

Dorset National Park - Short Case Study Series

To supplement evidence submitted in 2013, 2014 and 2018 on the environment, heritage and biodiversity, and the recreational opportunities in the proposed National Park.



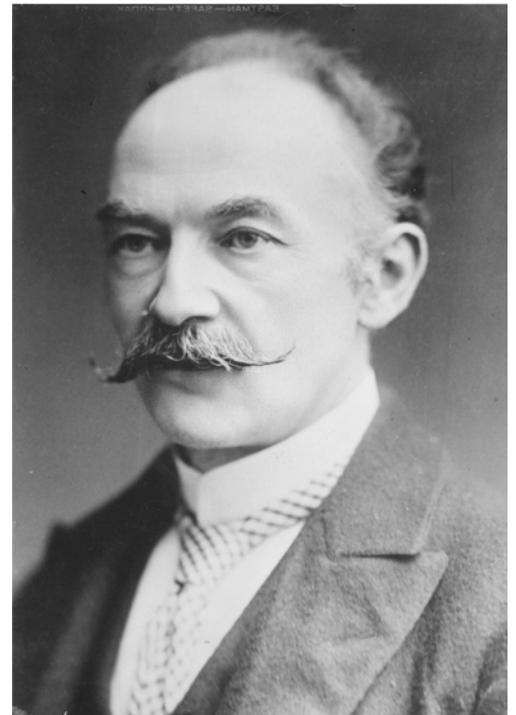
3. Thomas Hardy & the Proposed Dorset National Park

The Thomas Hardy Heritage

Thomas Hardy was born in Bockhampton in rural West Dorset in June 1840; he died at Max Gate just outside Dorchester in January 1928. In the intervening eighty-eight years, he wrote and published fourteen novels, over fifty short stories, an epic verse-drama and nearly 1,000 poems. The frail boy from an obscure Dorset hamlet became in time the much-feted grand old man of English letters, given a funeral in Westminster Abbey, where his ten pallbearers included the Prime Minister and the literary greats of the day. This fame was achieved mainly on the strength of his novels, published between 1870 and 1897; tales of life, love and betrayal set in the rural community of his childhood, often based upon true incidents from what he described as 'the immediately recoverable past'. By the end of his life, the Victorian novelist, a contemporary of Dickens, had become a twentieth-century poet, a contemporary of T. S. Eliot.

Hardy's stories were set in 'the part real, part dream country' for which he chose the name Wessex after King Alfred's Saxon kingdom. So successful has Hardy's resurrection of this once obsolete term become that Wessex is now restored to common usage. In defining Wessex, Hardy not only marked out his fictional territory but gave each individual place its own separate name, often based upon historic designations, to emphasise the distinction between fiction and reality. Thus there have been several hundred Mayors of Dorchester but only three fictional Mayors of Casterbridge.

The first collected edition of Hardy's works (1895) was accompanied by a detailed map of Wessex. This whole process can be seen as a shrewd and most successful marketing device. Literary tourism came on apace with the growth of Romanticism; for the reader to be moved to tears by the fate of Tess d'Urbervilles or Bathsheba Everdene and then to be able to visit the places where these heroines lived, loved and died gives an entire extra dimension to the literary experience, especially when these scenes are set amongst some of the most beautiful countryside in England. 120 years after Hardy published his last novel, literary pilgrims still journey to Dorset and the adjoining counties to discover for themselves the landscape of his fiction and poetry.



The Importance of Egdon Heath

Egdon Heath was defined by Hardy's favoured topographer Hermann Lee as 'That vast expanse of moorland which stretches, practically without a break, from Dorchester to Bournemouth.' Desmond Hawkins interpreted 'this severe unwelcoming landscape with its strange beauty and untameable character' as 'one of the grand metaphors of Hardy's imagination: a symbol of Nature's indifference to human frustration and despair'. Hardy opens *The Return of the Native* with a detailed description of the Heath, which can be regarded as the main character in the novel: 'The untameable, Ishmaelish thing that Egdon now was it always had been. Civilization was its enemy. Ever since the beginning of vegetation its soil had worn the same antique brown dress. The great inviolate place had an ancient permanence which the sea cannot claim. Who can say of a particular sea that it is old? Distilled by the sun, kneaded by the moon, it is renewed in a year, in a day, or in an hour. The sea changed, the fields changed, the rivers, the villages and the people changed yet Egdon remained.'



