

## Thomas Hardy Society – Walks

### A Woodlanders Walk

(OS Explorer Map 117)

(seven miles)

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

The best way to get a true feel of *The Woodlanders* country is on foot. At any time of year, it is a rewarding venture through beautiful countryside, and generally easy going. Start from The Common at Evershot –the green at the bottom of East Hill (Holywell turning off the A37), where a seat of ancient stone is shaded by an enormous Holm Oak (NGR ST 574 046)

Head north up Park Lane, bearing right where the road divides beside the tall Scot's Pine – follow this track up and over the hill – as you descend, there are clear views of the wooded Bubb Down straight ahead. If a breeze is up, notice how the conifers in the plantation beyond the meadow on your right sigh, just as Marty South observes in 'The Pine Planters' (CP 225).

At the next division in the bridleway, again turn right - signposted A37. (A short diversion down the bridleway to the left will give you a view of Lucerne Lake, the largest in the park). Follow the bridleway uphill beside Hazel Wood; then from the top corner of the wood continue at the same angle left across the field to the gate into the coppice. Pause at the gate and look back at Hintock House in its wooded glen – a hollow but not the deep damp hole (of Turnworth) described by Grace on her visit to Mrs Charmond. You are joining the road by 'that obscure gate to the east' through which Charles Phelipson made off with Betty Dornell, later to become 'The First Countess of Wessex'. Sadly the late nineteenth-century boom in rail travel did not persist and the A37 today bespeaks noise, danger and environmental disaster rather than the 'tomb-like stillness' of 'the deserted highway' described on the first page of *The Woodlanders*.

Cross this rat-run and take bridleway opposite up through the wood, turning left after a short distance along contouring track through coppice - follow for 600 yards until you meet another bridleway at a T-junction – turn left down to wooden barrier – then right on woodland track to reach a gate into a large sloping meadow with a prominent Trig Point near its lower end. The route should be easy to follow – despite this being the wood where Grace and Felice spent the night huddled together after becoming hopelessly lost – but if you happen to accidentally divert to the upper edge of Bubb Down Wood, you will be rewarded by an aerial picture of the hamlet of Melbury Bubb with extensive views over Blackmore Vale beyond.

At the field-gate, you are rewarded on a clear day by a similar magnificent panorama to the north and east - it was here that Grace Melbury discovered her infatuated husband:

leaning over a gate on Rub-Down Hill ... which opened on the brink of a steep, slanting down directly into Blackmoor Vale, or the Vale of the White Hart, extending beneath the eye at this point to a distance of many miles. His attention was fixed on the landscape far away, and Grace's approach was so noiseless that he did not hear her. When she came close she could see his lips moving unconsciously, as to some impassioned visionary theme.

Dr Fitzpiers disappears 'into the gorgeous autumn landscape' in pursuit of Felice Charmond, to be replaced by Giles Winterbourne who:

looked and smelt like Autumn's very brother, his face being sunburnt to wheat-colour, his eyes blue as corn-flowers, his boots and leggings dyed with fruit-stains, his hands clammy with the sweet juice of apples, his hat sprinkled with pips, and everywhere about him that atmosphere of cider which at its first return each season has such an indescribable fascination for those who have been born and bred among the orchards. ... Nature was bountiful, she thought. No sooner had she been starved off by Edred Fitzpiers than another being, impersonating bare and undiluted manliness, had arisen out of the earth, ready to hand.

From the field-gate, head straight down the slope, passing to the right of the Trig point and then bear right beside the hedge and through gate and follow the curving track downhill through two further gates and the farmyard. Behind the wall on your right is the Jacobean manor house and beside it the Church, originally Saxon but wholly rebuilt in 1854 – the Great War memorial tablet inside (two dead) bears testimony to the limited population of this tiny parish. The church tower nestles neatly against the hillside but look in vain for Dr Fitzpiers' house on the slope behind – that 'comparatively modern' dwelling with its neat regular garden – the most likely candidate for Fitzpiers' lodging is the extended brick house on the corner of the lane just below the churchyard.

Retrace your steps from the church to admire the manor house. This is the model for the Melbury's home which lay at 'end of Hintock Lane' and was roomy enough that the timber-dealer was able to set aside a disused wing for the exclusive occupation of Grace and Fitzpiers on return from their honeymoon, including a 'ground-floor room, with an independent outer door, fitted up as a surgery'. This house 'had, without doubt, been once the manorial residence appertaining to the snug and modest domain of Little Hintock' – a house 'of no marked antiquity, yet of well-advanced age; older than a stale novelty, but no canonized antique; faded, not hoary; looking at you from the still distinct middle-distance of the early Georgian time'.

