

Orcheston St Mary, Orcheston St George and Salisbury Plain

Distance: 4.1 miles/ 6.6 km leisurely walking

Total ascent: 321ft/98m

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

Refreshments: The Boot Inn, Berwick St James SP3 4TN

The Plume of Feathers, High St, Shrewton SP3 4BZ

Rose and Crown, High St, Tilshead, SP3 4RZ

The Bell Inn, High Street (A303) Winterbourne Stoke SP3 4SZ

Map: Explorer 130 (Salisbury and Stonehenge)

Getting there: Drive to the northern end of Orcheston and park in the vicinity of the church (059:456) and the old schoolhouse (1854).

The rubble and flint St Mary's church goes back to the 12th century. The aisle and three-stage tower are 13th century. It was restored by Thomas Henry Wyatt and refurbished in Victorian times.

Wiltshire, known to Thomas since his youth, was his favourite county and Salisbury Plain, on the edge of which he was to spend his last days in England at Codford Camp in 1917, was such a joy to him and he visited it many times alone and with friends.

The Winterbourne guides you through the heart of the Plain. It has, I believe, no very strict boundaries, but the Plain may be said to consist of all that mass of downland in South Wiltshire, which is broken only by the comparatively narrow valleys of five rivers – the Bourn, the Avon, the Wylde, the Nadder and the Ebbel. Three of these valleys, however, those of the Bourn on the east, and the Wylde and the Nadder in the south, have railways in them as well as rivers. The railways are more serious interruptions to the character of the Plain, and whether or not they must be regarded as the boundaries of a reduced Plain, certainly the core of the Plain excludes them... Within the reduced space of fifteen by twenty miles the Plain is nothing but Plain. As for the military camps, nothing may be seen of them for days beyond the white tents gleaming in the sun like sheep or clouds. When they are out of sight the tumuli and ancient earthworks that abound bring to mind more forcibly than anywhere else the fact that, as the poet says – 'the dead are more numerous than the living'.

The valleys are rivers not only of waters, but of greenest grass and foliage. The greatest part of the Plain is all treeless pasture, treeless arable land. Some high places, as at the meetings of roads, possess beeches or fir trees in line or cluster. In several places, as at Asserton Farm above Berwick St James, the plantations have been made in mathematical forms. But as you travel across the Plain you come rarely to a spot where the chief thing for the eye is not an immense expanse of the colour of ploughed chalkland, or of corn, or of turf, varying according to season and weather, and always diversified by parallelograms of mustard yellow...

...As soon as my road was outside Berwick St James it mounted above the river and was absolutely clear of houses, hedges and fences for a mile, and showed me nothing more than the bare and green arable land flowing away on every side in curves like flight and compact masses of beeches on certain ridges, like manes or combs... Out and up the road took me again to the high arable without a hedge, and the music of larks, and the mingling sounds of pewits and sheep-bells...

... After passing over the Winterbourne and running along under its willows to Shrewton's little domed dungeon of blackened stone, and an inn that stands sideways to the road, with the sign of Catherine-wheel, the road again bridges the river from waterside Shrewton to waterside

Maddington. ... I was looking for Orcheston St Mary. One sunny February day, when the fields by the road hither from Tilshead were flooded with pools and channels of green, peacock blue and purple by the Winterbourne, I had seen below me among the loops of the water a tiny low-towered church with a roof stained orange, and a white wall curving and long, and a protective group of elms, which was Orcheston St Mary.

Neolithic field systems, ditches and barrows are found in the area. Orcheston is pre-Norman. Its population has invariably been low; at present it stands around 350. It lies on gravel beds in gently rolling downland in the upper Till valley. Arable land is dominant in the centre and south of the village while pasture dominates in the north and west. Sheep-farming has always been a major economic force. Orcheston is made up of two villages. The two parishes were united in 1934 and became a single parish in 1971. The War Department bought up a great part of the parish between 1897 – 1934 and the northern Downs remain as part of the artillery range, its presence advertised by red flags and no-go areas. Thomas notes many roads around the village: *...The next village was five villages in one – Rollestone, Maddington, Shrewton, Orcheston St George and Orcheston St Mary. Here many roads from the high land descended to the river and crossed mine. The cluster of villages begins with orchards and ends in a field where the grass is said to grow twelve feet high.* They link south with Maddington and Shrewton, southeast to Elston via Orcheston St George, southwest towards Warminster, north to Devizes and northeast to Netheravon.

