

The Walk

Turn left out of The Casterbridge and walk east out of town. The first landmark is Grey's Bridge over the River Frome. Walk straight on, reading the notice on the bridge as you pass.

Soon, just before the first road junction, you pass the kissing gate to Bockhampton Path on the right. If you take the circular route this is where you will eventually emerge.

Continue up the hill to the roundabout. On the way you will pass this milestone as Hardy would have done daily.



Although you are now a mile from the centre of Dorchester you have only come three quarters of that distance from The Casterbridge.

Cross the roundabout and take the second exit marked **Bockhampton** among other destinations.

A short way along this road, on the right, is the lane to Stinsford Church. You may like to detour for a visit but if you are intending to take the circular route it is better to leave it until later.

Note: Wheelchair users will emerge here if they choose the alternative route for the last stage.

Carry straight on for a little way, passing the entrance to Kingston Maurward College and, under the sweet chestnut trees, the entrance to Birkin House. On the left is a fingerpost pointing to **Higher Bockhampton**. This is a new footpath — Hardy could have walked diagonally over the field but this route runs parallel to the road through a newly planted copse on the line of a Roman road. It is the roughest section of the walk and includes a stile. Some may prefer to continue along the metalled road to the bottom of the hill as Hardy might have done on occasion.



At the foot of the hill take a short farm track leading north west from the road. Here diverted walkers rejoin the route. Please leave all gates as you find them.



This is the view back to the road from the gateway. A fingerpost marks the bottom of the path that we followed along the Roman road.

Another fingerpost shows our path running diagonally up the hill to the east and around the end of a wood.

If you look closely at the right hand edge of this picture you will see a narrow pathway leading through the bushes. This leads into an old marl pit, a place where lime was excavated for agricultural use. The young Hardy would have known it as a small open quarry. Now it is a tree shaded, secret place where occasional children play and rabbits burrow into the banks.

Return to the main path and climb the hill. The straight route goes around the end of the wood and through a gate but more adventurous walkers might like another diversion: There is a stile leading into the wood a hundred yards or so from the end. Once inside there is no definite path so thread your way between the trees to your left but mind where you tread.

Here are dozens of holes comprising a magnificent badger's sett which must have already been ancient in Hardy's time. As a schoolboy passing daily he would have known it well.



The wood ends just beyond the sett and you rejoin the path up the hill to a gate by a distinctive barn. Go through the gate and turn right onto a farm track.

Follow the track to its end where it joins the road at Higher Bockhampton and turn left. A short distance away you will see the sign for **Hardy's Cottage** on the right. This picture shows the end of the track and the short stretch of road to the turning for the cottage. Beyond the turning the road is sometimes known as Cuckoo Lane because the bird was once common there.

Turn right at the sign. Soon the road becomes a gravelled track. Hardy's Cottage is the very last house on the right.

The cottage now belongs to the National Trust. For opening times and charges call 01305 262366.



After visiting the cottage you might wander for a while in the countryside behind the building. Much of it is wooded but if you carry straight on you will come upon one of the many remnants of what Hardy called Egdon Heath. This section is known as Puddletown Forest. Puddletown itself; Hardy knew it as Piddletown and called it Weatherbury, is some three miles further east.

The Circular Route

When you have seen enough retrace your steps to the road, turn left and follow the road south past the point where you joined it and on for another half mile to Bockhampton Crossroads. From here to Stinsford Church you are following the footsteps of the carol singers in **Under the Greenwood Tree**. Walk straight on, (the signpost points to **Lower Bockhampton** and **West Stafford**) and you will come to the village that Hardy called Mellstock.



Hardy's first school was here in Lower Bockhampton and later he recast the old school house as Fancy Day's house.



Walk through the village to the bridge at the southern end. This bridge carries two of the famous nineteenth century warning plates, take note of their admonitions as you pass.

Immediately after the bridge turn right and take the waterside footpath. This is not strictly a river, it is a watermeadow carrier, an artificial channel used to direct water where it was needed for the "drowning" of the meadows. You will encounter many remnants of watermeadow engineering on this section of the walk.

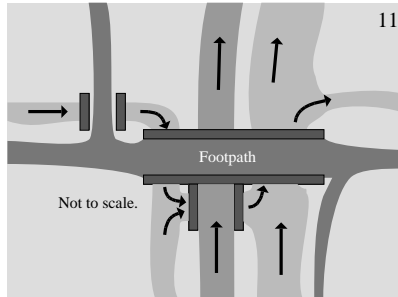
Watermeadows were not used for irrigation. In the cold of winter water was trickled through the roots of meadow grasses. The water was a little warmer than the frost and so protected the grass which grew faster in consequence. Watermeadows produced earlier spring grass and greater hay harvests in the days before mechanisation.

Hardy knew the meadows in their heyday. They are too labour intensive for modern farming and most now are derelict.

Follow the path. (continued overleaf)

Much of the footpath here lies on a raised bank between two watercourses. The tree-lined route runs almost straight until it crosses another wide carrier just before the turning for Stinsford Church.

