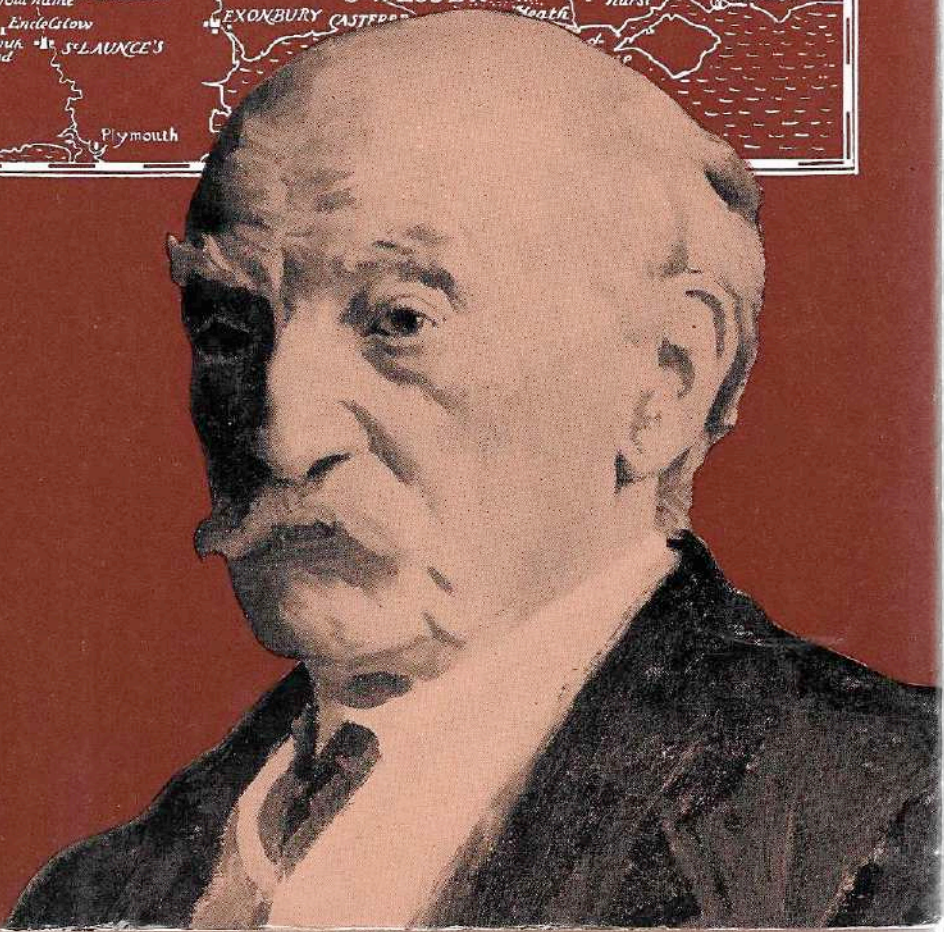
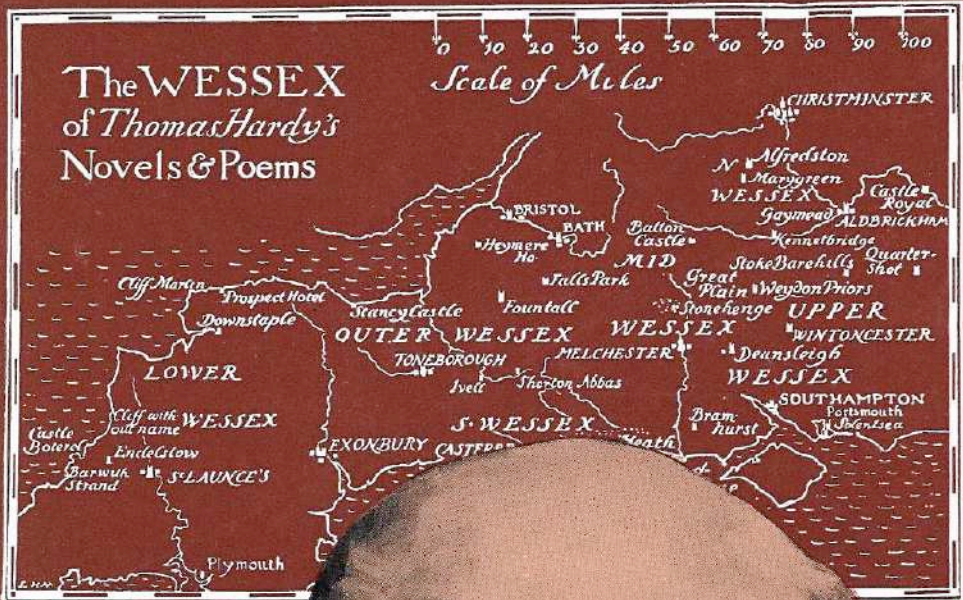


