

## Stapleford

**Distance:** 4.47m / 7.2km leisurely walking

**Total ascent:** 337ft/107m

**In Pursuit of Spring:** Chapter 4 *From Dunsbridge over Salisbury Plain*

**Refreshments:** The Swan at Stoford, Warminster Rd, Stoford SP2 0PR

The Royal Oak, Langford Rd, Great Wishford SP2 0PD

The Pelican Inn at Serrington, Warminster Rd, Serrington, SP3 4LT

The Boot Inn, Berwick St James SP3 4TN

**Map:** Explorer 130 (Salisbury and Stonehenge)

### Getting there:

If driving, take Berwick Road (A3083) off A36, drive northwards to the church. Follow the left bend in the road west of church and park in righthand gravelled bay next to the colourful Wiltshire-Stapleford sign.

Cycling from Salisbury Thomas rode on steadily alongside the Wylde. *For three miles I had on my left hand the river and its meadows, poplars, willows and elms – the railway slightly above the farther bank – and the waved green wall of down beyond, to the edge of which came the dark trees of Grovely. The road was heavy and wet, being hardly above the river level, but that was all the better for seeing the maidenhair lacework of the greening willows, the cattle among the marsh marigolds of the flat green meadows, the moorhen hurried down the swift water, the bulging wagons of straw going up a deep lane to the sheepfolds, and the gradual slope of the Plain where those sheepfolds were, on my right. This edge of the Plain above the Wylde is a beautiful low downland, cloven by coombs and topped by beech clumps; and where it was arable the flints washed by last night's rain were shining in the sun. A few motorcyclists, determined men, passed me at twenty miles an hour through South Newton. Larks sang high, and hedge sparrows sang low.*

After South Newton, he rides on to Stapleford. *From Wishford onward the river has a good road on either side, each with a string of villages, one or two miles apart. Passing the Swan at Stoford, he kept to the left bank, because I was about to leave the Wylde and go north up its tributary Winterbourne. From the Swan I began to climb above the river, and had a steep meadow and the farmyard and elm trees of Little Wishford between it and me, but on my right a steep bank of elms which had less for the eye than the farther side of the river, its clean wall of down, terraced below, and the trees of Grovely peeping over. Ahead I could see more and more of the of the long, broad vale of the Wylde and its willows contained within slopes, half of pasture, half arable; and above all, the curves of the Plain flowing into and across one another. The earth was hazy, the sky clouded, and no one who had ridden on that Good Friday and bad Saturday could have expected a fine day with any confidence.*

*... I now kept on until the road had risen, so as to touch the edge of the Plain, the arable land, the home of pewits. Here I had below me the meeting of the Wylde and Winterbourne, the thatched roofs of Stapleford scattered around it, and the road going on westward with telegraph posts along the sparse, willowy vale. I turned out of this vale at Stapleford. It is a village of many crossing roads and lanes, of houses of flint and stone chequer, in groups or isolated, under its elms and high grassy banks.*

**Stapleford**, 4 miles northwest of Wilton, stands on the River Till's eastern bank. Serrington and Over Street, both parts of the village, are on the west bank. Each lies on narrow gravel strips and suggest Saxon origin, though there is evidence of Iron Age and Romano-British settlement in the locality. The meadow lands round about lie on alluvium from the Till and

pastures and arable land ranges up on to the Plain as well as south of the village. Common land-use ceased after the enclosures of 1810. Remains of a 12th century castle mound and ditch, now covered in trees, lie to the northwest of the village at Over Street. Cobbett wrote in 1826 that 'The farms are very fine up this vale, and the meadows, particularly at a place called Stapleford, are singularly fine'.



Above Stapleford from Chain Hill, BM

**1. Walk back down the road, passing the gate of St Mary's Church.**



St Mary's Church, BM



The old malthouse, BM

**2. Follow the road back down towards the A36.**



*The church is kept open, a clean, greenish place with Norman arches on one side, and a window illuminated by a coat of arms – a phoenix on a crown – and the words, 'Foy pour devoir. There are no other inscriptions. Outside I noticed the names of Goodfellow, Pavie, Barnett, Brown, Rowden, Gamlen, Leversuch. The lettering survived on the headstone of John Saph, who died in 1683, and his wife, Alice, who died in 1677.*

The Saphs were a long-standing Roman Catholic family who suffered penalties for refusing to attend the Anglican church and are buried to the east of the church, whereas the communicant parishioners whom Thomas lists are buried in the north graveyard.

