

Itchen Abbas and the Itchen Valley

Distance: 4.3 miles / 6.93 km

In Pursuit of Spring: Chapter 3 Guildford to Dunbridge

Refreshments: The Chestnut Horse Easton SO21 1EG

The Cricketers Inn Easton Ln SO21 1EJ

The Plough, Main Road, Itchen Abbas SO21 1BQ

Map: Explorer 32 (Winchester, New Alresford & Eat Meon)

Getting there:

If driving, take the B3047 Winchester-Alresford road to Itchen Abbas. Turn down the side road past the church, over the Itchen and round to the right and then left through Avington. At the end of the village turn right down Easton Lane, over a cattle grid and into car park on the right.

In his Fieldwork Book 45, Thomas jots notes about a cycle ride to this area with his son Mervyn.

5.v.10

Alresford to Winchester

Wide streets of Alresford. S[outh]. over Tichborne Down to Pilgrim's Road, then N[orth] along it + a succession of lanes linked to one another as far as Easton, always on S[outh] of Itchen, + n[ea]rly always in sight of it --- w[ith] much sedge, iris + willow, sedgewarblers, wrens, willow wrens. Highish land rising on our left away fr[om] river, w[ith] a chalk pit at a bend., a hazel copse + many sunny angles, at Avington Park, several lime avenues + a row of elms by the riverside + sloping turf w[ith] woods beyond then just the classic brick ch[urch]. low long house w[ith] big windows + a central porch + ivy looking across a broad pond at elms + then the l[ow]w[e]r downs... At Easton a big farmyard, just over r[oad] fr[om] pub, full of waiting cattle w[ith] parallel backs, quiet, after milking.

In *In Pursuit of Spring*, he writes as if cycling on the opposite bank of the Itchen: *I got to Itchen Abbas, its bridge, mill, church and Plough, all in a group, when the rain was beginning... and... fell and it thundered, if not to the tune of 'Greensleeves', at least to that of blackbirds' songs. The sky was full and sagging, but actually it rained little, when I started soon after four, and went on through the four Worthys – on my left the low sweep of Easton Down, and the almost windowless high church wall among the elms between it and the river; and on my right, arable country and pewits tumbling over it.*

The Worthys on Thomas's route were Martyr Worthy, Abbot's Worthy, Kings Worthy, and Headbourne Worthy – *At Kings Worthy just beyond [Worthy Park] I might have crossed over and taken the shortest way to Salisbury, that is to say, by Stockbridge. But... I determined to take the Roman road through Headbourne Worthy to Winchester.*

The Itchen Valley, with its braided waters, has multiple long-distance trails traversing it. The key one in this walk is the Itchen Way. At points it meets with the Watercress Way, Alan King Way and St Swithun's Way (the Pilgrims' Way). The proximity of the last may have some bearing. Thomas's friend Hilaire Belloc had written a survey of the pilgrim route – *The Old Road* (1905) – and suggested the name Abbas derived not from ecclesiastical ownership but from *Itchen-A-Bas*. (Another suggestion is that the word Abbas derives from the Abbess of St Mary's convent in who held land here.) Writing of the Pilgrim's Way in 1914, Thomas says, *I don't remember but I think the Way crosses the Itchen at Itchen Stoke. Both banks of the river*

have roads. The left bank is pleasanter for walking (through Ovington and Avington). Soon afterwards at the last of the Worthies you are where the Pilgrim's way began (according to Belloc) to be the Pilgrim's way, from Winchester and S.W. England....

The river and its clear waters are in sight for much of the time. The well-watered valley is a rural area, largely arable, and among its crops is watercress which thrives on the plentiful spring waters flowing from the aquifers of the Cretaceous chalklands. Its small settlements go as far back as the Bronze Age and it has traces of Iron Age fieldwork systems. The area yields Roman, Saxon artefacts and the medieval period saw the development of small villages through monastic enterprise and farming estates.

