

THOMAS HARDY'S DORSET

Rodney Legg

Thomas Hardy celebrated the glorious county of Dorset through his writings. Today our vision of Dorset is very much that fixed by Hardy in novels ranging from *Far From the Madding Crowd* and *The Mayor of Casterbridge* to *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*. Hurriedly produced in instalments for magazines, they were then reworked by Hardy with care and finesse, and turned into world classics. He proceeded to write some of the greatest poetry in the English language.

Rodney Legg, the doyen of contemporary Dorset authors, revisits the Dorset heartland of Hardy's Wessex. He charts Thomas Hardy's life and work through the places he knew and the locations he immortalised, from his birthplace at Stinsford, to his old age at Max Gate, with Swanage, Sturminster Newton, Weymouth and Wimborne in between. Fresh facts and anecdotes have come from Moule family papers and visits to Fordington Vicarage. They are brought together in a lively and profusely illustrated biography which will also be invaluable for those studying Hardy at school or college.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

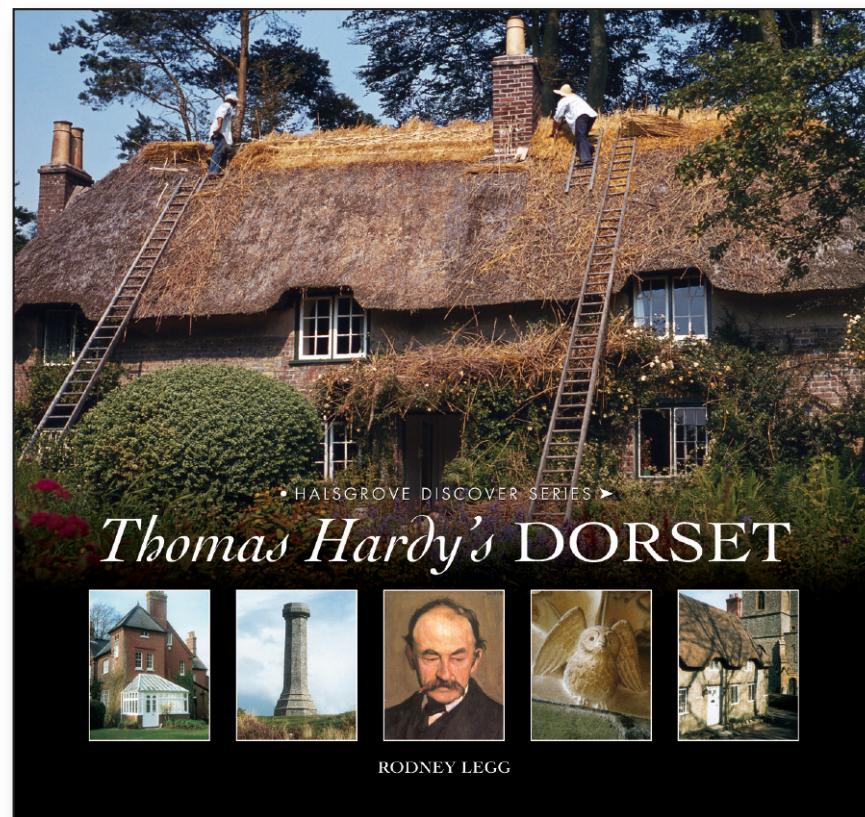
Rodney Legg was born in Bournemouth and has emerged as one of Dorset's most prolific historians. Having founded *Dorset – The County Magazine* in 1968, as well as starting the Tyneham Action Group, he also edited *Purbeck and Poole Magazine*. He has published hundreds of country walks including a total of 140 circuits for *Somerset Life*. Through his efforts, with a twenty-five-year personal campaign, Thomas Hardy's Max Gate home in Dorchester was eventually opened to the public. He achieved the same for Fort Henry at Studland in 2002. Nationally he is still active in the environmental movement having been chairman of the Open Spaces Society since 1989 and a member of the ruling council of the National Trust from 1990 to 2009.

