

Thomas Hardy's Ghosts

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Thomas Hardy and Dorset Folklore

Thomas Hardy was born at Lower Bockhampton, a hamlet near Dorchester, in 1840, the eldest son of a builder. He died in 1928 and was buried in Westminster Abbey, having long been recognised as the leading writer of his generation. Although regarding himself primarily as a poet, Hardy was and is best known as a novelist and all his novels (as well as his short stories and poetry) remain in print. His most successful novels, such as *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, *The Return of the Native* and *Far from the Madding Crowd* are set in "Wessex", a landscape which, although fictional, is recognisable as being closely based on Dorset and its neighbouring counties. Indeed, Hardy was happy to identify many of the real sources for his fictional settings, such as Dorchester for "Casterbridge", Bournemouth for "Sandbourne", Bere Regis for "Kingsbere" and so forth. Other identifications, since Hardy's death, have formed the basis of a minor Dorset literary industry, which continues to the present day. Not only towns, villages and topographical features of Wessex may be identified, since Hardy also used individual buildings and real people as bases for his fiction. His determination to achieve verisimilitude in his Wessex settings is emphasised in his general preface to the Macmillan "Wessex" edition of his novels, where he explains that he had "instituted inquiries to correct tricks of memory, and striven against temptations to exaggerate, in order to preserve for my own satisfaction a fairly true record of a vanishing life." (Hardy, 1967, p. 46).

This determination to preserve a record of Wessex/Dorset in the nineteenth century is of particular interest to folklorists, since Hardy makes many references to traditional culture, in all its forms, throughout his work. Such use of traditional material as part of the background to novels is not unique to Hardy, since other Victorian novelists, such as Dickens, Eliot and Mrs Gaskell, also include local traditions in their writing. Nevertheless, Hardy is distinguishable from his fellow writers both by the extent to which he drew on local folklore and, in particular, by his first-hand knowledge of the subject.

Hardy, growing up in a working class household in rural Dorset in the mid-nineteenth century, was able to experience, at first hand, traditional song, dance, belief, narrative, and other aspects of what we would now call folklore. Further, the Hardy family were tradition bearers, in that Thomas Hardy's father, uncle, and grandfather were west gallery musicians, while his mother was a fertile source for stories and beliefs from West Dorset. Finally, Hardy himself was a traditional musician as an adolescent, accompanying his father in playing at village dances and revels, and he was able to demonstrate an extensive knowledge of songs and music even in old age (Marden, 1964).

Hardy's background and experience would therefore appear to make him an ideal source for the study of Dorset folklore, but there are qualifications as to his usefulness in this respect. For example, his references to folklore are for the most part fleeting, being only as complete as is necessary for the purposes of his plotting, background or characterisation.

Hardy was also very conscious of his humble origins and made every attempt to obscure his sources, particularly where his own family were involved. Nevertheless, I have carefully examined all instances where Hardy's use of folklore may be checked against independent accounts and found him accurate on every occasion bar one (Robson, 2004, chapter 3). At the same time, consideration of Hardy's non-fictional writings (correspondence, notebooks and recollections) confirms his reliability as a folklore source as well as adding to the already numerous references to folklore in his fictional and poetical output. Therefore a consideration of Hardy's accounts of ghosts is likely to provide a promising avenue for exploration.

Hardy's Personal Experience of Ghosts

Hardy's attitude towards ghosts was positive, since in 1904 when he was sixty four years old he told the journalist William Archer (Archer, 1907, pp. 32-33),

“...I seriously assure you that I would give ten years of my life – well, perhaps that offer is rather beyond my means – but when I was a younger man, I would cheerfully have given ten years of my life to see a ghost – an authentic, indubitable spectre.”

