

Broughton Gifford

In Pursuit of Spring: Chapter 6 *The Avon, the Biss, The Frome*

Refreshments: The Bell on the Common, SN12 8NX

Drive: 1.7 miles

Map: Explorer 156

The frequent traffic on the road that runs through Broughton Gifford makes a walk along it inadvisable. An alternative created by footpaths is unattractive; most lead nowhere for the purposes of this visit. The fields through which they pass are largely flat and devoid of obvious attraction. The ground, in wet weather, can be slippery and clogging. So this location is one of those covered by a short drive, 1.7 miles, with suggested pause points along the way.

1. Park in front of the parish church of St Mary the Virgin, at the south end of the village.



St Mary's Church

After cycling through Trowbridge, Staverton and Melksham, Thomas closed his fourth day by cycling towards Holt with, he wrote, *ancient elms lining the road*, the Avon to his left as it *serpented along the meadow without disturbing the level three furlongs of its perfect green.... But our sun was fading over Challimead. The air grew cold as I went on, and the pewits cried as if it were whiter. The rooks were now silent dots all over the elms of the Trowbridge rookery. A light mist was brushing over the fields, softening the brightness of Venus in the pale rosy west, and the scarlet flames that leapt suddenly from a thorn pile in a field. Probably there would be another frost tonight...*



Packhorse bridge

When Edward Thomas visited Broughton Gifford, he would have seen a more wooded landscape. Since his day, war time demands led to extensive felling. Boundaried to the south and east by the Avon, Broughton Gifford is low lying, set on Oxford and Kimmeridge clay. Roman settlements were nearby and in Saxon times it was known as Broctune ('dwelling by the brook') and was later described in Domesday as having ploughlands, meadows, pasture and woodlands along with two mills. Its notable buildings were haggled over down the centuries, with some of their owners being executed for treason, at least one was murdered and a couple were regarded as lunatics. The 13th century parish church of St Mary has a 15th century tower. In the 16th and 17th centuries with sheep rearing to the



From Andrews' and Dury's Map of Wiltshire, 1773

2. Drive forward, passing the primary school on the right. At the junction with Mill Lane on the left, The Street turns to the left. At this angle lies Broughton Gifford Manor.



Clifford Bax

fore, Broughton was the home of clothiers and weavers and though hand-loom weavers persisted till the mid-19th century there was little call for their narrow cloths and the village became a depressed place, with, says the Rev J Wilkinson in 1860, no public amusements and weddings being drab and poorly celebrated. A link to the wool trade lies in the 1725 packhorse bridge over the River Avon to the south of the village and to the west of Monkton House, a Seymour family property. Thomas enjoyed swimming in this stretch of the Avon.

The Avon Valley and Broughton Gifford saw the advent of the railway in 1848, created by the Wilts, Somerset and Weymouth railway company which was dissolved in 1850 and the line absorbed into the GWR. The line remains open but since 1955 no longer operates the 1905 Broughton Gifford Halt.

The church lies at the southern end of **The Street**, a causewayed road facilitating Broughton Gifford's ribbon development and which joins the village with the Common. It is a key section of this drive which itself follows Edward Thomas's evening walk described in Chapter 6. He does not identify his stopping place as Broughton Gifford, but his description gives it away.

The fine 17th century limestone Old Manor has features such as moulded beams and Tudor fireplaces and was restored in 1909. Its gate-posts have mice carved on the surfaces of the ball finials. In the early 19th century it belonged to Sir John Cam Hobhouse, first Baron Gifford, a close friend of Byron and a radical Whig who held office under Prime Ministers Grey, Melbourne and Russell. He is credited as being the originator in 1826 of the term 'His Majesty's Loyal Opposition'.