1. Walk south along the lane



St Mary's church, BM

Pass the dormered two-storeyed flint, stone and brick Old Rectory on the right. The original rectory, built in Henry VIII's reign, was altered in the 18th century but was deemed too small. The present building was substantially built in 1827.

2. Just before the edge of Stonehenge Touring Park a footpath is signed footpath on the left bank of the Till winterbourne.

(Alternatively, if the Till is waterless – usually in late Spring and the Summer – it can be used as a designated byway running along the riverbed and it will emerge at Waterlake Farmhouse.)

The Till rises in Orcheston Down north west of the village (Tilshead is not named after it) and is a winterbourne. In a 1908 letter to his friend Gordon Bottomley, Thomas defines such a water course as *a river running only in winter. They are common in the chalk. All the Summer you can walk over their grassy beds & under their bridges, as a rule. They give part of the names to names of many villages in Dorset & Wiltshire.* In the village, as in Shrewton, it is also known as the Waterlake. It runs among arable and sheep-pastures.

3. Turn left through the wooden barrier, along the footpath and forward through a kissing gate. Continue along the field-edge and through a second kissing gate.

4. Still following the Till, go through two gates and on to the track beside Waterlake Farmhouse and Waterlake View.



Elston Lane, Waterlake, BM

5. Carry on down to where the lane meets a T-junction with Elston Lane (062:449). Turn right and walk over the bridge, the Till *and the lowest part of Orcheston.*

6. The road bends to the right; at this point take the footpath signed to the left and go over a stile and through an old iron kissing gate into the churchyard of St George's church.



St George's church, BM

7. Leaving by the churchyard, go ahead to the road and up to the crossroads.



'the grass is said to grow twelve feet high'

The latter houses Thetiny pottery studio which retails hand-thrown colourful ware. On the right is a watermeadow which is a floodplain of the Till in winter months and is named the Waterlake. On its far side, where the extensive Drax Barn renovation stands, there were humble cob and thatch cottages. Higher rainfall than usual fell in the autumn of 1840, followed by frost and snow. By New Year, the temperature fluctuated and there was further excessive fall of snow and rain over the icy ground. The temperature rose to 42 °. Combined with melting snow and the release of meltwater from the frozen ground, on 16 January the Till rose in a massive flood, some 7-8 feet above its normal level. The cob houses along Watertlake's western side disintegrated, sweeping some of them completely away. The villagers worked furiously to rescue the afflicted but three people drowned and 72 houses in the wider area were destroyed, rendering homeless over 200 people.

Here *the grass is said to grow twelve feet high*, says Thomas. John Aubrey (1626 – 1697) records in his *Natural History of Wiltshire* that 'the grass grew as much as 17 feet by sending out strong shoots along the marshy ground'. These take root along the stem, so lengthening the original plant. Water sluices help control the flow. The winter crops of trefoil, broad clover and other succulent grasses thrive after the winter floods and are mown twice a year.

It is a flint church with an ivied tower standing on terms of equality among thatched farm buildings and elms. The church was stifling, for a stove roared among dead daffodils and moss and the bodies of Ambrose Paradice, gent, dead since 1727, and Joan his wife, and the mere tablet of John



8. Walk over to and along Whatcombe Brow.



The Flood Cottages, BM

9. Walk as far as Hill Cottage where the road turns to the right. Instead, walk up the restricted byway off to the left.



The sunken lane, BM

Shettler of Elston, who died at Harnham ('from the effects of an accident') on December 6, 1861, when he was fifty-two, and went to Hazelbury Bryan in Dorset to be buried. Outside the sun was almost as warm on the daisies and on the tombstone of Job Gibbs, who died in 1817 at the age of sixty-four. Close by, Ann Farr from Shropshire, a servant for fifty years at the Rectory, has a tablet between her and oblivion.