Denys Kay-Robinson
Hardy's Wessex
Re-appraised



that of Trinity church—where Jude walked after he had missed the bus to the station, remains trim enough, its paths still bordered by 'avenues of limes'. Close by, the tiny former market-place (the new market is on the edge of the town) affords space for one to appreciate the handsome eighteenth-century façade of the Grosvenor Arms, the 'Duke's Arms' of *Jude*. The station referred to in the novel is Semley, two miles to the north: closed now, leaving Shaftesbury travellers with a choice between Tisbury and Gillingham. Ironically, it is toward Semley that Shaftesbury (having no more building-room at the top of the hill) has mostly spread. Except for some new shop fronts, there is not much recent construction in the rather dull streets at the summit.

When Phillotson felt the need to consult his friend Gillingham he walked from Shaftesbury to the town of Gillingham ('Ledden-ton'), 'leaving Duncliffe Hill on his left'. This is a solitary conical hill in the Stour plain, partly encircled by woods and faintly forming a ring. Gillingham is described as 'a little town of three or four thousand inhabitants', and at the 1961 census its population was 3,500, so it has neither shrunk nor grown. The boys' school of the town (red brick, Victorian) is now a primary school.

Five miles south lies Tess's home at Marnhull ('Marlott'), a 'long and broken village' widely scattered about a network of lanes. Among the inevitable crop of claimants to be the Durbeyfield cottage (which Lea declared 'swept away') all but one can be dismissed out of hand. This building stands at the head of a narrow, bent cul-de-sac ('a crooked lane or street') off the west side of the B3092, a little north of Walton Elm Cross. During the 1920s Barton Cottage, as it was then called, was owned by a Major Campbell-Johnston, who lived one field away by the old Marnhull Brewery in Carraway Lane. A path still connects Carraway Lane with the head of the cottage lane, thus justifying Hardy's references to people *passing* the cottage (although in including Alec on horseback he appears to have ignored the stiles).

The Major employed a factotum named Blake, who on a day in 1924 was tending the garden of Barton Cottage with his assistant when they saw an elderly figure scrutinising the house. On Blake asking if he could be of service the stranger replied, 'No, thank you, I was only seeing where I put my Tess'. It has been said that Hardy was much too reticent to have been so forthcoming. But he

had been caught in a situation that he may well have felt demanded an explanation. Whether this answer meant anything to Blake is not recorded, but evidently he amplified it, for Blake ended by asking if he would care to meet Major Campbell-Johnston. The major was away at the time, as he often was, but according to Blake's account the meeting did take place—one imagines, in view of Hardy's age, at Max Gate. Shortly afterwards the deeds of the property were altered, and the name was changed to Tess Cottage.

Such is the version of the story given to me by the Blakes' nephew and virtually adopted son, Mr Ernest Allen, who heard it several times from Blake himself. The account differs only slightly from that given to the present occupants of the cottage by Mrs Blake shortly before her death in 1965 (Blake died in the 1930s). But corroboration is elusive. Neither Hardy nor Campbell-Johnston left any known letter or diary entry referring to a meeting between them. The major's son and daughter, though adults at the time, heard nothing of the matter then or later, but admit they spent long periods away from Marnhull; that their abnormally reticent father was fully capable of considering an encounter with Hardy none of their business; and that their infrequent appearances at home might explain their not hearing of the incident from the Blakes. Professor Geoffrey Cheshire, who with his wife and two sons lived in Tess Cottage for some years, during which he became the major's friend, never heard from him that he had met Hardy, but did hear repeatedly that the cottage was where Hardy had placed Tess. The professor adds that Campbell-Johnston was by no means a literary man, and would have been most unlikely to have linked his property with anything in a book unless he had strong reason. All these informants, together with Group-Captain Leonard Cheshire and his brother testify that the Blakes were an honest, conscientious, and solid couple incapable of inventing or even embroidering their story. It is worth noting that, if Hardy left no record of the episode, *Tess* was certainly in his mind in 1924, for his notes witness that he attended several rehearsals of a new dramatic production of the story that year at Dorchester.

The cottage itself neither invalidates the claims made for it nor tallies with Hardy's snippets of description closely enough to clinch the matter. At the period of the novel it was divided into two, a circumstance evidently discarded by Hardy. No one now alive