The new ‘Wessex Tales’ stories

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Robert Fripp 2015

Time moves on, and Wessex, too. Thomas Hardy’s first edition of Wessex Tales (1888) published just five stories although he went on to write many more. Critics comment that he set many of his stories before his own time. Why not? By exploring the past, did Hardy seek a more rustic flavour? He borrowed the colours of waning customs, work skills, animal handling and the voices of an older age. And he did it very well.

It is time to update Mr Hardy’s work. The world has changed. Two world wars and several depressions later, it is time for new stories. The majority of my new Wessex Tales are set in and around a ten-mile stretch of Dorset’s Stour Valley between Blandford and Sturminster Newton. My forty stories extend the name ‘Okeford’, which covers three villages. I apply Okeford as a generic name to the larger region.

Dorset’s River Stour at low water, looking downstream from Hayward Bridge to the spur of Shillingstone Hill that descends to Gains Cross. Copyright Stefan Czapski. Licensed for reuse under a Creative Commons Licence.

Having spent a large part of my teenage years in a canoe, I discovered the surface of the Stour, its shallows, banks and creatures at least as well as the bordering lands at the south-eastern edge of the Blackmore Vale. In Dorset: A Shell Guide (1968), Michael Pitt-Rivers’ entry for Child Okeford records his description of the ‘ruined mill-race’, thus: ‘To the children of Child Okeford and Shillingstone it is a
paradise.’ Yes, I found it so. The story *Ten years, six miles and one canoe* accounts for my time on the waters and banks of the Stour. That includes hours spent virtually camouflaged in a muddy green boat hidden in channels through reed beds, or beneath the cover of overhanging trees, especially willows in summer leaf.

There were times when I held my boat in place at fording places (i.e. Han/ford and Oke/ford) where, through six millennia, migrants, invaders and traders had followed the Wessex Ridgeway inland from the Channel coast before descending to cross the River Stour. From *Ten years, six miles and one canoe:*

‘What an extraordinary trove of artefacts from the Stone Age to the Middle Ages waits to be discovered beneath this river crossing and its banks. ... So much must have been lost during six millennia when humans and packhorses stumbled across or were swept off their feet in water running too fast and deep. I’m sitting among the ghosts of these people. Animals, their masters, migrants, carts and carters crossed the Stour at the very spot where I hold my boat in place against the stream.’

If only Lt. Gen. Augustus Pitt Rivers had paraded his liveried retainers with their picks and shovels and come down from the heights of the Cranborne Chase to dig into the Stour’s fords! What might he have found?

And what should we make of the all-important Ridgeway? A *tsunami* partially severed Britain from Europe 8,200 years ago. One might expect that the narrow strait between Calais and Dover provided the best crossing point for humans and animals after that event. But that route was probably a wasteland of marshes and mudflats separated by channels scour'd by strong, reversing tides. Far to the west, a migration route carried people to Britain from the Cherbourg Peninsula and the Gulf of St Malo. From my story, *Bronze:*

‘If the [migrants] had doubts about their destinies, at least their sea-destination straight. If wind- and wave-gods willed, they’d keep the leather bottoms to the surf on Dorset’s coast.’

That is how the ancient Wessex Ridgeway came to be. Starting with the migrants’ first steps at what is now Lyme Regis, the Ridgeway trended east and north along the ridges of the Dorset Downs, descended Shillingstone Hill at Gains Cross (‘straight crossing’ in the old language), before fording the Stour and climbing back to the heights of Cranborne Chase on the other side. A long time ago this crossing made the area around tiny Hanford (‘old crossing’) ‘a busy centre on the most important road in the Kingdom’ (R. Hippisley Cox, 1914).

This strategic river crossing was well defended. Two of the largest Iron Age hill forts in the country, Hambledon and Hod, stand just apart from each other, looking down upon the ford. In 1940, archaeologist Jacquetta Hawkes described their settings: ‘Together [these forts] are more important than any others in Wessex, save Maiden Castle’. The amplitude from the top of one rampart’s bank to the base of an adjacent ditch may reach sixty feet, while the space between adjacent banks was designed to match the range of the defenders’ preferred weapons, slingshot stones. Slingers did not use handy local flints for ammunition.
Archaeologists have unearthed piles of water-rounded pebbles on Hambledon, most likely gathered from the Chesil Bank.

