

... far from the madding crowd...

Two weeks to explore, to discover, to dream; to walk in the footsteps of Bathsheba Everdene, Gabriel Oak, William Boldwood and Sergeant Frank Troy, the charmer and all-round rotter. I'd read the book, borrowed from the library; and I'd seen the film. And I was a rather naive and romantic 18 year old, living in my books and my imagination. It was our final family holiday before I headed off to university, and my parents indulged my desire to explore the coast and countryside of Dorset - I'd studied geography, after all. So, come the summer, 'A' levels over, we headed to Swanage.

Admittedly our journey down was stressful as usual; Dad always insisted on getting a 'quiet route' from the AA and I tried vainly to ignore his frustration with Mum, the 'navigator', as we missed yet another turning on the country lanes; 'in 800 yards, turn left, unsignposted'. But arrive we did.

And once there... I was transported to another world. A world of the countryside, sheep grazing in peaceful fields, small villages nestling in the hills, and vast swathes of chalk downlands reaching the coast in towering white cliffs.

I sunbathed at the coast, on pebble beaches and outcrops of shale, waves gently lapping at our feet under the blazing sun. We travelled to the perfect circular bay of Lulworth Cove, and strolled onwards via the cliff path to the sturdy, wave-formed sea arch of Durdle Door, and beyond. We sat on Chesil Beach, the spit of sea-polished pebbles which joins the Isle of Portland to the mainland. And we saw the waves again, though now they broke noisily against the rocks of Portland Bill.

We saw all this, and more. The bustling county town of Dorchester, old mansions and manor houses. The village at Milton Abbas, which had been rebuilt, moved away from the sight of the wealthy family in their mansion. And we stood in the shade of the sycamore tree at Tolpuddle, where the Martyrs met.

But did I discover Hardy's Wessex? We visited the thatched cottage where he was born, and where he wrote 'Far From The Madding Crowd' and other works. As for the film's locations; on our visit to Athelhampton House, I saw the very staircase Bathsheba had descended as Troy returned. I sat on the mounds of Maiden Castle, the ancient earthworks where Troy showed his intoxicating display of undoubted swordsmanship to Bathsheba. And yes, walking along the beach, westwards from Durdle Door, I found the spot where Troy discards his clothes and swims out to sea.

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