Take a closer look at the bridge structures here. The plan shows them in Hardy's day. Hidden behind the trees on your right is an ornamental lake and the formal gardens of what is now Kingston



Maurward College. Hardy called the house Knapwater or Enckworth but made relatively few references to it although the Pitt family, who owned it, were the local notables. The wide carrier feeds the lake and the path crosses it by a bridge. Next to it and a little higher is another carrier, dry now, on a low aqueduct that fed the garden water features. The bridge crosses this too and a third, lower, channel. The flow from a spring and the meadow beyond was too low to power the gardens and so flowed beneath the higher carrier to augment the lake and some was taken to power lower watermeadows. The builders had such control over the water levels that the whole multi-layered structure stands little more than waist high from the bed of the lower carrier.

Note for those wishing to follow Hardy's steps in older age: The narrow footpath alongside the existing carrier and signposted to St. George's Road runs via Long Bridge and St. George's Road, to Syward Lane and thence to Max Gate.

Stinsford Church

The route to Dorchester lies straight on through a narrow gate and follows the line of yet another waterway, this time a shallow, spring fed, stream. Note the path for later.

Now is the best stage at which to divert to the right, uphill, to St. Michael's Church at Stinsford, the Mellstock Parish Church of *Under the Greenwood Tree* and other tales. The signpost is just marked *Stinsford*. This was Hardy's parish church and it is



here that his heart lies buried alongside members of his family. Here too lies the Poet Laureate, Cecil Day-Lewis.

Resist the temptation to enter the churchyard by the lower gate, carry on up the hill to the upper gate with its huge stone urns and the magnificent yew tree. The Hardy graves are just inside the gate on the left.

Closing the loop

Note: This last section has narrow kissing gates. It is passable with a light pushchair that can be lifted over them but wheelchair users should continue north along the lane from the church to the turning we passed on the outward journey and backtrace the route from there.

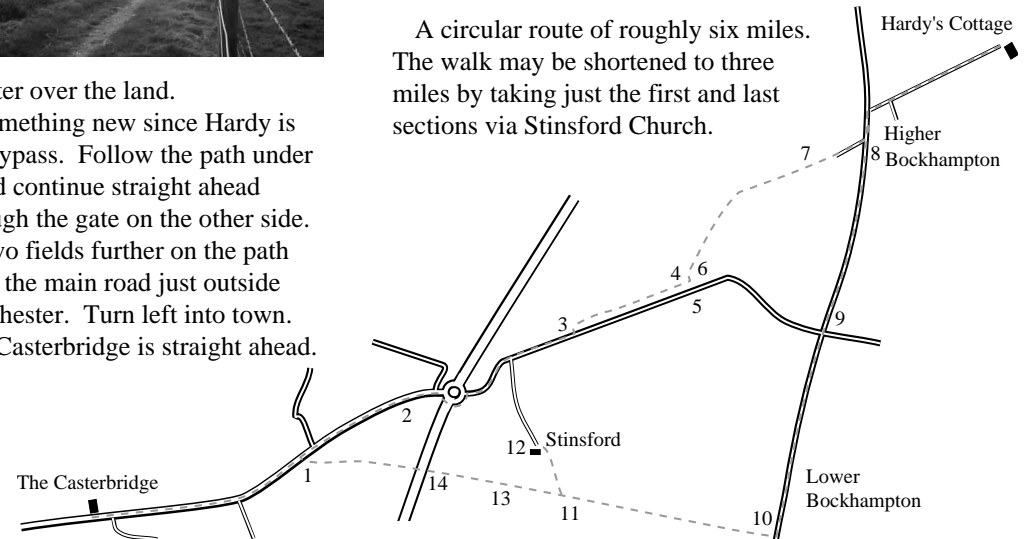
Go back to the riverside path and turn right for Dorchester. The path from here is mostly double fenced. It leads over more derelict watermeadows and if you look closely you can still find traces of the shallow, interleaved, channels; the mains and drains, that conducted the water over the land.



Something new since Hardy is the bypass. Follow the path under it and continue straight ahead through the gate on the other side.

Two fields further on the path joins the main road just outside Dorchester. Turn left into town. The Casterbridge is straight ahead.

Derek Moody © 2008



Walking to Hardy's Cottage from:

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Author Thomas Hardy coined the name Casterbridge. After leaving the village school at Lower Bockhampton the young Hardy went to school in Dorchester. He passed our door twice daily. This walk combines two of the routes he knew.

A circular route of roughly six miles. The walk may be shortened to three miles by taking just the first and last sections via Stinsford Church.

The terrain is mostly made-up rural footpaths and farm tracks with one stretch of unmade field path, also a mile of main road with footpath and a mile of byroad without.

There are no steep hills. The roughest section has a smooth alternative.

The route is passable with a large-wheeled child's pushchair. It is unsuitable for large, electric, wheelchairs but it is just about possible for adventurous users of light wheelchairs accompanied by strong assistants.

You are responsible for your own safety. The route shown is only a suggestion. Follow the countryside code and take due care when walking on roads and alongside water, especially so after wet weather. Information here was checked at time of writing but the countryside changes continually. Neither Derek Moody nor The Casterbridge are liable for loss or injury incurred on this walk.