Tens of thousands of man-hours went into cutting ditches and banks to create hill forts’ ramparts, using tools little more sophisticated than fire-hardened deer antlers as picks and scapulae (shoulder blades) for shovels. One imagines the diggers using large willow-woven baskets as skips to slide chalk spill up or down.

To me these earthworks recall Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. A day hewing chalk rubble into ramparts on Hambledon Hill may not have been as deliberately cruel as the regimen in a Soviet labour camp, but neither can it have been placid. My story, *The Hill*, begins:

‘Dig, you bastards, dig!’

The overseer was as sick to his soul as his crew, maybe sicker at the sound of his own voice. It had been yet another long day among many. His shouts came mushy through the rain, lacking force.

‘Pick it up, there!’

Hambledon’s ramparts came into belated use 2,000 years later when local men—the Dorset Clubmen—rose in protest against theft and pillage by Roundhead and Royalist troops alike during the English Civil War. *Called to Arms* tells that tale.

After migrants crossed the closely watched fords at Okeford, many of the humans and their animals continued eastwards through the forested Cranborne Chase towards lands that would eventually be settled by the Wessex Culture. Salisbury Plain became a cultural centre and a magnet for traffic.

*In the Land of the Great Stone Rings* tells the story of an old man who had been called up in his teenage years to serve two winters on a labour gang. By chance, he had been assigned to the team that manned the rising timber cradle placing the final lintel on Stonehenge. The story starts when the old man’s grandson asks, ‘What did you do in the old days, Grandpa?’
Responding, old Turig tells his adventures of two winters in camp, while labouring on the henge. After the final lintel dropped smoothly into place …

‘Some seventy generations had cut, moved, laboured and risked themselves among tree trunks and massive stones. These men were the survivors, the inheritors of benefit. …

In the darkness of their hut, Turig bent over his grandson. “When your time comes to pay your homage to the Rings, boy, remember, your old Gramp were there!”

He held his hands up in the dark, rough and scarred and skilled. “I built that Stone henge with these hands.

“You tell ’en when you go, old Turig heaved them stones in place, and he were there the day we finished ’em!” Reliving all the energy, the fear, the love, the joy of that proud moment long ago he looked down at his grandson for response.

The boy was fast asleep.’

Stonehenge was one of several spiritual focal points in Wessex’ prehistory. Many more Wessex Tales take shape before the Roman invasion. Archaeologists at work on Hod Hill have unearthed several iron tips from ballista bolts shot at the site of one particular hut on the south slope of Hod. The headman’s compound, perhaps. Refugees, fleeing before the advance of the Second Augusta Legion, cross paths with legionnaires in the story, Dies Irae (Day of Anger), when the legion attacks Hod.

Dorset’s Durotriges and other Celtic peoples soon fell under the aegis of Rome; tranquillity prevailed for nearly four centuries. Cultural change and advances led to the laying of a magnificent mosaic floor at what is now Hinton St Mary. The story The Face in the Floor creates a history for the only known representation of Christ in a mosaic floor anywhere in the lands of the Roman Empire.
The central roundel in Hinton St Mary’s Roman mosaic floor becomes the focal point in the ‘Wessex Tales’ story, 
*The Face in the Floor*

‘Tesserae flew from his hands to take their natural places in glorious patterns across the great sweep of the floor—twenty-eight feet by nearly twenty. Images materialised as if they already lived, with tiles falling into place beside neighbours to form a destiny conceived long since by a genius the master could not explain. More than ever, Beletus imagined himself the spirits’ instrument.’

Let us hope part of this story survives to cherish the reputation of Hinton St Mary’s floor. Some time in the past twenty years the British Museum made a disgraceful decision, punching the face of Christ out of its magnificent mosaic as if the floor were an oversized, cancelled bus ticket. The museum currently displays the circular section of dismembered head with no more panache than any other exhibition in the same gallery. Dorset must reclaim its floor.

Passing over many stories, we reach the modern world, in *The Dorset Ooser Dines*. The Dorset Ooser (a.k.a. ‘The Bull’) took several names in the county, as outlined in a fine paper by Daniel Patrick Quinn. (Web search: ‘Ooser:quinn’.)

‘Wessex Tales’, *The Dorset Ooser Dines*:
The story’s e-book cover.