In fact, it seems that Hardy achieved this desire fifteen years later, since his second wife Florence, in a letter to Sydney Cockerell in 1919 (E. and F. Hardy, 1996, pp. 164-165), describes the following experience,

“He saw a ghost in Stinsford Churchyard on Christmas Eve, & his sister Kate says it must have been their grandfather upon whose grave T.H had just placed a sprig of holly – the first time he had ever done so. The ghost said: ‘A green Christmas’ - T.H. replied ‘I like a green Christmas’. Then the ghost went into the church, &, being full of curiosity, T. followed, to see who this strange man in 18th century dress might be – and found – no-one. That is quite true – a real Christmas ghost story.”

This story is told at secondhand and, since Hardy made no subsequent reference to the event in spite of his interest in ghosts, it might be regarded with some scepticism. Nevertheless a further experience recalled by Florence Hardy, this time in 1927, a year before Hardy's death, (Hardy, 1984, pp. 475-476) is more persuasive,

“During the evening he spoke of an experience he had a few years ago. There were four or five people to tea at Max Gate, and he noticed a stranger standing by me most of the time. Afterwards he asked who that dark man was who stood by me. I told him that there was no stranger present, and I gave him the names of the three men who were there, all personal friends. He said that it was not one of these, and seemed to think that another person had actually been there. This afternoon he said: ‘I can see his face now’.”

Ghosts in Hardy's Poetry

Hardy's interest in the supernatural manifests itself throughout his considerable output of verse. As well as references to ghosts within individual poems there are a number of poems

centred on ghosts, such as “The Dead Quire”, “Voices from Things Growing in a Churchyard” and “The Choirmaster's Burial” (Hardy, 1981, pp. 255-259, 623-625, 534-535). Although the ghosts in his poems are drawn almost entirely from Hardy’s artistic imagination they nevertheless behave in the fashion of traditional ghosts. Hence in “I Rose Up as My Custom Is” (Hardy, 1981, pp. 378-379) the storytelling ghost arises “On the eve of All-Souls' day”, while in “Yuletide in a Younger World” (Hardy, 1981, p. 861) those who passed over a bridge or stile in life return each Christmas Eve to pass over it as ghosts.

Hardy and the Dorset Ghost Tradition

For the folklorist, the most interesting ghosts in Hardy’s writings are those drawn from local belief and these may be found in Hardy’s prose writings, both fictional and personal. The first such ghost comes from Melbury Osmond and dates from about 1820 (Hardy, 1967, p. 14). The story, in one of Hardy’s notebooks, almost certainly originates from his mother, who was born and brought up in Melbury.

“At Melbury Osmond there was a haunted barn. A man coming home drunk entered the barn & fell asleep in a cow’s crib that stood within. He awoke at 12, & saw a lady riding round and round on a buck, holding the horns as reins. She was in a white riding-habit, & the wind of her speed blew so strong upon him that he sneezed, when she vanished.”

This ghost has no parallels elsewhere in Dorset, although the reference to the barn as haunted suggests that others may have experienced the apparition.

Hardy’s mother, Jemima, was also the source of a personal experience narrative involving a ghost (Archer, 1907, quoted in Ray, 2007, p. 33).

“My mother believed that she once saw an apparition. A relative of hers, who had a young child, was ill, and told my mother that she thought she was dying. My mother laughed at the idea; and as a matter of fact she apparently recovered and went away to her home at some distance. Then one night – lying broad-awake as she declared – my mother saw this lady enter her room and hold out her child to her imploringly. It afterwards appeared (I need scarcely tell you) that she died at that very time; but the odd thing was that, while she was sinking, she continually expressed a wish that my mother should take charge of the child.”

Despite the note of scepticism in his final sentence Hardy told a later interviewer “Though I cannot explain how all this happened, I do not doubt that my mother saw what she afterwards described.” (Holland, 1948, p. 62).

A further story, collected by Hardy in 1897, comes from the midwife who had delivered him as a baby (Hardy, 1984, p. 316) and gives an insight into popular belief about the relationship of the dead to those still alive.