Hardy's painting 'Rainbarrow and the Heath' (1871) - courtesy Dorset County Museum

Where is this Egdon Heath now?

Civilization was its enemy for it has fallen prey to four main human activities:- The Army, Afforestation, Enclosure for Agriculture and House Building (these activities in order of increasing destructiveness). Contrary to the impression which Hardy gives, heathland is managed land. Starting from Mesolithic times, it evolved as a man-made environment. Although lowland Heathland is internationally recognised as an endangered habitat, it is estimated that 1.5 acres of Egdon is being lost daily, mainly to development. Approximately 10,000 acres of unspoilt heathland remain today, of which nearly a quarter is on MoD property and thus relatively secure although inaccessible. Afforestation had begun in Hardy's time but accelerated with the establishment of the Forestry Commission in 1919, whose stated aim was to turn 'non-productive' heathland in 'productive' conifer plantations, thus converting 'the heathens'! So the vast open vistas of unspoilt Egdon described in *The Return of the Native* have been replaced by intense dark forest plots: there have been limited attempts to restore the heath, immediately behind Hardy's Cottage and around Rainbarrow.

In *The Return of the Native*, Hardy - at the time himself a returned native - describes Clym as having 'been so interwoven with the Heath in his boyhood that hardly anybody could look upon it without thinking of him.' For 'if anyone knew the heath well it was Clym. He was permeated with its scenes, with its substance, and with its odours. He might be said to be its product. His eyes had first opened thereon; with its appearance all the images of his memory were mingled ... His toys had been the flint knives and arrow-heads which he found there ... his flowers the purple bells and yellow gorse; his animal kingdom the snakes and croppers; his society its human haunters'. For Clym, read Hardy.

Egdon Heath is therefore both the fundamental landscape of Hardy and an environmentally sensitive and endangered habitat. Whilst some of it remains unspoilt and undeveloped, it is also largely unprotected and vulnerable. It must be incorporated into the National Park.

Dorchester / Casterbridge

From the age of ten until just before his twenty-first birthday, Hardy walked daily from the rural isolation of his parents' Egdon cottage to the centre of Dorchester, a County Town of 'assizes, railways, telegraphs and daily London papers', despite which it remained somewhat a municipality in miniature, still confined within old Roman boundaries. The sharp contrast between two such diverse environments lent a cutting-edge to his subsequent creativity, which was further enhanced by an intense awareness of local history: recent in the form of hang-fairs, the cholera epidemic and papal riots; more distant in memories of the Monmouth rebellion, the Great Fire, Roman skeletons and evidence of human occupation stretching back five thousand years. Dorchester forms the nodal point of Hardy's life, his fiction and his poetry and as such should be included within the National Park.

Largely because of much of the peripheral land being Duchy property, Dorchester has remained until very recently confined within or close to its Roman boundaries - defined by the Eighteenth Century 'Walks', the tree-lined avenues, which feature prominently in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Early in this novel, approaching the town down Stinsford Hill, Elizabeth-Jane comments to her mother on the apparent squareness of the antiquated borough laid out before them. The narrator confirms that 'it was compact as a box of dominoes. It had no suburbs - in the ordinary sense. Country and town met at a mathematical line'. From the east and the north, this arrangement still holds to the present day. Grey's Bridge and the Frome do indeed mark the abrupt boundary between Mellstock and Casterbridge; the river being the only buffer between isolated parish and bustling town.

Stinsford / Mellstock -> Waterston Ridge



Stinsford Church with Hardy's tomb - courtesy Alamy.com

Hardy's fictional Mellstock equates very closely with the actual parish of Stinsford; and still does so 180 years after the setting of *Under the Greenwood Tree*. The parish remains large, scattered and thinly-populated, reaching from the heights of Waterston Ridge in the north to the lowly Frome water-meadows in the south. In the west the parish abuts the Fordington end of Dorchester and in east merges beyond Hardy's Cottage into Egdon Heath. The population of Stinsford parish today is only 300, which is seventy fewer people than in 1840.