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This internet search term may help: ‘Wessex Tales Fripp’  p. 5
In *The Dorset Ooser Dines*, set in the 1880s, the Ooser bumbles into the annual Christmas dinner party for tenant farmers hosted by a lady in a country house not far from Child Okeford. Two of her tenants have been trying to steer their children towards marriage because ... Well, because the business of leasehold and land was often a muddy and muddled affair in England. Here, the young man is too bashful, too shy, to declare his affection for the young lady, let alone propose to her. So the girl’s father has a quiet word with the Ooser’s handler, offering four gold sovereigns if the Ooser would pick up his daughter and carry her off, setting her down safely at some distance from the house. The handler relays this proposition to the Ooser, a giant of a man, who responds agreeably, ‘I humped deer carcasses weighed more’n her!’ Minutes later,

‘In the wink of an eye, the Ooser bundled up Alicia Parsons in her Louis Quinze chair and its fine silken seat, and started roaring towards the door, …

Behind them a crowd was gathering outside the french doors. Men hooted and cheered “Tally-ho!” while women protested or giggled behind their fans. The orchestra gamely played on.

The handler was wrestling with Map on the lawn, but it didn’t stall the reluctant suitor this time. Map cuffed the handler on the jaw and started after the sound of Alicia’s screams.

As if it had all been a dreadful mistake, the Ooser put the startled girl down on the gravel of the carriageway, still seated absurdly on French silk, telling her soothingly, “There you are, love. No harm done.” With that, the headless thing ran on.

Not a moment too soon. Young Map was at her side.

“Gregory!”
“Alicia! Are you all right?”
“Just shaken.”
“Alicia, dear, thank God. I love you so.”
“Oh Gregory, you do?”

The young lady in a thin silk ball-gown with a missing shoe sat contentedly on her Louis Quinze chair on the moonlit drive while a young man knelt before her holding hands, rapt in moonlight and her spell. …

In years to come, Raymond Parsons would consider his investment the best money he had ever spent.’

Inevitably, the sequence of stories reaches the First World War. One of the Okeford villages, Shillingstone (Shilling Okeford), came out of that conflict, in 1919, with the distinction of being named ‘the bravest village’. Shillingstone sent a higher proportion of its young men to war in the first months than any other parish in the U.K. In September 1919, the village war memorial was inaugurated six weeks before the first annual celebration at the unfinished Cenotaph in London. My stories, *Moving On*, *Gallipoli*, and *Fair Welcome and Farewell* are all, in part, set in the First World War.

In fact, both my *Wessex Tales* volumes are dedicated to the men who fell in the Great War, whose names appear on Shillingstone’s War Memorial. Those names do not include that of Jack Okeford, a young man who advances against enemy machine guns in *A Short Walk in France*. 

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This internet search term may help: ‘Wessex Tales Fripp’ p. 6
‘Cli-clung-cli-click! Commanding four souls in a hole was a lance corporal the same age as Jack, his fresh stripe a white scar in the dark. Irish by the sound of him; a clerk, he said, from a shipping office in Liverpool. Cli-clung-cli-click! He’d slipped the magazine off his rifle and was working the bolt, over and over again. Cli-clung-cli-click! Bayonet fixed and all, the Irish lad’s Lee-Enfield served a higher calling as a rosary. How many Pater Nosters must the corporal’s rifle speak?’

Many of these stories have still to be unleashed on the reading public. At this writing only one reviewer has commented. He chose to review A Short Walk in France. David H. Keith, ‘former U.S. Army combat medic and paramedic’, writes:

‘A harsh, sobering, and completely accurate description of combat that is reminiscent of All’s Quiet on the Western Front. Although set in 1916 France, it could very well have been anywhere from Stalingrad to Inchon…’

I am grateful for David Keith’s opinion. It is difficult indeed to step into someone else’s war.

Wessex and Dorset have moved forward since the Somme. There are many more stories to tell: of the Somerset and Dorset Railway; of the dew pond on Shillingstone Hill; of the antique shop Koster’s in Blandford, which sold the exotica of civil servants retiring to Britain as the Empire shut down; of Pilot Officer Michael Edward Staples, whose Spitfire Mk.1 was crippled over Dorchester by a Me 109.

Having spent the past half-century in Canada I may be well qualified to discover links among Poole, the cod fishery and Newfoundland. However, those are tomorrow’s stories. For the moment, my Wessex Tales rest where they are.