The church is substantially 13th century and has Victorian fittings. Thomas Henry Wyatt restored it. Declared redundant in 1972, it is now cared for by the Churches Conservation Trust.

Here, on the left, can be found a sign over a garage for **Text Cottage**: *A cottage near the church bore upon its wall these words, cut in stone, before Queen Victoria's time:*

*Fear God
Honour the King
Do good to all men.*

Probably it dates from about the year of Alton Workhouse, from the times when kites and ravens abounded, and thrived on the corpses of men who were hanged for a little theft committed out of necessity or love of sport. The fear of God must have been a mighty thing to bring forth such laws and still more the obedience to them.

Council houses, begun in 1910 and expanded with another 20 houses by 1957, were built along here in the 20th century and the village hall is on the right. This forms the link between the two Orchestons.

These are followed by the Flood Cottages and the old village stores. The cottages were built in 1842 with money from the Shrewton Flood Fund which raised over £4000. Cast-iron plaques tell of the 'awful visitation' which afflicted six parishes.



The Shrewton road, BM

10. Cross the A360 and continue forward on the byway, a cart track in earlier times. Veer right at the three-point byway signs, pass between the posts marked Sched[ule] 1 and forward on to a lefthand post indicating byways and 'Danger'.

11. Go right here along the bridleway running towards the A360, with clumps and a barn visible to the right.

12. The way descends to and joins the tank track. Walk right along this and down to the crossroads with the A360 .

Going through the tank-crossing's series of yellow-capped posts, cross over the road to the far side. Observe the red flags and their warning.

13. Follow the track along its curves up the south edge of Orcheston Down to the trees of Old Penning on the right.

This starts as a section of sunken lane which leads to expansive open chalk downland.

Sometimes this expanse rolls but little before it touches the horizon; far more often, it heaves or billows up boldly into several curving ridges that intersect or flow into one another. The highest of these may be crowned by dark beech or carved by the ditch and rampart of an ancient camp. Hedges are few, even by the roads. The roads are among the noblest, visiting the rivers and their orchards and thatched villages, but keeping for the main part of their length high and dry and in long curves. They are travelled by an occasional (but not sufficiently occasional) motorcar, or by a homeward-going farm-roller with children riding the horses.

Next to the dead the most numerous things on the Plain are sheep, rooks, pewits and larks. Today they mingle their voices, but the lark is the most constant. Here, more than anywhere else, he rises up above an earth only less free than the heavens. The pewit is equally characteristic. His Winter and twilight cry expresses for most men the sadness and the wildness of these solitudes. When his Spring cry breaks every now and then, as it does today, through the songs of the larks, when the rooks caw in low flight or perched upon their elm tops, and the lambs bleat, and the sun shines, and the couch fires burn well, and the wind blows their smoke about, the Plain is genial, and the unkindly breadth and simplicity of the scene in Winter or in the drought of Summer are forgotten. But let the rain fall and the wind whirl it, or let the sun shine too mightily, the Plain assumes the character by which it is best known, that of a sublime, inhospitable wilderness. It makes us feel the age of the earth, the greatness of Time, Space and Nature: the littleness of man even in an aeroplane, the fact that the earth does not belong to man, but man to the earth. And this feeling, or some variety of it, for most men is accompanied by melancholy, or is held to be the same thing. This is particularly so with townsmen, and above all with writers, because melancholy is the mood most easily give an appearance of profundity, and, therefore, most easily impressive...



The Old Penning, BM

**14. Continue up and over the crest.
Go forward and down to cross-lanes.
Turn right along a stony byway**

**15. At the line of beech trees, turn
left down a way between two fields
to a T-junction of pathways.
Go right, passing the 'Out of bounds
to all military vehicles' sign.**

**16. Follow the track with pasture on
the right and the ground rising on the
left.**

**17. Return to the starting point by
the church.**

The Army's Westdown Camp lies ahead near Tilshead.