Clifford Bax (1886 – 1962) owned it from 1911 – 1914. Bax, the younger brother of composer Arnold Bax, was a playwright and poet, a journalist, critic and biographer. He wrote, that the house had been built by Sir Thomas Horton as *a modest home, three-storeyed, three-gabled, and with one wing only, so that the ground-plan formed an L.*



Broughton Gifford Manor

He had topped each gable with a stone, and on the flat of each stone, so that it faced the sky, he had grooved a cross; in order, I was told, that the angels in passing might not hesitate to bless the house... It had an air antique and gracious. The look of it was a welcome and a promise of courtesy. The lines of it, and the proportions, and the grey hue, tinted by the weather of three centuries, made an impression of slightly ceremonial sweetness and warmth like an Elizabethan madrigal.



Helen Thomas

Eleanor Farjeon, who met Edward Thomas through the Bax circle, said in *Edward Thomas, the Last Four Years*, that friends persuaded Edward Thomas, an unenthusiastic cricketer, to join Clifford Bax's Wiltshire cricket team that summer.... The Cricket Week was a high-spot of their year... Sport, though the paramount object, was far from the only qualification for that Eleven... wit or charm or intellect, love of music and poetry, an interest in chess and indiscreet paper-games, a speculative mind, and elegant tongue to discourse, could score a boundary in dialectics or stump a sophistry outside its crease; such delights ruled the grey-stone manor morning and night during the golden week...

In this gay company Edward that summer stood hunched reluctantly (in the long field too), on a different village green every day, and every evening took part in the bout-rimés, the chess tournament planned to cover the whole period, and the symposia of talk far into the night. Edward was prized and delighted in for his quality. In September 1912 he told Gordon Bottomley ...I went to Clifford Bax's & pretended to play cricket with 10 others for a week, nice people and moderate cricketers. He scored three runs in five matches.

In October he told Bottomley, Bax is a local magnet, cricketer, theosophist, and an amusing talker who knows poetry because he likes it. He will probably never write any... his brother Arnold Bax, a most excellent pianist and composer...



Eleanor Farjeon

Helen Thomas, in *World Without End* remembers [Edward] coming back from a big house-party of men of his own age and interests who met together each year to talk and walk. They met at an old Manor House owned by the host of the party, whom we had visited in Wiltshire, and here with every kind of comfort and luxury, among congenial friends who admired and loved him in a way that very few men are admired and loved by their contemporaries, Edward had spent one of his rare holidays.

Of the two women in the circle one was Eleanor Farjeon, a sister of one of the most brilliant of the party... I knew from him that she was not beautiful, but clever and lively and witty; that she not only equalled the men in what was being discussed, but shone above them all in imagination and humour. I knew also from his letters among this high-spirited, confident successful crew, that in his heart he was bitter and lonely, and that this girl was the only one with whom he had felt easy.

Helen remained lifelong friends with Eleanor and both played a significant role in encouraging and, later, promoting his poetry. Edward Thomas visited Bax frequently. Helen felt ill at ease with Bax and his friends, which irritated her husband, who wrote to Bax in September 1912 *If ever I feel I ought to indulge again in so long and happy a dream as I had at Broughton Gifford I shall come. I could not tell you without painful explanations and contrasts how happy your wife and you and Baynes [a follower of Jung who treated Thomas for depression] made me for the whole of the time.*

The drive now follows the lyrical description with which Thomas ends his chapter. He evokes a lone meditative evening walk along The Street to Coombe Lane (and back to the Manor) in the Spring dusk, selecting and combining different images, letting impressions enter his reflective mood and creating a simple and moving ruminative idyll.

I went out into the village at about half-past nine in the dark, quiet evening. A few stars



Former Rusty Stag pub



The Reading Room



The Methodist Church

3. Drive as slowly and safely as possible.



The reading room

4. Pass the war memorial on the right and park opposite The Bell on the Common public House.

5. Continue the drive along the left side of the Common.

6. Drive forward. The road becomes Coombe Lane and passes the lefthand junction to Great Chalfield Manor.

penetrated the soft sky; a few lights shone on earth, from a distant farm seen through a gap in the cottages. Single and in groups, separated by gardens or bits of orchard, the cottages were vaguely discernible: here and there a yellow window square gave out a feeling of home, tranquillity, security. Nearly all were silent. Ordinary speech was not to be heard, but from one house came the sounds of an harmonium being played and a voice singing a hymn, both faintly. A dog barked far off. After an interval a gate fell-to lightly. Nobody was on the road.

