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DIGITAL GUIDE

THOMAS HARDY COUNTRY

Discover the real Wessex



Far from the Madding Crowd

Beloved by novelist and poet Thomas Hardy, the south-west county of Dorset continues to charm visitors with its unspoilt charm, rolling countryside, chalk downlands and sleepy villages



A century ago, Sir Frederick Treves, the king's surgeon, was spending his retirement cycling the tracks and lanes of his native Dorset, researching the "green and homely" county that he considered the finest spot on earth.

It surely says something for Dorset today that his book, *Highways and Byways in Dorset* (first published in 1908), is still a guide to be relished when touring this timeless part of south-west England.

Among the picturesque curiosities Dr Treves spotted on his travels was "an ancient cottage, hidden from sight by the bushes of its old garden," which turned out to be the birthplace of novelist Thomas Hardy. The cottage is still there and it still seems little changed since the 1800s. Heavily thatched and set against a backdrop of tall, dark trees, it lies off Cuckoo Lane in Higher Bockhampton, with its large garden ablaze during the summer with traditional plants like lupins, daisies and delphiniums. It is now owned by the National Trust, and the old family heirlooms in its simple rooms breathe of the country life which Hardy evocatively re-created in his novels.

The Trust has a high profile in Dorset and it also looks after another, and very different, writer's cottage nearby. Clouds Hill, buried in woodland near Wareham, was the country bolt-hole of T E Lawrence, better known as Lawrence of Arabia and author of *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. Literary celebrities like Shaw, E M Forster and Robert Graves visited Lawrence in his Dorset retreat and

perhaps they, like modern visitors, were struck by the spartan, almost monastic way in which Lawrence lived, and amused by the Greek words he had carved above the lintel, *Ou Phrontis* (Why worry?).

Both cottages are about ten miles outside Dorchester, the county town of Dorset, a pleasant old place with history stretching back well over 2,000 years. In just a few hours it's possible to stroll across Dorchester's huge, pre-Christian hill fort of Maiden Castle, visit the remains of its large Roman town house, and see the courtroom where cruel Judge Jeffreys held his notorious Bloody Assizes in 1685.

Yet the town is not backward looking, for it is also the site of a unique architectural experiment by Prince Charles. Exasperated at soulless housing developments, the Prince has created an innovative 'traditional' village, Poundbury, on the edge of Dorchester. Eco-friendly Poundbury is totally modern but it feels and looks historical. It's been so popular with buyers and visitors that many local builders have copied its ideas – and so some lovely thatched cottages in nearby villages may not be as old as they look.

There is no need for well-intentioned fakery in one of Dorset's most architecturally-beautiful villages, Cerne Abbas,

Clockwise from bottom left: Lyme Regis; duck pond and limestone cottages at Worth Matravers, a picturesque village in Dorset; Gold Hill in Shaftesbury, made famous by Hovis; Mupe Bay, Dorset; the 17th-century Sturminster Newton Water Mill

which is just outside Dorchester. Dr Treves has some surprising things to say about Cerne. He lovingly describes its quaintness and charm, yet regrets its sad decline, with grass growing in the street, historic cottages boarded up, and even the image of the famous Cerne Giant carved into its hillside, neglected to the point of invisibility.

He would be surprised to see Cerne today. It is restored and thriving – which may be partly due to the rediscovered charms of the Giant, now bright and trim. Nobody is sure if this naked, club-wielding figure is a pagan fertility symbol or the work of naughty 17th-century iconoclasts and perhaps the prudish Victorians did prefer him to be discreetly covered with grass. But, ►