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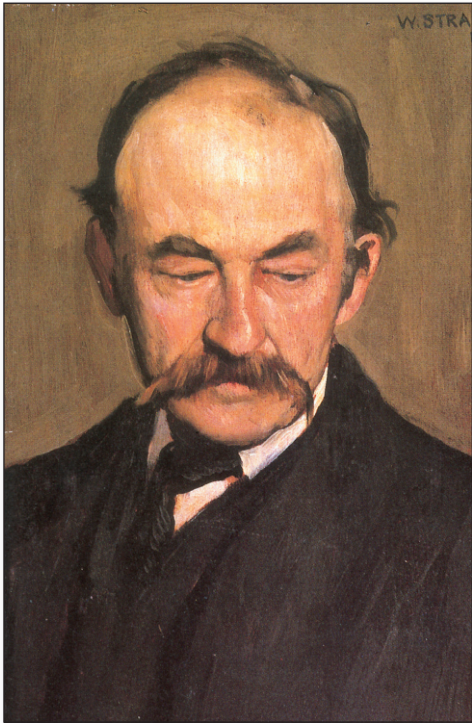
RODNEY LEGG

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Above: Hardy shaved off his beard and sat for his portrait, by William Strang, in 1892

Below: Example of a double-page spread.

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The fifteenth-century church has survived, mediaeval and magnificent, complete with dark oak pews and a large gallery where musicians played at services until 1845. Fiddletown and its volatile Sparks family provided Hardy with the best of settings and stories. These were full of incident and emotion. Without the wealth of material that came from this working class background - which he spent a lifetime reconciling - he may well have never progressed beyond a more purveyor of ponderous prose and poetic poetry.

Hardy himself realised this when he admitted that Weatherbury folk were:

'... by no means uninteresting, intrinsically. If you put spoke truly, they were as hardy, strong, hearty, wicked as set as any in the whole country.'

Standish cottage and back from the main road into Dorchester

Chapter Three
Architect turns Author

AS YOUTHFUL BROTHERS Tom and Henry embarked on a tour of the cathedral cities of southern England. They travelled on their Sunbeam bicycles and put up for the night in village inns. There's a very restrained apple-wine ginger-beer sheath.

In his self-revolutionary poem 'Women's Heights' of 1896, Tom implies that as a 16-year-old in 1836 he considered becoming a clergyman but 'cannot go to the tall-spire town, being barred by the forms now passed'. Salisbury had the diocesan theological college and such a mission. Professor J.O. Bailey argues in *The Poetry of Thomas Hardy*, would have marked a turning-point in his life. He writes that Dr Elsie Smith, the librarian at Salisbury, 'discovered correspondence indicating Hardy's application to prepare himself for the

Woodford Castle, morning up of stairs in 1836 named the corner of Thomas Hardy, architect

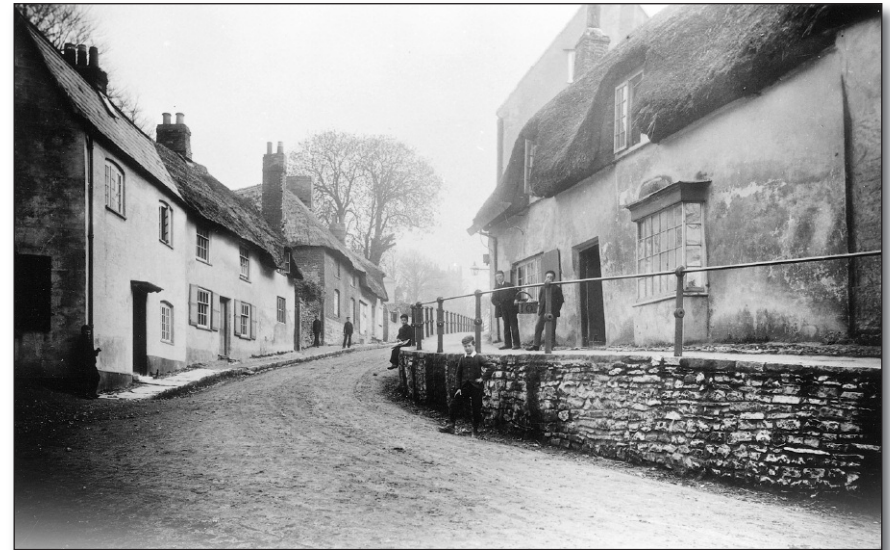


Top: Tess Cottage at Evershot, on the corner of Back Lane above the churchyard, retains its rustic look

Above: Hardy and Florence Dugdale, his second wife, contemplating the future on the beach at Aldeburgh



Garden view of Hardy's Cottage with upstairs windows being those of the birth-room (above door) and young Thomas Hardy's bedroom (right)



Fordington High Street, towards the artisan quarter of the county town