Thomas Hardy

POET & NOVELLIST 1840 - 1928

Thomas Hardy was born in 1840 at Higher Bockhampton, near Dorchester. He was the eldest of four children and his father was a master mason. As a child he was shy and reflective, encouraged by his mother to read and study beyond the usual level for local children. He was also a keen fiddle player and often went with his father to play at local christenings, weddings and parties.

At 16 Hardy became apprenticed to an architect in Dorchester. He practised as an architect in London for five years but returned to Dorchester after deciding he wanted to write. His first attempt at a novel was rejected, but with the help of Emma Gifford, whom he later married, his second attempt was successful. Over the next 25 years he wrote in all 14 novels and over 50 short stories. In 1895 he published Jude the Obscure, after which he abandoned novel writing and devoted the rest of his life to poetry.

In 1885 he and Emma moved into Max Gate, the house he had designed on the edge of Dorchester. Emma died in 1912 and in 1914 he married Florence Dugdale. He died on 11th January 1928.

Hardy adopted the historical name of Wessex as the name for his own ‘partly real, partly dream country’. The raw materials for his novels came from his life, the country folk and the contrasting landscapes of Dorset.

He used a mixture of real and fictional names for landscape features and the towns and villages, drawing from his extensive knowledge of the area.

The great majority of locations in Hardy’s novels and stories are set within West Dorset. Among these are Tess of the d’Urbervilles, Under the Greenwood Tree, Far from the Madding Crowd. The Woodlanders and The Return of the Native. Many of the key locations from these novels are mentioned throughout this leaflet, the real place names are shown first, followed by those used by Hardy.

Further information

If you would like to delve further into the fascinating life and work of Thomas Hardy, Dorchester Tourist Information Centre stocks a selection of maps, books and trail leaflets. The Discover Dorchester leaflet includes a Thomas Hardy walk that follows plaques on the ground around the town. More information can also be found at www.hardycountry.org

Blue Badge guided Hardy tours

Book a group tour with an experienced Blue Badge Guide and visit the locations that inspired Hardy with a Hardy Country Tour or explore Dorchester on foot on a ‘Casterbridge’ walking tour. www.dorsettourguides.com

Events

The international Thomas Hardy Conference and Festival is a bi-annual week-long event offering an exciting programme of lectures, seminars, talks, poetry readings, walks and entertainment. The Thomas Hardy Birthday Weekend event includes the laying of wreaths at the Hardy Statue in Dorchester on the Saturday nearest the anniversary of his birth (2nd June). For more information on these and other events contact the Thomas Hardy Society (details left).

Accommodation

Visit www.visit-dorset.com or contact our Tourist Information Centres

Dorset County Museum

A visit to the Dorset County Museum in Dorchester is recommended. The museum has the largest Hardy collection in the world, the bulk of which was bequeathed to the Museum by his wife Florence Hardy. The most fascinating material from this collection, including manuscripts, books, diaries, photographs, notebooks and paintings, is on show in the gallery ‘A Writer’s Dorset’. At the centre of the gallery is a reconstruction of Hardy’s study at Max Gate, with all his books and furniture. For more information visit www.dorsetcountymuseum.org. Tel: 01305 262735

For further information on the area visit our website www.visit-dorset.com or download the Dorset Visitor App

Big Screen and TV locations

So much of the West Dorset landscape has remained unchanged since Hardy’s time that it is not surprising that several film and TV adaptations of his novels have been filmed here.

In 2013 Hollywood film crews descended on Sheborne and Mapperton House near Beaminster to shoot Thomas Vinterberg’s adaptation of Hardy’s fourth novel and first major literary success Far from the Madding Crowd. Starring A-listers Carey Mulligan, Tom Sturridge and Matthias Schoenaerts, film locations include Mapperton House, Sheborne Abbey, Castleton Church and Abbey Close. The streets of Sheborne were transformed to resemble an 1870s market square in Hardy’s town of Casterbridge. The last big screen adaptation of this classic novel was in 1967 and starred Alan Bates and Julie Christie using locations including Maiden Castle, Max Gate and 14th Century Tithe Barn at Abbotsbury.

The 2003 ITV adaptation of The Mayor of Casterbridge starring Caran Hinds and Jodhi May was filmed at locations including Maiden Castle, Cerne Abbas and Charmouth. Cerne Abbas and Minterne Gardens provided locations for the filming of the 1998 ITV production of Tess of the d’Urbervilles.