“She used to tell a story of a woman who came to her to consult her about the ghost of another woman she declared she had seen & who ‘troubled her’ – the deceased wife of the man who was courting her.

‘How long hev’ the woman been dead?’ I said.

‘Many years!’

‘Oh, that were no ghost. Now if she’d only been dead a month or two, and you were making her husband your fancy-man, there might have been something in your story. But Lord, much can she care about him after years and years in better company!’ ”

Despite these examples of ghost belief from within his own family circle, Hardy inclined to the view that such belief, together with folklore in general, was becoming extinct. This attitude is articulated in a letter written to Rider Haggard in 1902 (Hardy, 1984, p. 336).

“For example, if you ask one of the workfolk ... questions on local fairies, ghosts, herbs &c, they can give no answer: yet I can recollect the time when the places of burial even of the poor and tombless were all remembered, and the history of the parish and squire’s family for 150 years back known. Such and such ballads appertained to such and such a locality, ghost tales were attached to particular sites, and nooks wherein wild herbs grew for the cure of divers maladies were pointed out readily.”

The most ancient ghosts mentioned by Hardy are in his novel *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (Hardy, 1986, p. 81) and are those of Roman soldiers at “The Ring”, which is based on Maumbury Rings, a Roman amphitheatre in Dorchester,

“... some old people said that at certain moments in the summer time, in broad daylight, persons sitting with a book or dozing in the arena had, on lifting their eyes, beheld the slopes lined with a gazing legion of Hadrian’s soldiery as if watching the gladiatorial combat; and had heard the roar of their excited voices; that the scene would remain but a moment, like a lightning flash, and then disappear.”

Hardy took a great interest in the history of Maumbury Rings and he may be reporting a genuine local tradition but, if so, it is unrecorded elsewhere until 1947 and then was probably influenced by his own writing (Harte, 1986, p. 64). Jeremy Harte has drawn attention to the absence of sightings of Roman ghosts in the Dorchester area until the twentieth century and the increasing frequency of such reports from then on, as more people became aware of the former Roman presence in the area and began to “see” ghosts as Romans (Harte, 1986, pp. 33-34). This observation is consistent with the now widely held view that the form in which ghosts are experienced is shaped by communal tradition (Simpson and Roud, 2000, p. 142).

Further ancient ghosts are mentioned in *The Woodlanders* (Hardy, 1990, i, p. 35), in which the older people tell the story of the spirits of the Two Brothers

“who had fought and fallen, and had haunted King’s Hintock Court a few miles off till they were exorcised by the priest, and compelled to retreat to a swamp, whence they were returning to their old quarters at the Court at the rate of a cock’s stride every New Year’s Day, Old Style, hence the local saying, ‘On new-year’s tide, a cock’s stride’.”

The motif of the cockstride ghost is well known in Devon and Cornwall (Brown, 1979, chapter 3) and, since Hardy's first wife was from the latter county, there must be a possibility that she was the source for this story. On the other hand, Hardy's mother, Jemima, was a native of the countryside in which *The Woodlanders* is set, and actually worked for the owners of Melbury House, the "King's Hintock Court" of the novel. It seems unlikely that Hardy would have imported a Cornish story when Jemima was a ready source of local tales. Therefore this story could be a unique example of a cockstride ghost tradition from Dorset.

A ghost tradition from East Dorset was collected by Hardy in 1883, when he stopped to inspect a former inn at Corfe Mullen (Hardy, 1984, p. 164),

"Passed a lonely old house, formerly an inn. The road-contractor now living there showed us into the stable, and drew our attention to the furthest stall. When the place was an inn, he said, it was the haunt of smugglers, and in a quarrel there one night a man was killed in that stall. If a horse is put there on certain nights, at about two in the morning (when the smuggler died) the horse cries like a child, and on entering you find him in a lather of sweat."

