

Stinsford Parish Bounds Walk Notes

The Stinsford Parish Bounds walk has not taken place for a number of years. This paper provides a list of sites around the edge of the parish, many if not all, that will be well known to residents. The route has deliberately held to existing public rights of way rather than requesting permission from landowners to follow the exact boundaries of the parish. There are as a result two relatively short stretches where the route leaves the parish. These are at Yellowham Wood and Seager's Barn. This was deliberate in that if there is any interest in the future as writing this up as a walk route for wider distribution it will be usable 12 months of the year by visitors and anyone with an interest in walking the parish.

This text has tended to be less informative about well-known sites such as Hardy's Cottage and attempt to give more information about those areas less well trod to the north and west of the parish. If you think that there are sites not worth including or places that should have been included and are not please let us know.

The walk is not difficult. There are climbs near the beginning near Duddle Heath, Snails Creep and Yellowham Wood. The only bank is near Pigeon House between Seager's Barn and Lovers Lane. It is over 12 miles in length. Generally the surface is suitable for all year use but boots or sturdy foot ware is to be recommended.

Numbered site locations are marked on the accompanying map. Enjoy the walk.

1) Kingston Maurward

The 750 acre parkland that we see today was ostensibly laid out in the 18th Century with several additions and major changes resulting from military use in the 1940s. The gardens cover 35 acres and were created between 1915 and 1922 under the influence of the Arts and Crafts movement. The house itself is a fine example of the Palladian style built in 1720. Like other 17th and 18th Century mansions in the area, including Kingston Lacy, it was later clad in Portland stone. In the case of Kingston Maurward this was done in 1794 so more or less giving it the appearance it has today. Today it operates as an agricultural college. The college has done a great deal of work to address its energy needs through renewable energy provision and opened the gardens and animal park to the public at no charge.

2) Old Manor

Built in 1590 to replace a house dating back at least a further 200 years. By 1698 it became a farm- house and was eventually subdivided in the 19th Century before falling into disrepair. In the 1950s Dorset County Council suggested its demolition before it was bought and restored to be the picture perfect Elizabethan manor house we see today.

3) Lower Bockhampton

Sitting on the northern slope to the water meadows the village is very picturesque. Many of the cottages are very ancient. The suffragette, Emmeline Pankhurst's driver lived in the village and the school still exists, all be it converted for residential use, that Thomas Hardy attended.

4) Bhompston

Bhompston was recorded in the Domesday Book. Most of the handful of cottages that exist today are 19th Century but the farmhouse is of considerable age.

5) Pine Lodge

Pine Lodge tea rooms can provide a refreshing on route stop.

6) Thorncombe Woods

Thorncombe is a 26 acre nature reserve. The Rushy Pond is at its most scenic in calm sunny weather and provides a watering hole for the reserves herd of Dartmoor Ponies. At this point the route was crossed by the Roman road from Dorchester. This can be seen in a reasonable state of preservation a little off route to the east and beyond the Rainbarrow. Much of the area to the east is subject to an attempt to restore the heathland from the pine plantations that were planted in the post war period.

7) Hardy's Cottage

The well known and loved National Trust Property with all of its rusticity where Thomas Hardy was born in 1840. The orchard provides a pleasant place to rest or it is possible to walk through the village to the tea shop at the Hardy Visitor Centre.

8) Snails Creep

The route rises up a gentle hill from the Hardy Monument to the rear of Hardy's cottage. The path is quaintly known as Snails Creep. The deciduous wood is particularly attractive in June when it is carpeted with bluebells.

9) Yellowham Wood and Keepers Cottage

Unfortunately we have to leave the parish at the junction into Yellowham Wood. Part of the wood is in the parish but the path is actually in the adjacent parish. Keepers cottage is deep in the wood . It is a 19th Century building that allegedly featured in Hardy's novel Under the Greenwood Tree.

10) Waterston Ridge

The path climbs steeply to the top of Waterston Ridge. The Ridge runs for about 1.5 miles east to west with Charlton Down in the west and Puddletown in the east. The western half falls within the Parish and provides spectacular views to the north and south for much of its 3.5 miles in length. Our route heads west returning to the Parish at the copse a short distance before the Piddlehinton Road. The views from the high point just West of the road were noted in the Stinsford Neighbourhood Plan. Most of the Parish can be seen from this point with views to Kingston Maurward and the forest to the Southeast and from the downs over the water meadows to Dorchester, Maiden Castle and the Coastal Ridge beyond.

