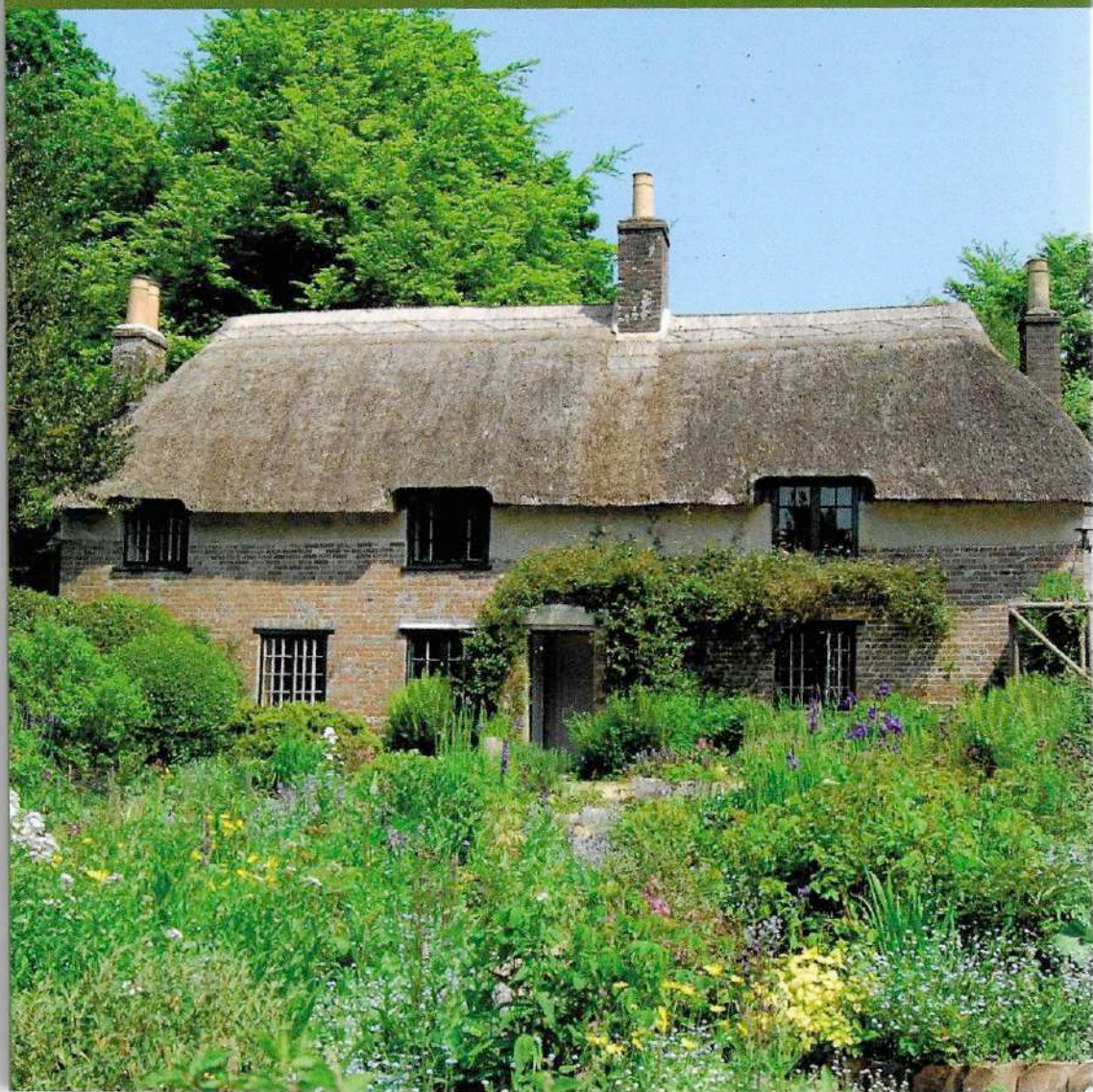


Exploring
Thomas Hardy's Wessex

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ONE Introduction

Thomas Hardy was born in Bockhampton in rural Dorset in June 1840; he died at the house he built for himself, Max Gate, just outside Dorchester in January 1928. In the intervening 88 years, he wrote and published 14 novels, over 50 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 pall-bearers 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 20th century poet, a contemporary of T. S. Eliot.

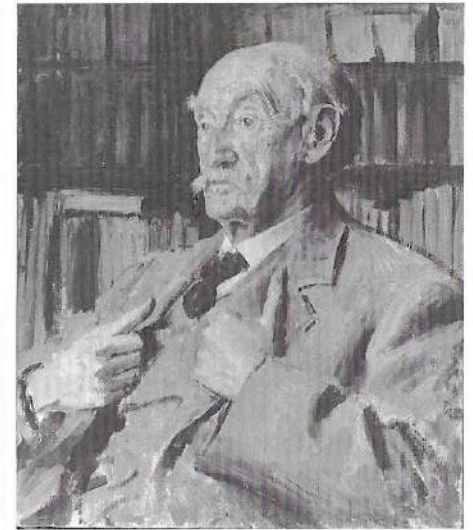
Hardy's stories were set in 'the part real, part dream country' for which he chose the name Wessex, after King Alfred's Saxon kingdom. So successful has Hardy's resurrection of this once obsolete term become that Wessex is now restored to common usage. In defining Wessex, Hardy not only marked out his 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, which is illustrated on page 9. 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'Urberville 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. This book is designed to facilitate and enhance such exploration of Hardy's Wessex.

To gain the most from this book, use it in conjunction with OS Explorer maps Sheets OL 15 'Purbeck & South Dorset' and 117 'Cerne Abbas & Bere Regis', which cover the vast majority of Hardy's landscapes. Also, a copy of *The Complete Poems of Thomas Hardy*,



Above Thomas Hardy in 1856 aged 16, son of a local stone mason and newly appointed apprentice to the architect John Hicks in Dorchester.



Above Thomas Hardy OM in 1923 aged 83 – now the grand old man of English Literature. From the painting by Augustus John.

edited by James Gibson, will add to your enjoyment and understanding of the writer and his works. References to relevant poems are given throughout this book as (CPxxx); the xxx representing the poem number in the Gibson volume. Hardy's Wessex places names are printed in bold; and I have included a detailed list of them at the end of this book. A second glossary links characters to Hardy's works.

For the ideal visual introduction to Hardy's Wessex, take the train from Southampton to Weymouth, passing Southampton Water, The New Forest, Poole Harbour, The Purbeck Hills, Bindon Abbey Mill (Tess), Egdon Heath, Max Gate, Dorchester (**Casterbridge**) to reach Weymouth (**Budmouth**).

When is the best time of year to explore Wessex? In winter and early spring the going may be muddy, but the views are at their best, allowing buildings to be seen more clearly, and whole landscape vistas to open before your eyes. Hardy, above all, is a 'landscape novelist'. Spring and early summer are glorious for the wild flowers, which add to the attractiveness of many of the walks and routes described in the book, especially as many include backwater country lanes whose verges and hedges are largely left uncut. Autumn is also good, for many of the best-known scenes in the novels take place then, and the countryside is more peaceful without the summer visitors.