1. Leaving the car park, go right, through the parklands.



Bishop Ken



Nell Gwynne

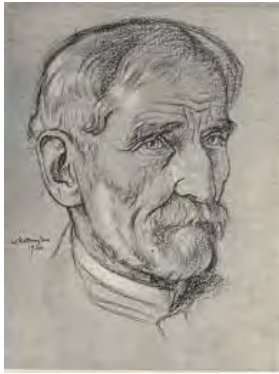


Charles II

Looking over to the right, there is a fine view of Avington Park House and lake on the right. In Fieldwork Book 45, Thomas notes *at Avington Park, several lime avenues + a row of elms by the riverside + sloping turf w[ith] woods beyond.*

William Cobbett, riding through in August 1823, says it is a very pretty park. *The house is quite in the bottom... The river Itchen, which rises near Alresford, which runs down through Winchester to Southampton, goes down the middle of this valley, and waters all its immense quantity of meadows. The duke's house stands not far from the river itself... There are several avenues of trees which are very beautiful...* He adds to his praises for this spot in November 1825: *... The high road, through the park, goes very near to this water; and we saw thousands of wild-ducks in the pond, or sitting round on the green edges of it, while on one side of the pond, the hares and pheasants were moving about on a gravel walk on the side of a very fine plantation. We looked down on all this from a rising ground, and the water, like a looking-glass, showed us the trees, and even the animals. This is certainly one of the very prettiest spots in the world.*

Avington Park estate is mentioned in Domesday. The house goes back to Elizabethan times and was given a classical makeover in 1670. It was a retreat for Charles II and Nell Gwynne, the redoubtable Prebendary Ken of Winchester having balked at offering hospitality to the monarch and his mistress. (The indulgent King appointed "the good little man that refused his lodging to poor Nell" to the Bishopric of Bath and Wells). George IV and his mistress Mrs Fitzherbert were similarly accommodated. The house was again majorly revised in the late 18th century, and later Victorian additions were made. It remains a family home, available for hiring for functions.



W H Hudson

2. Go over the cattle grid and up through the woods, past Easton Lodge and along to Easton.

3. Follow the road as winds to the left. With The Old Post Office on the left and the 15th century Chestnut Horse pub opposite, take the Itchen Way footpath to the right of the pub, through a kissing gate and paddock and another kissing gate on to the road, Easton Lane, with the much-altered Old Manor House over the road.



Easton Manor House

4. Follow the Easton Lane to the right, going over three Itchen courses bordered by white railings.

5. Take the footpath to the right, just after a brick bridge with wooden railings over a dried watercourse and before the redbrick New Bridge Cottage,

Edward Thomas's friend W H Hudson published *Adventures Among Birds* when Thomas was gathering material for *In Pursuit of Spring* (and he expands on it after visiting Wells, chapter 8). In this work Hudson writes of the raven fledglings the ducal family tamed and kept as pets – only to be *done to death by the savage blows of the two powerful beaks* of their jealous parents.

The village lies below Easton Down alongside the Itchen. Easton is a charming if unpretentious village with two pubs and houses dating back to Tudor times. Cobbett, says it is *close by the waterside. The meadows are the attraction; and, indeed, it is the meadows that have caused the villages to exist.*

A slight detour can be made here to visit the church or to use the alternative pub, The Cricketers. **At the road with The Old Manor House, turn left to visit the pub.** For St Mary's Church, carry on up Church Lane. The late Norman parish church of St Mary's has a 13th century tower and fine doorway but has undergone rigorous renovation. Edward Thomas would surely have picked out the memorial of Agatha Barlow who died in 1595. She had been the widow of the fervently reformist and disputatious William Barlow (1498 – 1568), who became in turn Bishop of St Asaph, of St David's, later of Bath and Wells, and, finally, of Chichester. He left behind him a path of ideological destruction of the 'papist' idolatry of medieval carvings, rood screens and wall paintings. Their daughters followed their mother's episcopal preference and married a batch of Elizabethan Bishops – of Hereford, Winchester, Lichfield, York and Durham.

To resume the walk, return to The Old Manor House and 4.

In November 1825 Cobbett comments, *The water in the Itchen is, they say, famed for its clearness. As I was crossing the river the other day, at Avington, I told Richard to look at it, and I asked him if he did not think it very clear. I now find that this has been remarked by very ancient writers.*

marked Allan King Way, Pilgrims' Way and Watercress Way.