This landscape forms 'the heart of Hardy's Wessex' - if it is to be preserved for posterity, then the downland immediately behind Dorchester needs to be included in the National Park - in particular, the parishes of Stratton, Charminster, Stinsford and Puddletown - traversed by the Ridgeway path from Charminster Down, across Wolfeton Eweleaze to Waterston Ridge. This is the area described in *The Three Strangers*, subsequently dramatized by Hardy as *The Three Wayfarers*, - his first Wessex Tale and one of his most popular short stories. Here at Fiddler's Green stands Shepherd Fennel's ruined cottage Higher Crowstairs, within the boundaries of Stinsford Parish and less than two miles from the Hardys' cottage. From here the Ridgeway continues into Puddletown Parish - to Waterston Manor, and Hardy's Weatherbury, the setting of *Far from the Madding Crowd*. The Piddle Valley traverses Egdon to the north just as the Frome - Hardy's Valley of the Great Dairies - traverses it to the south. All this area must be included within the National Park if Hardy's landscape is to be preserved.

The Vale of Blackmoor

In his later fiction, Hardy moved northwards - for *The Woodlanders* and *Tess* into the Vale of Blackmoor, the landscape of his mother's childhood and home territory for many generations of maternal ancestors. To a significant extent Blackmoor Vale, like Wessex itself, appears to be Hardy's own construct - if nothing else, he certainly expanded and redefined its boundaries.

Historically, Blackmoor was a Norman hunting ground. The name does not appear at all on nineteenth-century Ordnance Survey maps but has been consistently present on them ever since the publication of the definitive Wessex edition of Hardy's novels. William Barnes was born near Sturminster Newton and is now referred to as the dialect poet from Blackmore Vale - but the research trail invariably leads back to Hardy and his much-quoted definition from *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*:

This fertile and sheltered tract of country, in which the fields are never brown and the springs never dry, is bounded on the south by the bold chalk ridge that embraces the prominences of Hambledon Hill, Bulbarrow, Nettlecombe-Tout, Dogbury, High Stoy, and Bubb Down. The traveller from the coast, who, after plodding northward for a score of miles over calcareous downs and corn-lands, suddenly reaches the verge of one of these escarpments, is surprised and delighted to behold, extended like a map beneath him, a country differing absolutely from that which he has passed through. Behind him the hills are open, the sun blazes down upon fields so large as to give an unenclosed character to the landscape, the lanes are white, the hedges low and plashed, the atmosphere colourless. Here, in the valley, the world seems to be constructed upon a smaller and more delicate scale ...

This is Hardy's Vale of the Little Dairies, in former times the Forest of White Hart; until recently a densely wooded country, where the medieval customs of the Green Man and his companions survived well into the nineteenth-century. Lea, defined these Woodlands as 'a region inhabited by simple-minded people, where many old-fashioned ideas and superstitions still linger' - woven by Hardy wove into his later fiction: an essential component of any National Park.

Portland / The Isle of Slings (Isla Vindilia)

'The peninsula carved by Time out of a single stone'

From Hardy's *Top-o'-Hill* (the knoll just west of the Heights Hotel), there are superb views over the entire length of Chesil Beach, Portland Harbour and West Bay (Deadman's Bay); ahead the coastline tapers away beyond Lyme towards Exmouth. Immediately below you are the combined towns of Chiswell and Fortuneswell, (The Street of the Wells) where stand 'the houses above houses, one man's doorstep rising behind his neighbour's chimney, the gardens hung up by one edge to the sky, the vegetables growing on apparently almost vertical planes, the unity of the whole island as a solid and single block of limestone four miles long ... all now dazzlingly unique and white against the tinted sea'.



From Portland heights - courtesy booking.com

In 1805 (The Trumpet-Major) Anne Garland followed 'the central track' down the island, 'the wide sea prospect extending' on both sides, 'she approached and gazed at Portland Bill, or Beal, as it was in those days more correctly called':

The wild, herbless, weather-worn promontory was quite a solitude, and, saving the one old lighthouse about fifty yards up the slope, scarce a mark was visible to show that humanity had ever been near the spot. Anne found herself a seat on a stone, and swept with her eyes the tremulous expanse of water around her that seemed to utter a ceaseless unintelligible incantation.