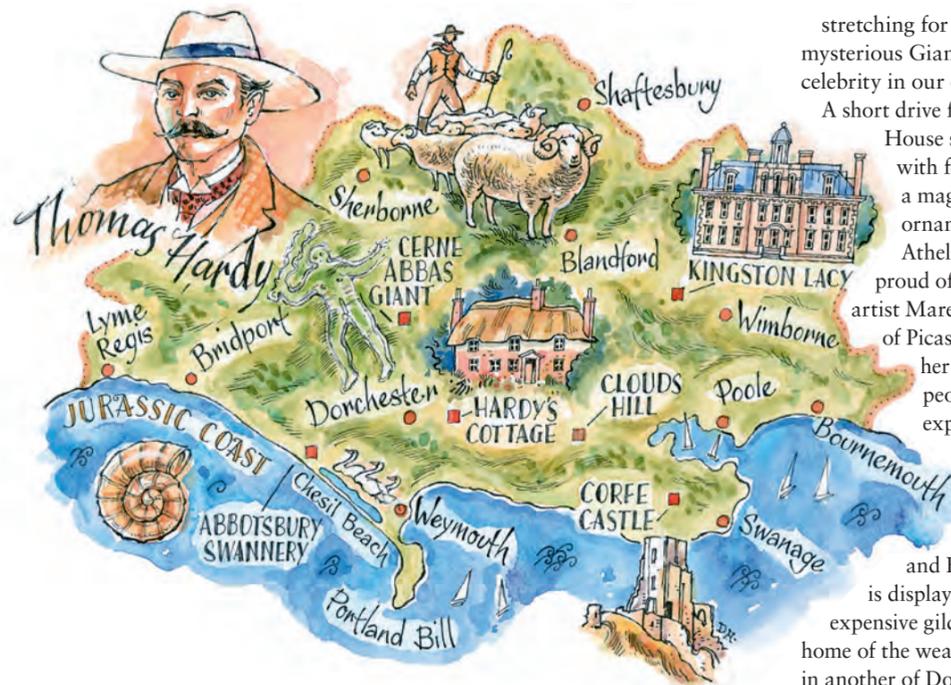
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DORSET AND THE OLYMPICS:

The 2012 Olympics are fast approaching, and Weymouth & Portland National Sailing Academy is the official venue for the Olympic Sailing events. This wonderfully exposed spot at the western end of the English Channel and the natural amphitheatre of Portland Harbour combines to provide some of England's best natural sailing waters. The ground facilities form part of the Osprey Quay regeneration area and are based on the old naval station which once

occupied the site. Championship events are frequently held in this ultra modern venue, and the 2006 ISAF World Youth Championship was attended here by over 60 nations. www.london2012.com.



stretching for 180 feet across the green hillside, the mysterious Giant has become a well-known Dorset celebrity in our own times.

A short drive from Cerne, 15th-century Athelhampton House stands in one of England's great gardens, with features that include 12 yew pyramids, a magnificent 16th-century dovecote and an ornamental canal. There is plenty to see at Athelhampton but its owners are particularly proud of its connection with the gifted Russian artist Marevna, intimate of Diego Rivera and friend of Picasso, Braque and Matisse. An art gallery of her work, including portraits of many local people, gives an unexpected twist to the experience of touring this gracious house.

There is more interesting art in Kingston Lacy, another of Dorset's mansions, near Wimborne. There, as well as pictures by Van Dyck, Titian and Brueghel, a collection of works by Murillo is displayed in a room hung with enormously expensive gilded leather. The mansion is the ancestral home of the wealthy Bankes family, who previously lived in another of Dorset's landmarks, Corfe Castle.

PHOTOS: VISIT BRITAIN IMAGES; WWW.BRITAINMAGAZINE.COM; GREG ROBERTS; MAP ILLUSTRATION BY DAN DODDHOES

Now a picture-perfect ruin, 1,000-year old Corfe Castle is a popular destination for ramblers, as well as for fans of the children's novelist Enid Blyton, some of whose Famous Five books were inspired by it.

Corfe Castle village, built about the castle mound, is a pleasant spot to linger. It is also one of the stops on the heritage steam line running between nearby Wareham and the coastal town of Swanage. Volunteers operate the trains and equipment, and serve home-made teas in restored buffet cars, so it is generally admitted that the Swanage Railway is a very pleasant way to see this part of South Dorset.

The railway's attractive Swanage terminus is almost within sight of the beach: in this case, a traditional seaside one. Dorset has its share of bucket-and-spade resorts but its coastline is definitely one of its glories. Not only is around 70 miles of it included in the Jurassic Coast World Heritage site but its wide variety encompasses both lively Bournemouth in the East and fossil-hunting Lyme Regis in the West.

