

Rudge and Brook Farm – a walk and a drive

Distance: miles 1.7 / 2.7 km leisurely walking

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

Refreshments: The Full Moon Lower Rudge, Frome BA11 2QF

The Woolpack Inn, 2 Warminster Rd, Beckington, Frome BA11 6SP,

Map: Explorer 143

Getting there: Bath and Trowbridge have bus services to Rudge

If driving, at Rudge there is a three-way junction, described by Thomas. Take the Berkley-Frome Rd lane and park in the small lefthand bay next to a sign indicating bends in the road for $\frac{3}{4}$ mile.

The sun came out in earnest at eleven, and shone upon a field of tall yellow mustard and a man loading a cart with it, and I ceased to bend my back and crook my neck towards violet, primrose, anemone and dog's mercury in the blackthorn hedges, and I let the sun have a chance with me. I was trespassing, but, alas! No glory any longer attaches to trespassing, because everyone is so civil unless you are a plain or ill-dressed woman, or a child, or obviously a poet. So I came to well-warmed Rudge...



The Full Moon and the three-way signpost



With the former Baptist Chapel on the left, a view towards the Full Moon, Edward Thomas, 1913

1. Walk back up the road to the signpost and Full Moon pub.



The Baptist Chapel



2. Following Thomas, go uphill on the Beckington-Rode lane (i.e. left of the pub as it is approached)



The Wesleyan chapel

The former 1786 **Baptist Chapel** will be on the left. It was enlarged in 1802 and was a rival for attenders with the Anglican church in Beckington. Such Chapel v Church competition was strong in this region. The chapel is now a private residence. Thomas describes Rudge as *a hamlet collected about a meeting of roads and scattered up a steep hill, along one of these roads. The collection includes a small inn called the Half Moon, a plain Baptist chapel, several stone cottages, several ruins, solid but roofless, used solely to advertise sales, and a signpost pointing to Berkley and Frome past the ruined cottages, to Westbury and Bradley downhill from the inn, through the woods about the river Biss, and uphill to Road and Beckington. Southward I saw the single bare hump of Cley Hill five miles away, near Warminster: northward, the broad wooded vale rising up to hills on the horizon.*

Thomas has misnamed the pub. Kelly's 1914 Directory names it as it is today – **The Full Moon**. It was a coaching inn dating from the 1690s and was sited on the crossroads leading to Salisbury Plain and Beckington, an important centre for the wool trade.

The route retains much that he describes. *I went uphill, between two bright trickles of water.* The **ditches** for these flows are on either side but are somewhat overgrown.

The steep roadside bank, strengthened by a stone wall, was well-grown with pennywort and cranes bill, overhung by goose grass and ivy, and bathed at its foot by grass and nettles.

The bank is shrouded with trees and the nettles still thrive.

First comes a Wesleyan chapel, a neat, cold, demure little barn of the early nineteenth century, having a cypress on either side of its front door, and a few gravestones round about. One of these caught my eye with the verse, —

*“And am I born to die,
To lay this body down,
And must my trembling spirit fly
Into a world unknown?” —*

and the name of Mary Willcox, who died in 1901 at the age of eighty-eight

The Wesleyan chapel was Rudge's last public building to remain open in the 20th century. A stone above the doorway indicates that it was built in 1839. The cypresses no longer stand and the building is now a private home. The churchyard retains one grave with a stone. The

rest were thoughtlessly demolished when the chapel was sold.

Thomas notes that the wall of the lefthand bank *in one place is hollowed out into a cavernous, dark dipwell or water-cupboard. The rest of the village is built upon the banks.*

There are a number of springs and wells in the village and names like Springfield testify to that. Before the coming of a public supply in 1954, such sources could be polluted by roadside contaminants and cattle and the Parish Council was asked in 1901 to protect the dipwell. The water cupboard bears a sign which reads: 'This petrifying spring was a major source of drinking water for the hamlet until mains water was laid down in the 1950s. Renovated in 2003, sponsored by Beckington Parish Council, funded by Somerset County Council.' Electricity came to Rudge by 1950.



