Kay-Robinson attempted to confirm his identification of *Trantridge* with *Pentridge* by following Tess on her two journeys to *The Slopes* and back but, despite 'a comprehensive study of maps, guides and directories of the period, supplemented by an exhaustive study of the terrain', he had to admit defeat. Whilst I agree that it is impossible to map Alec's journey with Tess 'on that day