6. Walk through two kissing gates; then bear left to follow the headland to a third kissing gate and on to a lane alongside St Swithun's Church at Martyr Worthy.

7. Turn left onto the village road and then right alongside the Village Hall and on to the Pilgrims' Way, through a kissing gate and meadow, two more kissing gates before veering right and down to Chilland Lane.

8. Turn left and almost immediately right, up steps to a gravel path alongside a high brick wall (known locally as "the Great Wall of Chilland"). Go through a kissing gate and alongside the Itchen, across meadowlands. Going through two more kissing gates and across a lane (the Lime Avenue – private), walk on to Itchen Abbas. (The Plough pub is on the B3047 off to the right.)

9. Turn southwards, passing (if the pub has been visited, St John the Baptist Church on the right), the old mill on the left, over successive bridges and past Avington Lodge and the fine entrance and avenue to Avington Hall. Here the road turns right into the village but walkers should turn left towards the golf course then turn right again to take the footpath parallel to the road.

The small riverside village of Martyr Worthy is one of the string of Worthies that Thomas passed. It is not reckoned to have any connection with martyrdom. Worthy means 'enclosure' and the forename derives from the la Martre family who owned it in 1200. St Swithun's Church is built on what was monastic property and has Norman features. It lies on the Pilgrims' Way.

Spring Driving Away Winter is a fair parallel of the title *In Pursuit of Spring*. It is, in fact, a painting in the RA refreshment room. It was painted by Frederick Appleyard (1874 – 1963) who lived in nearby Itchen Stoke. He took many subjects from around here, including a charming representation (1935) of *The ford at Chilland, Martyr Worthy*.



The ford at Chilland, Martyr Worthy, Frederick Appleyard

Charles Kingsley often visited Itchen Abbas, drawing on the surroundings to inspire *The Water Babies*. Lord Grey of Falloden (1862 – 1933), Liberal Foreign Secretary and indefatigable fly fisher and ornithologist, came here as a retreat to his own fishing hut by the river, his 'sacred place'. It was here, on 26 July, 1914, he began to realise that his offer of mediation in the hastening climax before the First World War was unavailing and nine days later, Britain declared war on Germany. He famously declared, *The lights are going out all over Europe and I doubt we will see them go on again in our lifetime*. The hut burned down in 1922.

At the centre of the village a gigantic smitten grey bole stands in the garden of the former rectory. What must have been a fine copper beech was a



Avington Church



10. Continue past the 18th century terrace of brick and flint cottages, turning right into Avington Lane and back to the car park.

feature of the village. Unimaginative handling led to its destruction, sanctioned by an insurance company. Thomas visited Easton and Avington (Fieldwork Book 45) and notes *the classic brick ch[urch]*. **Walk up to St Mary the Virgin church** with its tombstone pathway. It is a charming, airy redbrick Georgian church, built between 1768 – 71 by the 3rd Duke of Chandos (1731 – 1789) and his wife Margaret (1736 – 1768) – owners of the Chandos portrait of Shakespeare. It has a memorial to Sir John Shelley, brother of the poet and an owner of Avington Park. The mahogany box pews and the three-decker pulpit were reputedly built from Armada timbers. A notable feature is the ample Chandos box pew with its pegs for hanging wigs; the parish pews for the socially inferior parishioners are smaller and have inward looking seats.

Cobbett noted that Avington Park and the *little village* were *beautifully situated, amidst fine and lofty trees, fine meadows and streams of clear water*. He thought the state corn was *indifferent*, the turnips *by no means good* but he felt compensated *for the bad turnips by the sight of the duke's turnip-hoers, about a dozen females, amongst whom there were several very pretty girls, and they were merry as larks. There had been a shower that had brought them into a sort of huddle on the roadside. When I came up to them, they all fixed their eyes upon me, and upon my smiling, they bursted out into laughter... they seemed happier and better off than any work-people that I saw in the fields all the way from London to this spot.*



With thanks to Catherine Carberry and Jacqui Squire
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