The houses are a mix of 18th – 20th century styles. An interesting mental game is to ‘demolish’ any house you think built after 1912, so as to give an idea of what would have been seen in Thomas’s day.

The Rusty Stag pub on the right, formerly the Fox and Hounds, was built around 1700 and is a painted rubblestone building. It is closed at the time of writing.

Further on, note the compact Reading Room with its iron railings forecourt. Wealthier inhabitants of the church or gentry sponsored the building of such institutions as a means of encouraging the ‘lower orders’ to improve by self-help. Such patronage, however well-intentioned, buttressed class division. During WW2, The Solomon Wolfson Jewish School was based here and in the Wesleyan Sunday schoolroom nearby. Hollybrook House is on the left, an ashlar limestone, late 18th century, three storey home.

The 1828 Methodist church, also on the left, was rebuilt in 1907 and has been converted for domestic use. Revd. T. R. Jones commented in 1857 that *‘this appears to be an ungenial soil for Methodism, for though the chapel is neat and comfortable the congregation is small and disheartening’*

Thomas himself continues: *The road was visible most dimly, and was like a pale mist at an uncertain distance. When I reached the green all was still and silent. The cottages on the opposite side of the road all lay back, and they were merely blacker stains on the darkness. The pollard willows fringing the*



The Bell on the Common



The Common



Gifford Hall

green, which in the sunlight resemble mops, were now very much like a procession of men, strange primeval beings, pausing to meditate in the darkness.

Just past the Melksham Rd and standing off on the right, the war memorial, stepped and supporting an obelisk commemorates the 148 men who marched to battle in WW1; 23 did not return. Six went in WW2 and none returned.

The Bell on the Common stands at the end of The Street. It was bought by the last Lord of the Manor in 1780 and an external staircase led to an upstairs clubroom.

Returning from a ruminative dusk-time walk, Thomas says of the pub, *The inn door, which was now open, was at the entrance to a bright cave in the middle of the darkness: the illumination had a kind of blessedness such as it might have had to a cow, not without forgiveness; and a half-seen man within it belonged to a world, blessed indeed, but far different from this one of mine, dark, soft, and tranquil.*

The Common, poorly drained and formerly known as Broughton Marsh, escaped the 1783 enclosure. Claiming commoners' rights, houses were built on the Common's edge. They were regarded as unhealthy – seventeen commoners died in an 1851 scarlet fever epidemic. It has ponds and is now used for recreational purposes.

Paths run round the perimeter, making a circular stroll possible. Gifford Hall on the north side of the Common, dates from the 1700s. A small classical house, the interior retains much of the original work and has fine plasterwork decoration and panelling. The rear was extended in the 19th century. The 1806 Particular Baptist Chapel remains active.

To the west of the Common and down a cul-de-sac, is Broughton House, a rubblestone, stone tiled building, one of the oldest in the village. A datestone over the door gives it 1673 but it probably goes back to Tudor times.

Note the four remaining *pollard willows fringing the green*. The hard cutting back of the branches encouraged new growth. It also provided a source of material for basket weaving and small building and agricultural tasks. A pollarded tree tends to grow slowly, with narrower rings after cutting

7. Drive just past Newhouse Farm and on the left is a field gateway, with enough space to park temporarily.



Thomas's gate, BM

The intervals between the cottages were longer here, and still longer; I ceased to notice them until I came to the last house, a small farm [Newhouse Farm on the right], where the dog growled, but in a subdued tone, as if only to condemn my footsteps on a deserted road.

Rows of elm trees on both sides of the road succeeded.

This is the point where Thomas paused and reflected in the deepening dusk.

I walked more slowly, and at a gateway stopped. While I leaned over it looking at nothing, there was a long silence that could be felt, so that a train whistling two miles away seemed as remote as the stars. The noise could not overleap the boundaries of that silence.