Dorset smugglers were not above trading upon superstitious beliefs to cloak their illicit activities. Hence at Chideock (and elsewhere) the exhausted state of horses which had been appropriated overnight by smugglers was attributed to their being ridden by fairies (Harte, 1998, pp.18-19). The story of the smuggler's ghost bears the hallmark of an attempt, this time using a ghost story, to dissuade investigation of the smugglers' headquarters and to explain the exhausted condition of the horses used by them during the previous night.

The best known of Hardy's ghosts is the phantom d'Urberville coach, which appears in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Tess Durbeyfield, a milkmaid who is a descendant of the ancient and aristocratic d'Urberville family, on seeing the antiquated carriage provided for her wedding transport, observes that she has seen it before, possibly in a dream (Hardy, 1990, ii, p. 212). Her bridegroom then relates the story of the coach and, in so doing, elicits a superstitious response from Tess.

" 'A certain d'Urberville of the sixteenth or seventeenth century committed a dreadful crime in his family coach; and since that time members of the family see or hear the old coach whenever – but I'll tell you another day – it is rather gloomy. Evidently some dim knowledge of it has been brought back to your mind by the sight of this venerable caravan.'

'I don't remember hearing it before,' she murmured. 'Is it when we are going to die, Angel, that members of my family see it, or is it when we have committed a crime?'

Subsequently Tess is told a further version of the story by her would-be lover Alec, whose family has assumed the name d'Urberville (Hardy, 1990, ii, p. 334).

" 'Ah! You heard the d'Urberville Coach perhaps. You know the legend, I suppose?'

'No. My – somebody was going to tell me once, but didn't.'

‘If you are a genuine d’Urberville I ought not to tell you either, I suppose. As for me, I’m a sham one, so it doesn’t matter. It is rather dismal. It is that this sound of a non-existent coach can only be heard by one of d’Urberville blood, and it is held to be of ill-omen to the one who hears it. It has to do with a murder, committed by one of the family, centuries ago.’

‘Now you have begun it, finish it.’

‘Very well. One of the family is said to have abducted some beautiful woman, who tried to escape from the coach in which he was carrying her off, and in the struggle he killed her – or she killed him – I forget which.’”

In a letter written some twelve years after the 1891 book publication of *Tess*, (Hardy, 1978-1988 iii, pp. 93-94), presumably in response to a query as to the source of the story, Hardy indicates its traditional origin.

“The legend of the phantom coach is well known here, the scene of its wayfarings being the road between Woolbridge manor-house & the site of the destroyed manor-house at Bere Regis – two properties formerly owned by branches of the same family – the Turbervilles. The cause of the appearances is said to be some family murder, but this may be an invention of recent times, such supplementary detail being often added to mediaeval tales. ...”

It is interesting that Hardy comments on the rationalising element of the family murder, thus showing a healthy cynicism for explanations added at a later date to explain the stories of otherwise purposeless nineteenth-century ghosts.

The d’Urberville coach was a genuine tradition, one of several such apparitions in Dorset (Waring, 1967), the earliest written reference to it being in 1877 (Anonymous, 1877, p. 46)

“It is said that a spectre-coach and four drives out from Wool-bridge House in the gloom of evening; but lest any reader may wait until evening in order to fathom this mystery, we may add that none can see this ghostly coach of the Turbervilles who have no Turberville blood in their veins.”

In 1884, some four years before Hardy began to write *Tess*, H. J. Moule read a paper to the Dorset Field Club which included a reference to the coach (Moule, p. 63). He begins by essentially repeating the earlier brief account, but goes on to add

“A gentleman whom I have the honor [sic] to know was passing here one evening of late years – going to dine with friends. On arriving he asked which of their neighbours kept a four-in-hand coach. No one. Yes, he said, someone must, for I’ve seen a four-in-hand – a queer, old-fashioned, but handsome affair, with outriders. No, they said, no one here keeps such a turn-out, but – you’ve surely seen the Turberville coach. Now he is akin to the old Turberville race.”