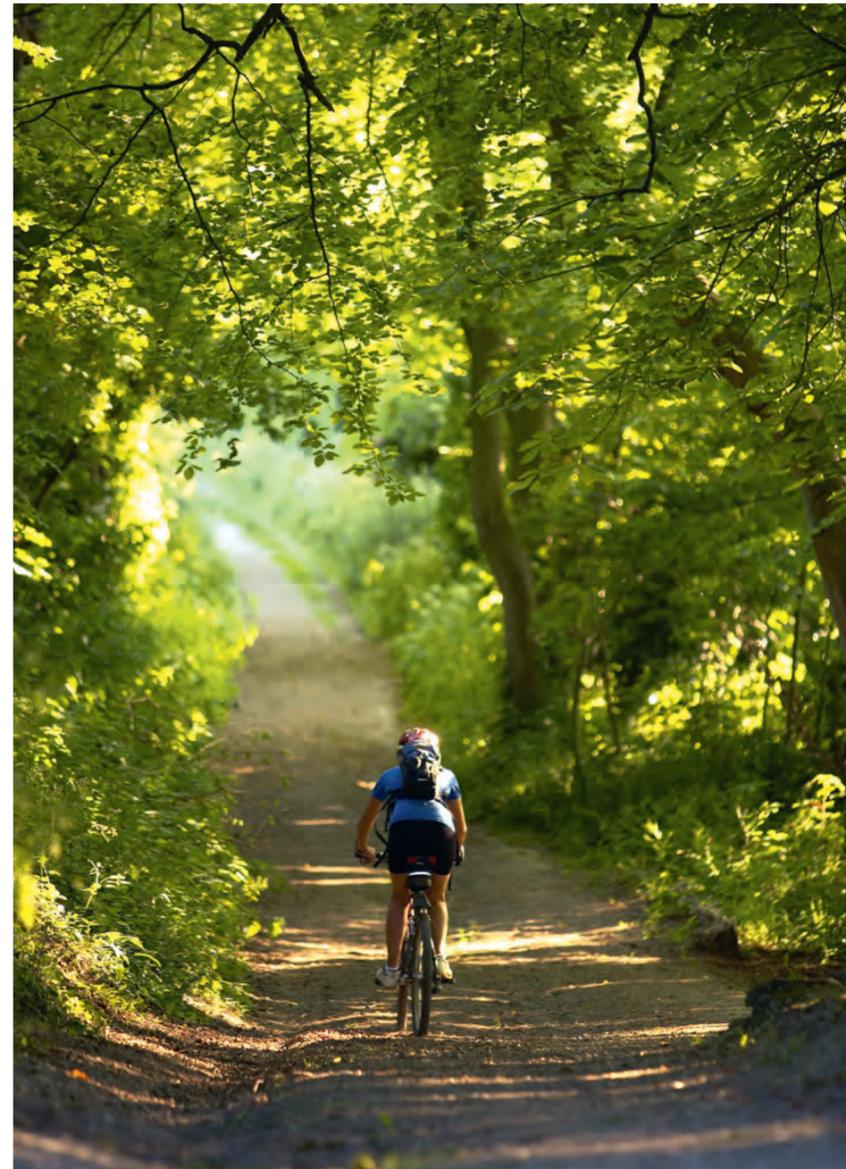
Lyme Regis was the home of Victorian fossil hunter Mary Anning, featured in Tracy Chevalier's best-selling *Remarkable Creatures*, and it's also the location for the book and movie of John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. It offers fossil walks, fossil shops, even fossil-inspired crafts but there are other ways to pass the time there, too. The 600-year-old watermill still operates, there are sea mice in the intriguing little aquarium and some good walks in the Undercliff Nature Reserve nearby.

By contrast, Bournemouth, at the other end of Dorset's coast, is the county's social hotspot, with plenty of shops and entertainment, a pier at Boscombe and even the chance to rent "beach pods" – updated, designer beach huts directly overlooking the sea.