Hardy finds his descriptive cinematic best on this magical island; in *The Well-Beloved*, his final completed novel, he offers a concentrated essence of his understanding of the inter-relationship between man and the natural environment:

Ascending the steep incline ... he looked southward towards the Beal. The level line of the sea horizon rose above the surface of the isle, a ruffled patch in mid-distance as usual marking the Race ... Against the stretch of water, where a school of mackerel twinkled in the afternoon light, was defined, in addition to the distant lighthouse, a church with its tower, standing about a quarter of a mile off, near the edge of the cliff. The churchyard gravestones could be seen in profile against the same vast spread of watery babble and unrest.

The Wessex Question

Hardy initially wrote out of his own experience - about the areas of Dorset and London and Cornwall which he knew - using some real names and some fictitious - varying them fairly arbitrarily between novels. His first use of the term 'Wessex' was as a passing reference in Chapter XLIX of *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874) - the resurrection of such historic terminology being an off-shoot of Romanticism - Barnes' Dorset Dialect was derived from 'Saxon Wessex' and Charles Kingsley in 1866 writing of 'Wessex Worthies', an expression which resurfaces in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. From *The Hand of Ethelberta* (1875) onwards Hardy began to construct 'the part real part dream country' which to become his brand-name - a process which came to fruition in 1895 with the publication of the first collected edition of his works, complete with detailed map of Wessex.

Hardy admitted that he 'ventured to adopt the word 'Wessex' from the pages of early English history' to give 'fictitious significance' to the name 'of the district once included in that extinct kingdom'. Historically, Saxon Wessex started in the sixth-century in the area of modern Hampshire but slowly engulfed surrounding counties so that by Alfred's reign in the late ninth-century it included all of Southern England; during his reign Mercia was subsumed also so that the Kingdom of Wessex became the Kingdom of England. Hardy's Wessex therefore has never overlapped exactly with its Saxon progenitor.

The Wessexification of his fiction - and subsequently poetry - defined both his product and his territory. This was a shrewd marketing ploy which continues to pay vast dividends. Romanticism heralded the great age of literary tourism - what better way to maintain interest in your writings - not only during your life-time but posthumously also - by creating a semi-fictitious landscape which can forever-after be a place of pilgrimage? If the brand proves successful - and Hardy's Wessex probably outranks all except Goethe and Rousseau's efforts with the Alps - it ultimately has a profound effect upon the real countryside upon which the fiction was projected.

A mere twenty-one years after Hardy had first used the word Wessex, he noted that this process was well-established for his 'dream-country' had 'by degrees solidified into a utilitarian region which people can go to, take a house in, and write to the papers from ...'. Hardy's greatest impact on the world has been this, almost accidental, creation of a Twenty-First Century Wessex, headed by a Royal Earl and Countess, where you drink Wessex Water, eat organic Wessex produce, send your children to the Wessex Academy, travel in Wessex Taxis and are eventually laid to rest by the Wessex Funeral Service - pushing 'Dorset' into outmoded insignificance.

Landscape / National Park

'The essential energy of a Hardy novel is to be found in the descriptive detail, especially in his depiction of landscape'. (Michael Irwin)

Above all, Hardy was a landscape novelist, a landscape poet, who painted enduring pictures of a natural world - a real outdoor world - which forms the stage upon which his dream characters live out their tragic lives. Throughout his works, the landscape offers a tacit commentary on the mutability and brevity of existence - not just for his human protagonists but for all living creatures from the maggoty ephemera 'heaving and wallowing with enjoyment' in the Egdon mud to the combatant trees locked in a perpetual struggle for survival 'In a Wood'.

It is 120 years since Hardy published *The Well-Beloved*, his thirteenth and final novel. Time has been relatively kind to Dorset - no motorways, and countryside in a large part preserved so that much of the landscape and scenery and the vistas described by Hardy can still be explored and enjoyed by the county's twenty-first century residents, visitors, tourists as well as Hardy enthusiasts and scholars. It is essential that this landscape be preserved.

Hardy, a literary genius, who happened to be born in Dorset, has, like Shakespeare, an enduring message which transcends the centuries, with their transient intellectual and popular fashions. His novels and poetry are set in the Dorset Landscape, which he describes with the true clarity of the 'man who used to notice such things'. We have a duty to look after the landscape of Hardy's novels for future generations - to share, to love and enjoy - and by doing so to continue to appreciate and understand the natural world and heritage he valued. The best possible way to preserve this unique literary environment is through the creation of a Dorset National Park, including all those parts of the County described herewith - and so important to Hardy.

Tony Fincham on behalf of The Thomas Hardy Society