Edward Thomas: The raised footpath

A cottage or two stand not quite opposite [the Wesleyan Chapel], behind gardens of wallflowers, mezereon, periwinkle, and tall copper-coloured peony shoots, and a wall smothered in snow-on-the-mountains or alyssum. On the same side, beyond, a dark farm-house and its outbuildings project and cause the road and water to twist. The bank on that side, the left, covered with celandines and topped with elms, now carries a footpath of broad flagstones a yard or two above the road.

This footpath, ending at Lower Rudge Hill Farm, is not easy to discern. It has grassed over but for some length is protected by fencing which can be seen from the road. It is a public footpath but is difficult and tortuous to access and its descent to the road is hazardous.

Where this footpath ends, the road, still ascending, forks, and at once rejoins itself, thus making a small triangular island, occupied by a ruinous, ivy-mantled cottage and a cultivated vegetable garden. This site is now a small walled garden of lawn and flowerbeds.

At the lower side a newish villa with a piano faces past the ruin uphill.



Lower Rudge Hill Farm

A portico marks the Victorian villa. On the lefthand side of the road, another dipwell can be seen, covered by a slab (and nettles).



The one-time 'newish' villa

3. Divert to the right of the road, up a drive-like section.



Edward Thomas: Old Manor House

At the upper side, facing past the ruin and the villa downhill, is a high-walled stone house of several gables, small enough, but possessing dignity and even a certain faint grimness: it is backed on the roadside by farm buildings. I saw and heard nobody from the "Half Moon" to this house, except a chicken.

The **three-gabled stone house is the Old Manor House** which is also known as Rudgehill Farm. It dates back to the early 17th century, though the front carries a stone commemorating its remodelling in 1692.

4. Return to the road.



Seymour's Court Farm

Ahead is the way to Seymour's Court Farm to which Thomas cycled: *For the sun shone radiant and warm out of a whitewashed sky on the red ploughlands and wet daisy meadows by Seymour's Court Farm, on teams pulling chain harrows and pewits plunging round them, on the flag waving over Road church as if for some natural festival. I found my first thrush's egg of the year along this road, in which I was fortunate; for the bank below the nest had been trodden into steps by boys who examined it before me.* This walk does not include this stretch of his ride.

5. Continue on the road till a lefthand sign for Scotland Farm is reached. This is Scotland Lane.

Thomas writes:

Here I tuned off from the road along a lane which ended a mile away at a cottage and a farmhouse, and in one of the ploughed fields I came upon a plain stone tower consisting of two storeys, round-arched, roofless, in the company of a tall lime tree. It looks over the low land towards the White Horse at Westbury. Once, they told me, the upper storey held a water tank; but as the map shows an ancient beacon at about this spot, I thought of it as a beacon rather than as a water tower.

Local lore has it that the demolished tower had been used as a pig sty and that the upper storey provided a viewing point for the local hunt.

6. Go left, like Thomas, down this lane, following it for ¾ of a mile.



At various points along the lane, a view is offered to the left of the northern edge of Salisbury Plain



'The single bare hump of Cley Hill', BM

7. Box Tree Cottage stands on the right of the road.

NB The way forward as a circular walk is not easy; it can be done but needs care crossing the dilapidated stile point as in instruction 8.

If this does not appeal, then the only way back (having come now as far as Edward Thomas describes the local scene) is to retrace your steps back along the lane and down to the pub at the start.

8. On the left is a stile. Cross this.

Walk along the hedgerow. To the left of a gate is a **double stile, fronted by corrugated iron**. Cross this.

9. Continue along the righthand hedge of the next field; go forward through a hedge gap into the following field. Go through a gate; the waymarking signs indicate two paths ahead – one to the left and another to the right.

10. Follow the righthand footpath down the slope, passing a pond and spring on the left. Exit the field through a gate and turn left on to the road.