Yet Bournemouth has its historical side, too. With its aromatic pine trees, parks and Winter Gardens, it was originally a lazy resort for the rich: Hardy described it as, "a Mediterranean lounging place on the English Channel".

Top left: Topiary at 15th-century Athelhampton House & Gardens in Dorchester. Far left: Feeding time at Abbotsbury Swannery. Above left: Old Harry Rocks, two chalk sea stacks located at Handfast Point, on the Isle of Purbeck. Above: Looking across the Dorset landscape to Corfe Castle

With its aromatic pine trees, parks and Winter Gardens, it was originally a lazy resort for the rich; Hardy described it as, "a Mediterranean lounging place on the English Channel"



Top left: Morris dancing at Lulworth Cove. Far left: Thatched cottages in Milton Abbas. This picture: Durdle Door on the Jurassic Coast. Right: Cycling near Child Okeford. Bottom right: Poole Quay

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- ◆ **Abbotsbury Swannery**, Abbotsbury. The mass feeding of 600 swans at noon and 4.30pm every day is incredible. Tel: (01305) 871130; www.abbotsbury-tourism.co.uk
- ◆ **Chesil Beach** on the Jurassic Coast is Europe's finest barrier beach, especially atmospheric when viewed from Golden Cap at sunset. www.nationaltrust.org.uk
- ◆ **Dorset Heavy Horse Centre**, Edmondsham. Top day out for the whole family. Tel: (01202) 824040; www.dorset-heavy-horse-centre.co.uk
- ◆ **Dorset Knob Biscuits**, sample Moore's unique Dorset Knob biscuits in Bridport – available in an airtight tin and great with cheese. www.moore-biscuits.co.uk
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Chef Mark Montgomery at The Bull Hotel in Bridport

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- ◆ **Mortons House Hotel** (3-star), Corfe Castle. Tudor building with views of Corfe Castle. Tel: (01929) 480988; www.mortonshouse.co.uk
- ◆ **Sherborne Castle**, Sherborne. Built by Sir Walter Raleigh, this quirky castle has grand and elegant rooms and an excellent tearoom. Tel: (01308) 422878; www.thebullhotel.co.uk

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The Russell-Cotes art gallery, whose fine Victorian art collection is set within the grand mansion of East Cliff Hall, gives a flavour of this wealthy and rather indolent aspect of Bournemouth. One feels Dr Treves' patient, the King, might have enjoyed taking the air there.

Bournemouth's closest coastal neighbour is the port of Poole, still busy and with an historic centre. When visiting, drop in at Poole Pottery, which was founded in 1873, for Poole produced some of the most collectable studio pottery of the 20th century, and still carries on that art tradition today.

Poole is also the starting point for the ferry that travels every half-hour to the hidden treasure of Brownsea Island. Originally owned by monks, Brownsea became a pirate hideout, and then a grand country estate, and Boy Scouts' founder Major-General Robert Baden-Powell organised an experimental campsite there. After purchase by a wealthy recluse, it became a wilderness and thereby escaped development in the early 20th century. It is now an enchanting National Trust nature reserve, and one of the only places remaining where the native red squirrel – Squirrel Nutkin – survives.

But, in truth, it's unnecessary to visit nature reserves to enjoy Dorset's natural beauty. In May, the woodlands around Milton Abbas shimmer azure with wild bluebells, and early summer is a very good time of year to visit the famous village. It was built in 1780 by the local squire who wanted to improve the view, so created his landscape with

thatched cottages with the help of one of England's greatest landscape designers, 'Capability' Brown.