Hardy, who was a member of the Club, must have been aware of this, but he gives his source for the story as “an old woman” (Parker, 1966, p. 4). This description is usually taken to

indicate his mother, Jemima Hardy but, given that Woolbridge Manor and Bere Regis are both some miles to the east of Hardy's home at Stinsford, whereas Jemima came from West Dorset, it seems more likely that grandmother Hardy, from Puddletown, was his source. On another occasion, Hardy told Clive Holland that "he had heard the legend from the lips of several people in Wool who claimed to have seen the spectral coach" (Holland, 1948, p. 61).

The motif of the coach's being visible only to Turbervilles is present in Moule's account, in which the man who sees it turns out, to his listeners' surprise, to be a Turberville descendant. A later version of the story, by Windle, is almost identical, other than the gender of the Turberville descendant (Windle, 1906, pp. 102-105), and subsequent accounts follow similarly derivative lines. Given the relative inaccessibility of Moule's paper compared to Hardy's fiction, it may be surmised that twentieth-century stories of the Turberville coach are largely based on Hardy's fictionalisation of a genuine tradition.

The remaining ghost in Hardy's fiction is that of William Privett in the short story "A Few Crusted Characters". On the day after his death, Privett's ghost appears at "Longpuddle Spring", a place previously always avoided by him since the death of his son at the spot (Hardy, 1981, p. 534). Hardy based this location on Buttock's Spring, in his mother's home village of Melbury Osmond, and confirmed that he had drawn on local tradition for the story of Privett's ghost (Hardy, 1978-1988 vi, pp. 251-252).

Wraiths, the supernatural images of the living, are most unusual in southern English folklore, but Hardy mentions William Privett's wraith twice, first when he is heard to leave his house shortly before his death (Hardy, 1981, pp. 533-534) and subsequently when he is seen at a Midsummer Eve church porch watch (Hardy, 1981, pp. 533-534).

Finally, two aspects of ghost behaviour are mentioned in Hardy's novel *The Return of the Native*, namely that ghosts appear to single sleepers and that they "claim their own" (Hardy, 1990 iii, pp. 49, 186). The latter belief refers to ghosts from ancient burials returning to claim their bones from the houses to which they have been moved following archaeological excavation. The Dorchester area, in which Hardy lived for most of his life, is particularly rich in prehistoric remains (Romano-British skeletons were unearthed when Hardy's Dorchester house was being built), so this could be a specifically local ghost tradition. One is even tempted to wonder whether it was encouraged by the excavating archaeologists to deter their labourers from pilfering artefacts.

Thomas Hardy and the Dorset Ghost Tradition

The preceding paragraphs outline a number of ghost stories and beliefs recorded in the fictional and personal writings of Thomas Hardy. Since there are already a good many Dorset ghost stories in print, it might be asked whether Hardy's examples are of significance, or whether they merely add to an already substantial corpus of material. Books on West Country ghostlore are often written by people who are not folklorists and, indeed, know little about ghosts. They can be derivative, in that they regurgitate previously published accounts which may themselves be secondhand, and they tend to concentrate on the macabre, exciting or unusual aspects of ghost tradition. Hardy, on the other hand, although not a folklorist (a fact

which he was at pains to emphasise), was drawing directly on local tradition. His selection criteria for supernatural beliefs were also different from most modern compilers of ghost stories. Hence his examples were chosen either, in his fiction, for the purposes of his plots or backgrounds or, in his personal writings, for their particular interest for him. Therefore, although Hardy's selection of Dorset ghosts is not systematic, it is relatively value free and, as such, a more valuable resource for the folklorist than most of the more recent writing on the subject. Like the traditional songs so frequently mentioned in his writings, the calendar customs, superstitions, beliefs and other elements of folklore, Hardy's ghosts provide a unique insight into the Dorset traditions of a century and a half ago through the eyes of a writer who experienced those traditions at first hand.

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