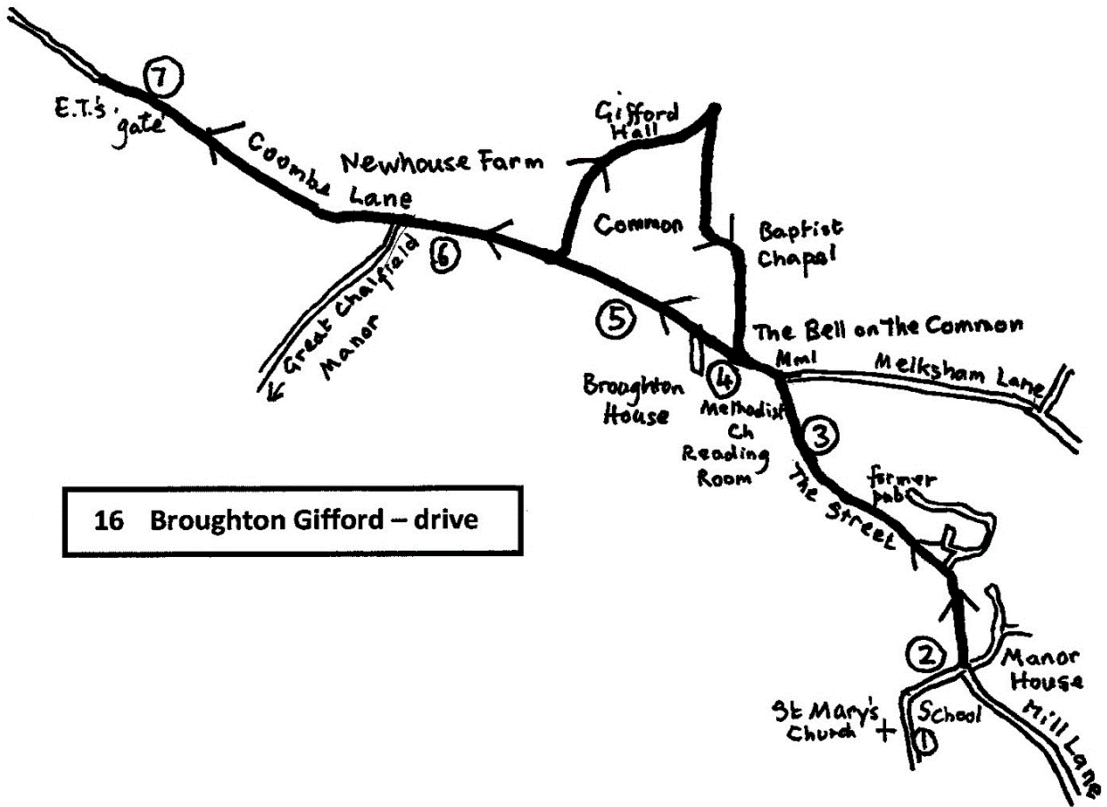
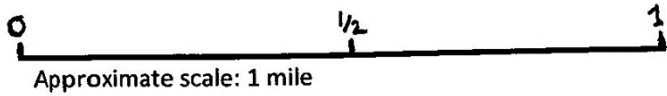
Having absorbed the silence Thomas *presently moved away, back towards the village with slow steps.*

I was tasting the quiet and the safety without a thought. Night had no evil in it. Though a stranger, I believed that no one wished harm to me. The first man I saw, fitfully revealed by a swinging lantern as he crossed his garden, seemed to me to have the same feeling, to be utterly free of trouble or any care. A man slightly drunk deviated towards me, halted, muttering, and deviated away again. I heard his gate shut, and he was absorbed.

...I felt that I could walk on thus, sipping the evening silence and solitude, endlessly. But at the house where I was staying I stopped as usual. I entered, blinked at the light, and by laughing at something, said with the intention of being laughed at, I swiftly again naturalised myself.

With thanks to the late Ken Watts, Wiltshire writer and historian, and Wendy and Roger Britton, Bristol Ramblers, for their collaboration with this drive.

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