It seems a shame to hurry past so many of Dorset's other towns and sights – 18th-century Blandford Forum with its biennial Georgian Fayre, artistic Bridport with its new Hat Festival, the eerie ghost village of Tyneham, golden Sherborne, or Wimborne Minster's astronomical clock and chained library. Dr Treves covered them, of course, but, on the other hand, there is something very important that this good doctor omitted. He doesn't mention Dorset Apple Cake, now considered almost the county dish of Dorset. A particularly delectable version can be found in the schoolhouse tearooms at Moreton, recently voted Dorset's top tearoom. There again, why be confined to apple-cake when potted Portland crab, local venison, or chestnuts, meringues and cream are also on the menu? Surely a delicious treat is the best reward for hiking up and down all those hills? **B**

◆ For information on visiting Dorset, go to www.visit-dorset.com.
Tourist Information Centres: Westover Road, Bournemouth; tel: 0845 051 1700; www.bournemouth.co.uk. 11 Antelope Walk, Dorchester; tel: (01305) 267992; www.westdorset.com. Lyme Regis Tourist Information Centre, Church St, Lyme Regis; tel: (01297) 442138; www.lymeregis.org. Welcome Centre, Enefco House, Poole Quay; tel: (0845) 2345560; www.pooletourism.com.



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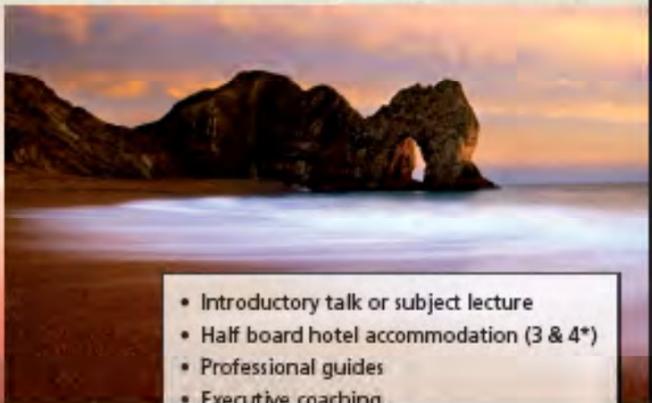
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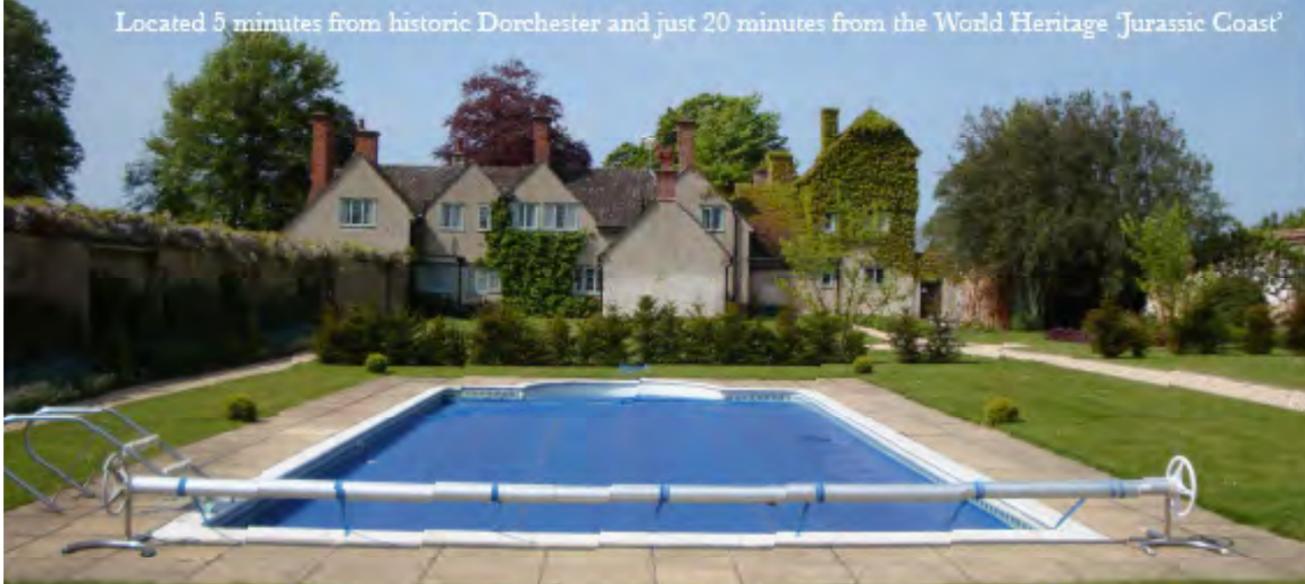

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