11) Barrows

The Ridgeway track is an ancient Bronze Age route. Just like the Southern Ridgeway between Dorchester and the coast it was lined with burial mounds.

a) Barrows East

Just to the north of the ridgeway track running towards the Piddlehinton Road is a Bronze Age long barrow (2000 – 700BC). There were originally 5 bowl barrows including one named Robins Barrow although this has been destroyed. Four barrows still remain.

b) Barrows West

Three bowl barrows exist at the west end of the Ridge just before the track steeply descends. Out of the three one large one survives. The other two to the north and south of the track are discernible only as slight risings in the fields after been destroyed. The panoramic views from this point are exceptional. From here can be seen the location of many hectares of bronze age field systems and a possible settlement. The field systems

stretched from Higher Charlton Down in the West to the Piddlehinton Road in the East. There are still traces but in the main it has been levelled, especially from 1970 onwards by deep ploughing.

12) Fiddlers Green

The site comprises a small derelict cottage and a huge round barrow. The cottage has been associated with 'Higher Crowstairs' in Hardy's short story 'The Three Strangers'.

Hardy describes it as:

'a lonely cottage stood on such a down and may possibly be stood here now. In spite of its loneliness however, the spot by actual measurement, was not three miles from a country town. Yet that affected it little. Three miles of irregular upland...' 'Some old earthen camp or barrow, some clump of trees, at least some starved fragment of ancient hedge is usually taken advantage of in the erection of these forlorn buildings. But, in the present case, such a kind of shelter had been disregarded. Higher Crowstairs, as the house was called, stood quite detached and undefendable. The only two footpaths at right angles hard by, which may have crossed

at this point for a good 500 years'.

The cottage was roofed until the 1970s and would probably have been completely demolished a few years ago had a solar farm development on the site progressed. It does not exactly fit Hardy's description today but there are signs. Most of the hedging is relatively recent and a closer inspection of Square Copse to the south shows a track cutting that would have formed a crossroads near the cottage. The barrow is the largest in the vicinity. It is a bell barrow dating to the early to middle bronze age (1500-1100BC)

13) Three Cornered, Long and Square Coppice

These are not classed as ancient woodland but form essential habitat on the wide open downs.

14) Seager's Barn

Presumably once there was a barn on the site. Today it is a junction where several paths meet in a hollow on the downs.

15) Limekiln Copse

Just over the fields from the top of the rise can be seen Limekiln Copse. It is thought that this may have been the site of the Hardy family limekiln. There is a 19th Century poster advertising its services on the wall in Hardy's Cottage at Higher Bockhampton. Nearby is Badger Copse with ancient woodland status.

16) Lovers Lane

This is possibly the last drove lane into Dorchester connecting the downs to the market in the town centre. No one is sure how long it has existed but the number of varieties of shrub that line the route suggest it is very old. A recent count identified 18 different shrubs. It is also a must for wild flora but regardless is in the path of the so called North Dorchester development if it goes ahead.

17) Frome Whitfield. Little remains of this ancient hamlet that existed as far back as the doomsday book. The site of the church and village was close by and to the south of Frome House. Earth works may be seen in the meadow just south of the house. The house was built about 1790 but cannot be seen from the track. To the east side of the track is a very debased section of parkland that featured in one of Henry Moule's paintings from the mid 19th Century.

18) Blue Bridge

The bridge was built in 1877 and is now a popular scenic riverside location.

19) Coker's Frome

This is the site of another medieval hamlet just outside of Dorchester. Meagre earthworks exist just south of the track. Today it is an important site of the County Show Ground.

20) Greys Bridge

The bridge was constructed in 1742 to carry the main road from the East into Dorchester. It featured in Hardy's novel *Far from the Madding Crowd*. Shortly before the bridge is 10 Hatches Weir. Like many locations in the vicinity featuring in Hardy's poem 'The Curates Kindness'. Many years ago this was a popular swimming place on the river. It provides splendid views across the water meadows to Dorchester.

21) Stinsford Water Meadows

The route takes us across the road and a short distance along the roadside footpath the route leads back into the water meadows. The cottage across the meadow to the left is Eagle Lodge. It was once the gatehouse to Stinsford House from where the remains of an avenue of trees that lead to the house although it is now cut off by the Dorchester bypass. Looking across the river provides splendid views to Fordington.

22) St Michaels Church

This is the well-known site of Thomas Hardy's grave. The church is a beautiful old building. The original stone relief of St Michael is now inside the church. It is late Saxon and interesting to compare with late Saxon sculpture at a number of sites in the locality such as Winterbourne Steepleton, Toller Fratrum and further afield at Chichester Cathedral.

23) Stinsford House

The manor dated back at least to the Norman conquest. The present house is of many periods. The earliest surviving structure date back to the 17th Century. It is subdivided into modern residential properties. A perpendicular arch lead into the private gardens from near the church tower. On the opposite side of the churchyard is the Old Vicarage, a fine building from the first half of the 19th Century.

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