

THOMAS HARDY AT MAX GATE

THE LATTER YEARS

Dr Andrew Norman

In June 1883, Thomas Hardy, then aged forty-three, returned to Dorchester in his native county of Dorsetshire, together with his wife Emma, in order to find a house.

Unable to find a property which suited himself and Emma, Hardy decided to build one, on a plot of land purchased from the estate of The Duchy of Cornwall and situated a mile or so to the east of Dorchester on the road to Wareham. In this house he would write some of his greatest works, including five novels, three collections of short stories, eight collections of poetry, an epic drama, and a play in verse. He would travel with Emma to the Continent and to Ireland, he would be accepted by the highest echelons of London society and into their innermost circles and meet not only the aristocracy, but also the leading literati of the day.

Sadly however all was not well in Hardy's 'Garden of Eden' as his marriage to Emma, gradually disintegrated into a meaningless charade. This had profound implications both for his social life, writing, and mental well-being, his overwhelming melancholy being only partially redeemed by his later marriage to Florence Dugdale.

The purpose of this book is to pierce the veil of secrecy which Hardy deliberately drew over his life; to decipher the coded messages which his writings contain; to find out why his life was so filled with anguish, an anguish which led to the creation, by him, of some of the finest novels and poems in the English language. Only then is it possible to discover the real Thomas Hardy whose life was played out in the self-designed setting of Max Gate.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

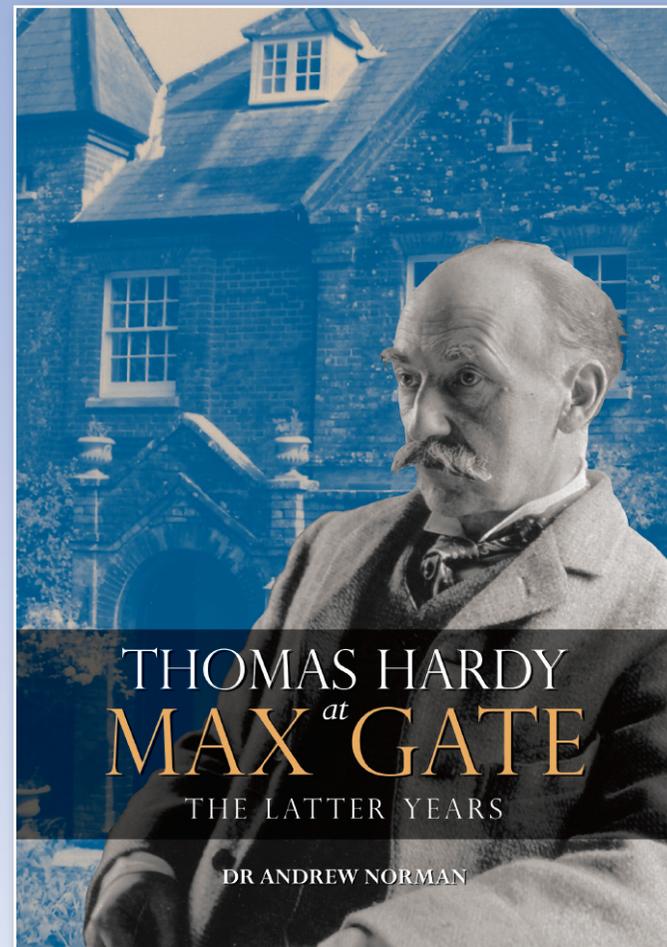
Andrew Norman was born in Newbury, Berkshire, UK in 1943. Having been educated at Thornhill High School, Gwelo, Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and St Edmund Hall, Oxford, he qualified in medicine at the Radcliffe Infirmary. He has two children Bridget and Thomas, by his first wife.

From 1972-83, Andrew worked as a general practitioner in Poole, Dorset, before a spinal injury cut short his medical career. He is now an established writer whose published works include biographies of Thomas Hardy, T.E. Lawrence, Jane Austen, Agatha Christie, Enid Blyton, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Sir Arthur Pearson, Adolf Hitler, and Robert Mugabe. Andrew was remarried to Rachel in 2005.

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Left: Hardy and Florence at Max Gate.
Photo: Dorset County Museum

Right: Max Gate, circa 1890s.
Photo: The National Trust

Bottom left: Thomas Hardy and HRH The Prince of Wales at Max Gate, summer 1923.
Photo: The National Trust

Bottom right: Thomas Hardy in the 1890s.
Photo: Dorset County Museum



Example of a double-page spread.

One THE NATIVE RETURNS

Born on 2 June 1840 in a cottage in the remote hamlet of Higher Bockhampton (which he preferred to call a house) 3 miles from Dorchester, Hardy's accomplishments were already great, despite his relatively young age. At his local school he had gained a working knowledge of Latin, French and German and, encouraged by his mother, was familiar with the great novelists of the day. He had witnessed a public execution; read Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*, and written what would be the first of many poems viz. *Domitium*, about his family home. He had lived, for a while, in London where he visited the National Gallery; attended operas and the theatre, and studied to become an architect/surveyor. In 1874 he married Emma Lavinia Gifford, daughter of a solicitor.

Among other places of residence for Hardy were, successively, Weymouth in Dorsetshire; Surbiton in Surrey; Swanage, Sturminster Newton and Wimborne, all in Dorsetshire, and the experience of living in such locations provided him with a backdrop for his novels and short stories. Astonishingly, he had already nine novels to his name, including *Under the Greenwood Tree*, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, *The Hand of Ethelberta*, *The Return of the Native*, *The Trumpet-Major*, and *A Laodicean*.

In June 1883, Thomas Hardy, then aged forty-three, returned to Dorchester (principal town of his native county of Dorsetshire). Here, he and his wife Emma, whom he had married nine years previously, took lodgings in Shire Hall Lane. The following month, accompanied by poet and critic Edmund Gosse, the couple attended a church service at nearby Winterborne Came, conducted by clergyman, poet and Hardy's former teacher, William Barnes. (Barnes had retired from school mastering two decades earlier, in 1864, when he had been offered the living of Winterborne Came-cum-Whitcombe.)

Unable to find a house in Dorchester which suited himself and Emma, Hardy decided to build one, on a plot of land purchased from the estate of the Duchy of Cornwall and situated a mile or so to the east of the town on the road to Wareham.

In this house he would write another five novels; three collections of short stories; eight collections of poetry; an epic drama, and a play in verse. He would travel with Emma to the Continent and to Ireland. He would be accepted by the highest echelons of London society and into their innermost circles, and meet not only the aristocracy, but also the leading literati of the

day – for example, poet Robert Browning, and poet and critic, Matthew Arnold.

In July 1910 he would travel to London, to Marlborough House to be invested with the Order of Merit by King Edward VII. Not only that, but the universities of both Oxford and Cambridge would award him an honorary degree of Doctor of Letters.

Sadly however, despite his wonderful achievements in the literary field, all was not well in Hardy's 'Garden of Eden'. His marriage to Emma, whom he had met and fallen madly in love with in March 1870, gradually disintegrated into a meaningless charade, with profound implications both for his social life, writing, and mental well-being.



Max Gate.