The church is built of chalk, ashlar and flint and dates back to the late 12<sup>th</sup> century. The 15<sup>th</sup> century porch shows graffiti of morris games possibly scratched by pupils of the school housed in a room above the porch. The church's most striking feature inside, noted by Thomas, is the Romanesque south side arcade and font. Shreds of early 13<sup>th</sup> century painted foliage survive on the arch undersides. Carved heads of various ages are dotted around the church. Extensive zealous restorations took place in 1861 and the nave was partly rebuilt. Much ancient material and artefacts were destroyed in the process. An early Victorian bier can be seen.

The route passes the *houses of flint and stone chequer* and thatched cob cottages (the 17<sup>th</sup> century Malthouse is impressive). Ignore Butts Hill lane on the left and continue forward. Thatcher's Cottage (formerly Rose Cottage) on



From RVW's 5<sup>th</sup> Symphony

**3. Just before the junction with the main road, go left on the drovers' flinty track up Chain Hill.**

**4. At the squat drum-like concrete pillar go on to the righthand byway. Ignoring the next righthand track to Crough's Barn, walk on to the farm track ahead, almost to the hill crest and to the barn on the left.**

**5. At this point, turn right and follow the Monarch's Way down towards Stoford.**



Towards Grovelly Woods, BM

**6. The track runs downhill and through trees to a second concrete pillar. From here, walk forward to the A36.**

**7. Cross the road with care to the pavement opposite and walk to the left to Stoford Bridge over the Wylde and the sign for Great Wishford.**

the right was a bolthole for Ralph Vaughan Williams in July 1938. He said he had "dried up"; his life was complicated by the twin loves for his wife Adeline and Ursula Wood (they married in 1953 after the former's death). Here he reworked some of his *Pilgrim's Progress* into what was to become his 5<sup>th</sup> Symphony. He wrote to Ursula, *I have been [for] wonderful walks on the downs – they were perfect – sun, high wind & wonderful July field flowers, the kind I like best.* RVW and Thomas were near contemporaries and shared a love of folk songs, the countryside and walking. Despite both having a wide range of interconnecting cultural contacts, there is no evidence that they ever met.



From the top of Chain Hill, looking back at the Plain, BM

This is a familiar route for Thomas who says *Had I been walking, I should have turned off this road between the Swan and Little Wishford, on to the Plain, and so by a green road that goes high across it as far as Shrewton.*

Grovelly Woods lie on the right of the horizon ahead. As he cycled from Salisbury, he could see *the waded green wall of down beyond, to the edge of which came the dark trees of Grovelly.* They reminded him of a delightful scene he had witnessed earlier: *... I was on Crouch's Down, on the other side of Grovelly Wood, enjoying the green road which runs between the ridge and the modern highroad. It was open land, with some arable below, the Grovelly oaks and their nightingales above, and the spire of Salisbury far off before me. Out of a warm, soft sky descended*



The Swan, Stoford, BM



From the Wylfe bridge, Stoford, BM

*a light whisking rain, and on the Down seven hares were playing follow-my-leader at full speed. All seven ran in a bunch round and round, sometimes encircling a grass tussock in rings so very small at times that only they knew which was leader. Suddenly one leaped out of this ring, and all pursued him in a long, open string like hounds. Several times this happened. For twenty, fifty, or a hundred yards they ran straight; then they turned suddenly back almost on their own traces, in the same open order, until their fancy preferred circles or zigzags. Again they set off on a long race towards a hillside beech clump, going down a cleft above Baverstock. They made a dozen sharp turns in the cleft, always at full speed. Maintaining the same long drawn out line, they next made for the woods above. In this long run the line opened out still more, but no one gave up. They entered the woods, to reappear immediately one at a time, and took once more to encircling a tussock. As they were usually two hundred yards away on downland of nearly their own colour, I could not be sure how often they changed their leader, but I think they did at least once in mid-career. They were as swift and happy as birds, and made the earth seem like the air...*

The Swan @ Stoford, a 1740 coaching inn, lies to the left.

**8. Walk right, over the bridge and down West St.**

*The Swan and an orange-coloured, plain, small house with grass and a great cedar stand at the turning which leads over the river to Great Wishford and the right bank.*



The bread stones, BM

The five-arched brick and ashlar bridge was constructed in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century and was rebuilt in 1841. A mill stood alongside, demolished by 1802. The lovely River Wylfe is a chalk stream rising in West Wiltshire, fed by winterbournes (which leads to variable water levels). It joins the River Nadder at Wilton and runs into the Avon at Christchurch. It is much favoured by fly fishers.