Further retrace your steps back through the farmyard – and survey the remains of the 'wagon-sheds' and 'many rambling out-houses' which surrounded 'Mr. Melbury's homestead' – continue all the way back to the Trig Point; the extensive wood which encloses this pasture is the site of the revels on 'old Midsummer eve' when the girls 'attempt some spell or enchantment which would afford them a glimpse of their future partners for life'.

From the Trig point follow the faint path across the meadow to your left. You will suddenly find yourself at the top of two steep terraced declivities of alpine gradient – here pick up the curving track which leads to a gate at the lower left bottom corner of this surprising field. For ease of passage, go through the gate and follow the track through Stock Wood – still appropriately stocked with game – and across a cow-pasture to reach Church Farm, Stockwood. Alternatively, to adhere to PROW, turn left at gate to find stile hidden in far left corner of field – follow this narrow, slippery and rather overgrown path down through marshy coppice, then ahead across meadow to turn left onto track.

This is another idyllic spot with the house and tiny St Edwold's church, tucked in below the wooded slopes of Bubb Down. Stockwood (originally Stoke-St-Edwold) is championed by some as Little Hintock – whilst the house and yard could be Mr Melbury's, there is nothing else there apart from the smallest church in Dorset, which is almost attached to the house: no village of woodlanders - and it is far too accessible, being five minutes' walk straight off the A37. In the search for Little Hintock, the church is actually a disadvantage for in the novel only Great Hintock is so endowed.

Cross the brick bridge into the meadow and follow the farm drive to the road, here turn right and then take signposted path over the stile in the hedge on your left. Follow the field boundary hedge on your right to another stile, cross this and now follow the left-hand field boundary. The farm to your right is Manor Farm, where Jemima Hardy lived with her mother and siblings after their father's death. When you reach a further stile in the hedge on your left, cross it and bear diagonally left across the next field to paired stiles separating a carefully netted collapsing bridge over a stream. Bear diagonally left across this final field to a gate in the far corner beside the Rest and Welcome Inn. Kay-Robinson postulates this as the 'little inn' of 'Interlopers at the Knap' – it is an old hostelry on this former Roman road and a good point to stop for refreshment.

From the pub, cross the road and still heading north, turn left over stile in hedge at footpath signpost. Follow along left-hand hedge until you cross a line of Oak trees, signifying an old field boundary – from this point bear very slightly right across this long field to a gate beside a cottage garden at its farthest right corner. From here turn right onto concrete track and then left along lane, over bridge and uphill past thatched cottages towards the church - Jemima Hardy was born in the thatched house on your left at the top of the hill (1, Barton Hill Cottages).

Past the cottage is an old red telephone box, beyond this turn left across the gravelled drive to enter the churchyard. This is the church of Great Hintock, 'standing at the upper part of the village, and which could be reached without passing through the street'. Here Grace and Fitzpiers were married to the sound of 'the three thin-toned Hintock bells', here Melbury visited the grave of John Winterbourne and subsequently

Marty and Grace made regular pilgrimages to the grave of his son Giles until eventually Grace deserted the dead for the living and Marty was left to eulogise alone:

‘Now, my own, own love,’ she whispered, ‘you are mine, and on’y mine; for she has forgot ‘ee at last, although for her you died. But I - whenever I get up I’ll think of ‘ee, and whenever I lie down I’ll think of ‘ee. Whenever I plant the young larches I’ll think that none can plant as you planted; and whenever I split a gad, and whenever I turn the cider-wring, I’ll say none could do it like you. If ever I forget your name, let me forget home and Heaven! - But no, no, my love, I never can forget ‘ee; for you was a GOOD man, and did good things!’

On the wall to your left as you enter the church is a copy of Hardy’s parents’ marriage certificate with an accompanying notice stating that his grandmother Elizabeth Swetman was married there also. Note the adjoining Roll of Honour, headed by the Earl of Ilchester. As you leave the churchyard by the southern gate, observe the Childs grave on your right; Hardy’s maternal great-grandmother was a Childs, another long-established Melbury family.