Walk over the low bridge of the of the River Till which runs down to the right. Its course in the late Spring and Summer is marked by a flowering thread along the gentle lower contours towards the Orchestons.

Thomas notes the Old Penning; *When the ground falls too steeply for cultivation a copse has been formed – a copse in one case, between Shrewton and Tilshead, of beautiful contour, following the steep wall of the chalk for a quarter of a mile in a crescent curve, with level green at its foot, the high Downs rising bare above it. A space here or there has been left to thorns and gorse bushes.*

Thomas's delight in this scene is reaffirmed as he leaves Orcheston to continue northwards: *... I did not get off my bicycle to visit that crescent beech and fir wood against the concavity of chalk upon my right. A farm road curves past it, the wood hanging above it as beautifully as if above a river.*

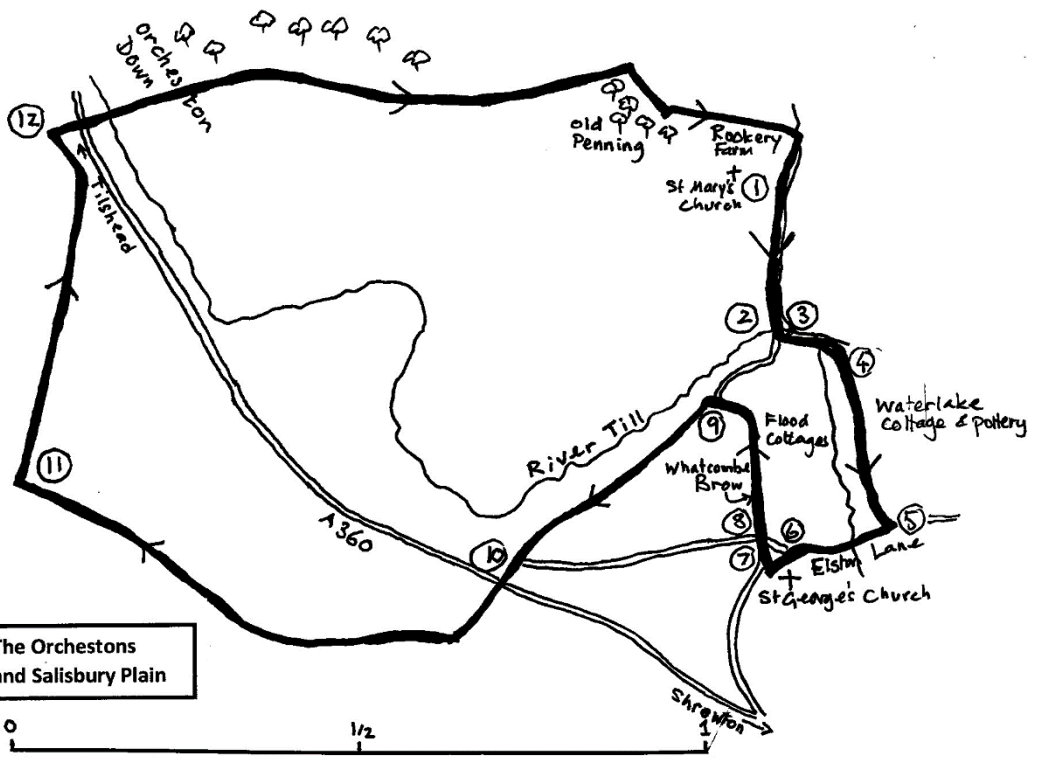
These trees belong to the out-of-sight Rookery farm, the principal farm in the area.

Rookery Farm can now be seen on the right. There is a gap in the parish registers and local lore had it that a Rookery Farm tenant burnt one of them to prevent it from being used as verification of his son's age, thereby saving the lad from having to join the militia.

Owing to higher precipitation and the raising of the water table, this path can sometimes flow with water and springs can be seen. There have been times when the church further down the track has been cut off by floodwater.

With special thanks to Wendy Britton, Bristol Ramblers, who devised this walk.

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 Approximate scale: 1 mile