Oak Apple Day, Salisbury Cathedral

*Again the road touched the river, and I looked over it to Great Wishford, its cottages and hayricks clustering about the church tower, with flag flying, and to a deep recess in the Downs*

*behind. The village has a street full of different, pretty houses, mostly built of chipped flint alternating with stone, in squares, or bands, or anyhow.*



St Giles's Church, BM

**9. Continue past the church.**

**10. Continue along West St and, before the pub, turn right (078:355) down Manor Farm Lane.**

**11. Just before Manor Farm and indicated by a footpath signpost, go left through the five-barred gate and cross to the field corner and river ahead. Go over the footbridge (076:356).**

**12. Follow the river to where the field widens into a rough L-shape (074:357). Walk over to the gate on the left of the far side of the field and go into the next field.**

**13. Continue following the river and go over the stile and two footbridges at the confluence.**

**14. Carry on along a well-used grassy path, with the river still on the left; ignore the concrete Kingsmead Bridge off to the left.**

Great Wishford is a pre-Norman village which grew to become Wishford Magna in the early 17th century. It is set in pastureland and watermeadows, one of the latter lies to the right of West St.

At the corner with South St is St Giles's Church. Its wall has a set of nine "bread stones", panels indicating the changing price of bread from 1800 to 2000. A gallon was equivalent to 8 lbs. The flint and limestone church is recorded in 1207, has a 13th century chancel and 15th century tower and a strongly carved Norman font. There is also a 1386 monument to Nicholas and Edith de Bonham. It has a fine monument to lord of the manor Sir Richard Grobham Howe and his wife. A plaque in the porch advertises his munificence in setting up in 1722 a school for boys and girls 'to write read cast accounts and to learn and say the church catechism'.

The church was radically 'restored' in 1863 to allow for a larger congregation. At a dinner to mark its re-opening in 1864 143 gallons of beer and 28 bottles of sherry were consumed. There is framed information about Oak Apple Day (29 May) which commemorates the defence of commoners' contested wood-collecting rights from nearby Grovely Wood, confirmed in 1603 by the Forest Court. In a revived festive day, band-led celebrating villagers parade oak branches. In Salisbury Cathedral they assert their rights by the traditional cry of "Grovely, Grovely, Grovely and all Grovely". A 1728 manual fire engine, in use till 1920s, is preserved in the church.

A picture of the village is gained from the 1911 Census, taken just before Edward Thomas's visit. The population was declining, possibly owing to migration of villagers to towns for work. It shows that 112 out of 292 Great Wishford residents (38%) were born in Wishford. There were 10 Old Age Pensioners and 30 children of school age. The women were engaged in housekeeping, domestic service (6), teaching (4) and 1 as a post office telegraphist. Among the males, 2 farmers were listed, 19 farm labourers,

**15. Continue following the river, following round the next meander. Walk ahead to the treeline which stands off from the river and go over the stile among the trees.**

**16. Walking forward and round to the left along the river, cross the 20-yard footbridge.**

**17. Pass the fisherman's stile on the left and, with the bench on the riverside now on the left, veering right, walk across to the trees. Houses will lie off on the left. Ignore the stile in the fence ahead but turn to the right (footpath signed) cross over two footbridges among the trees.**

**18. Continue to the left and over the stile by a gate and farm buildings. Follow the grassy path right to meet the A36,**

12 carters, 7 carpenters, 3 bricklayers, 9 railway workers, 2 in each of tailoring, gardening, steamrolling and baking. A list of single entries shows bailiff, blacksmith, clergyman, coal merchant, hawker, victualler, water bailiff, wheelwright and woodman.

On the right is Grobham's redbrick school and, on the left, Station Road Road (the Great Western Railway came to Great Wishford in 1856. Its station was closed in 1955.) Ahead, on the corner with Langford Rd is the Royal Oak, formerly The Tap.

From this point, the route runs alongside the meandering river for most of the way before returning to the A36.



River Wylde, BM

**9. At the petrol station, cross the road and go through a kissing gate**

opposite onto a footpath through rough pasture.

20. Go right up Chapel Lane.



Jane Seymour

21. Go left at the fork and walk up to Berwick Rd and left back to the starting point.



The Pelican Inn, BM

The stone bridge is next to the Pelican pub on the left, a building of late 17th- or early 18th-century origin.