Follow the street straight ahead – it is composed of a series of delightful stone houses, many with thatched roofs, set at irregular angles – as it curves gently down to a causeway beside the water-splash. On your right you pass Manor Farm Cottage, which equates with ‘The Knap’ – its sycamore replaced by a linden - the home of Sally Hall and her mother, in the story loosely based upon Hardy’s father’s journey to Melbury Osmund to marry Jemima. As you ascend the hill and the lane curves into the hamlet of Townsend a fine thatched house with ‘windows mullioned in the Elizabethan manner’ appears on your left – now known as Monmouth’s Cottage, in recognition of Hardy’s ‘The Duke’s Reappearance’, set here and based on a family tradition, involving a real ancestor Christopher Swetman.

In the more recent past, his descendant John Swetman disowned his daughter Betty (Hardy’s maternal Grandmother) on her marrying a labourer from Affpiddle, George Hand, ‘a wight often weak at the knee / From taking o’ sommat more cheerful than tea’ (CP 48). Having sired seven children by Betty, George ‘died of his convivialities’ leaving his family to seek poor relief; thus giving Jemima and her siblings a very tough start in life. Betty’s insistence that George be buried alongside his mistress is the source of the poem ‘Her Late Husband’ (CP 134).

Don’t take the hedge enshrouded path beside the cottage but follow the lane round to Clammers Gate – the north entrance to Felice Charmond’s estate. The route now lies straight ahead through undulating parkland, containing many magnificent specimen trees. The wood to your right as you approach the second cattle-grid is Great High Wood, within which is ‘The Circle’ – the place where Melbury had the appointment with Mrs Charmond’s Steward which prevented him from fetching Grace from Sherton on the day of her much-anticipated return home.

Before long you are confronted by the grand façade of Hintock House - the presenting late seventeenth-century front has the feel of a French chateau – but overtopped by a magnificent Tudor hexagonal tower, the original core of the house. The 5<sup>th</sup> Earl (who disapproved of Hardy) constructed a massive Victorian extension to the west, the presenting battlements, turrets and archway of which are of a stone now beautifully mellowed by time to match the rest of this palatial residence. Melbury House has been the home of the Strangways family, the Earls of Ilchester since 1500. Here dwelt Betty Dornell, ‘The First Countess of Wessex’ and ‘the little figured frock in which she had been married at the tender age of thirteen’ is still preserved at the house, just as described by Hardy. The cruciform church of Melbury Sampford to the east of the house lost its parishioners with the enclosure of the deer-park in 1546, and is accessible only by permission; within it a memorial to Stephen Fox, the Stephen Reynard of Hardy’s story.

Follow the drive to the right of the house and into the deer park – the small lake on your right is fed from the marshy wood beyond known as Stutcombe Bottom. The pain in George Melbury’s, ‘left shoulder had come of carrying a pollard, unassisted, from *Tutcombe Bottom* home’. Here was the scene of the barking operations and subsequent story-telling round the fire ‘of white witches and black witches; and of the spirits of the two brothers who had fought and fallen, and had haunted Hintock House till they were exorcised by the priest, and compelled to retreat to a swamp in this very wood, whence they were returning to their old quarters at the rate of a cock’s stride every New-year’s Day, old style’. On the near edge of this wood grows a massive ancient oak tree ‘Billy Wilkins’, believed to be four-hundred years old and described in *The Woodlanders* as ‘Great Willy, the largest oak in the wood’.

Over the hill beyond Stutcombe are the small villages of East and West Chelborough. Hardy gives an accurate description of Grace’s flight over the hill-top, across the park and through the woods beyond – a distance of ‘between three and four miles’ to reach Giles’ one-storey cot, ‘formerly the home of a charcoal-burner’ at ‘Delborough’ and of her return journey to fetch Dr Fitzpiers, passing back ‘over Rubdon Hill’ to descend to Little Hintock. Delborough is less wooded than in Hardy’s time and there is no evidence that ‘One-Chimney Hut’ ever existed so there is little point in pursuing Grace westward.

As you climb the hill through the deer park, pause for views behind of Melbury Lake and the church – from here also the house is set in a depression - and perhaps to read ‘Autumn in King’s Hintock Park’ (CP 163). As you leave by the magnificent Lion Gate, you have just traversed in reverse the route taken by the enigmatic stranger in ‘The Duke’s Reappearance’. A short walk downhill brings you back to The Common, Evershead.