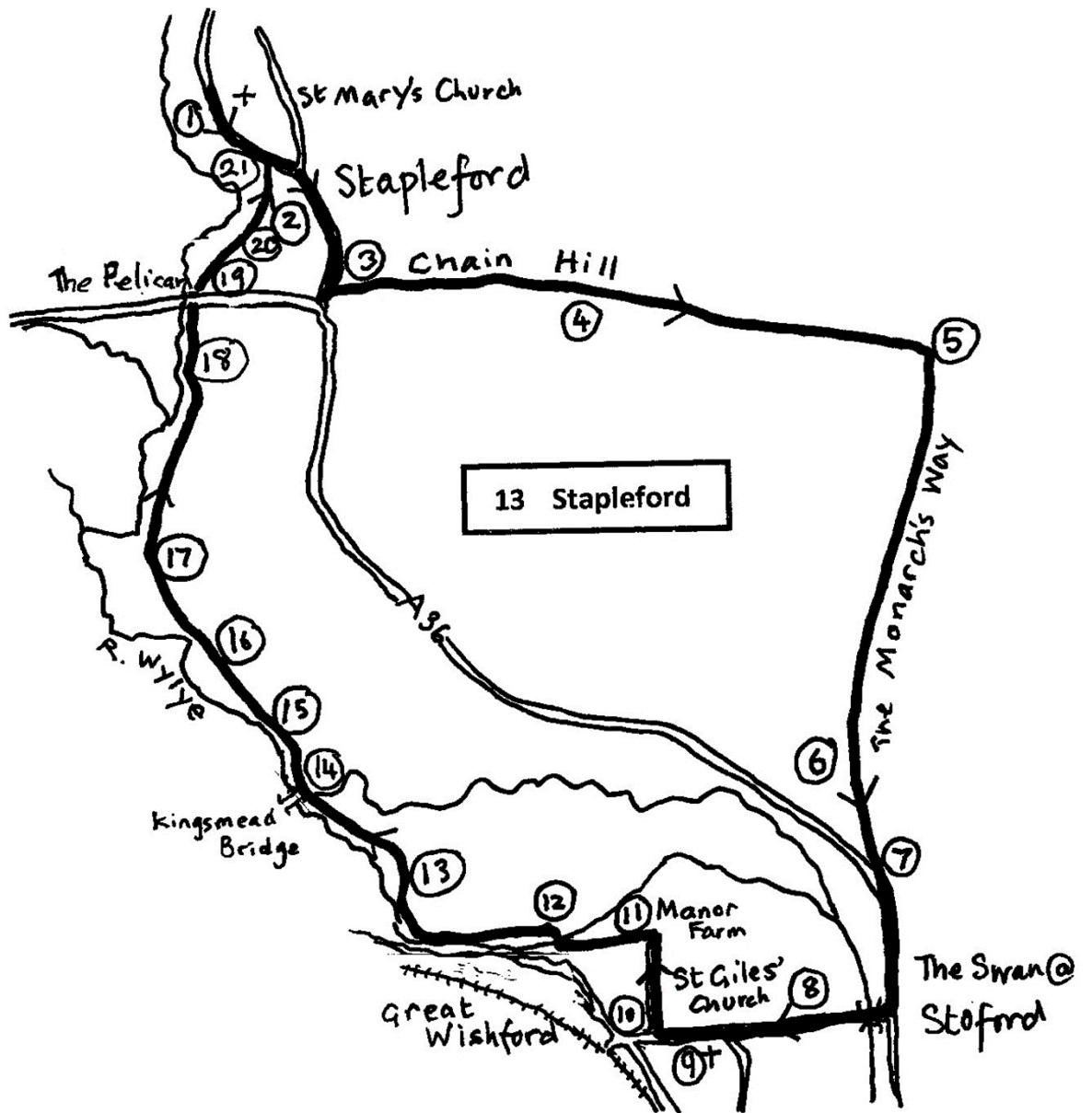
The mid-17<sup>th</sup> century Seymour Cottage is on the left. The name Seymour recurs in both Wiltshire and Somerset. The Seymour family claimed Norman descent and a dubious connection with royal blood. They held several manors across the southern counties, particularly the west, including Stapleford and Orcheston Manor as well as Nether Stowey, and by marriage and land acquisition rose in wealth and importance. Sir John Seymour of Wolf Hall in Wiltshire served Henry VII and Henry VIII. His eldest daughter Jane (c1508 – 1537) was Henry VIII's third wife and mother of Edward VI. Her brother Edward (1500 – 1552), now Duke of Somerset, became the unscrupulous and overbearing Lord Protector of England in his nephew's minority. His younger brother Thomas (1508–1549), equally scheming, married Catherine Parr, Henry VIII's widow. He cultivated the young king's friendship, vying with the Protector for power but was beheaded on charges of embezzlement. Somerset, charged with felony, followed him to the scaffold in 1552, driven there by rival power-seekers.

Edward Thomas makes mention of Seymour Court in his cycling through Rudge in Somerset.

Thomas himself cycles on: *I dipped to a withy bed, and went upstream along the Winterbourne to Berwick St James... The street ending in the Boot Inn was a perfect neat one of flint and stone chequer and thatch.*

With thanks to Wendy Britton, Bristol Ramblers, Sara Sawyer and Tim Parkinson, Edward Thomas Fellowship, and Catherine Carberry

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Approximate scale: 1 mile