11. Walk back to the start point

described in chapter 4 as *the grandest, cliffiest part of the Plain wall, the bastioned angle where it bends round southward by Westbury and Warminster, bare for the most part, carved with the White Horse and with double tiers of chalk pits, crowned with the gigantic camps of Bratton, Battlesbury, and Scratchbury, ploughed only on some of the lower slopes, and pierced by the road to Imber.*

Lying below the face of the Plain and looking somewhat intrusive among the fields and woods is the white bulk of the Westbury Dairies. Beyond all this to the left is Roundway Down and the Vale of Pewsey. To the right is *the single bare hump of Cley Hill.*

Later, a view to the right of the lane holds Thomas's route to Road (now Rode), Wingfield and Tellisford.

To its right is a footpath to an old stone reservoir building with a slim tall window. This is not the water tower that Thomas describes at Scotland Farm; that no longer exists. Forward on the road is the farm.

The White Horse now lies straight ahead.



Brook Hall, Edward Thomas

Having come back downhill from Rudge and Seymour's Court Farm, Thomas continues:
I went downhill again through Rudge and took the road for North Bradley, keeping above the left bank of the river Biss and commanding the White Horse on the pale wall of the Plain beyond it.

Thomas gives a full description of nearby **Brook Hall**. It is not easy to walk to it but it is worth a visit, even though it is private and not open to the public. **To see it,**

i. Drive up the Brokerswood Lane to the right of the Full Moon. After ¾ mile, go forward over the crossroad junction with Fairwood Road. This is Thomas's cycle route and passes **Cutteridge Farm** on the left...

ii. A little beyond this, turn right, as Thomas did, onto a lane.

iii. Drive over the ford of the Biss Brook (849:535) and up to Brook House ahead.



Brook House, BM

... a modest farm, all that remains of a great house, whose long avenue of limes, crooked and often as dense as a magpie's nest, still radiate from it on three sides. This is a country of noble elms, spreading like oaks, above celandine banks. Turning to the right down a steep-sided lane after passing Cutteridge I reached the flat, rushy, and willowy green valley of the Biss.

The Biss rises on the west side of Salisbury Plain, becoming the River Biss which passes through Trowbridge and enters the Avon near Staverton.

The road forded the brook and brought me up into the sloping courtyard of Brook House Farm. On the right was a high wall and a pile of rough cordwood against it; on the left a buttressed, ecclesiastical-looking building with tiers of windows and three doorways, some four or five centuries old; and before me, at the top of the yard, between the upper end of the high wall and the ecclesiastical looking building, was the back of the farmhouse, its brass pans gleaming. This is the remnant of Brook House. What is now a cowshed below, a cheese room above, has been the chapel of Brook House, formerly the seat of the Paveleys, Joneses and Cheneys'. The brook below was once called Baron's brook on account of the barony conferred on the owner: the family of Willoughby de Broke are said to have taken their name from it. The cows made an excellent congregation' free from all the disadvantages of believing or wanting to believe in the immortality of the soul, in the lower half of the old chapel; the upper floor and its shelves of Cheddar cheeses of all sizes could not offend the most jealous deity or his most jealous worshippers. The high, intricate rafterwork of the tiled roof was open, and the timber, as pale as if newly scrubbed, was free from cobwebs – in fact, chestnut wood is said to forbid cobwebs. Against the wall leaned long boards bearing round stains of bygone cheeses. Everyone who could write had carved his name on the stone. Instead of windows there were three doors along the side away from the quadrangle, as if at one time they had been

entered from a contiguous building or by a staircase from beneath. Evidently both upper and lower chambers were formerly subdivided into cells of some kind.

The farmhouse is presumably the remnant of the old manor house, cool and still, looking out away from the quadrangle over a garden containing a broad, rough-hewn stone disinterred hereby, and a green field corrugated in parallelograms betokening old walls or an encampment. The field next to this is spoken of as a churchyard, but there seems to be no record of skeletons found there. Half a mile off in different directions are Cutteridge, Hawkeridge and Storridge, but nothing nearer in that narrow, gentle valley.

Brook Hall was the birthplace of Baron Robert Willoughby de Broke (1452 – 1502). His mother Anne Cheyne inherited this hall. He was accused of treason against Richard III, fled to France and became an ally of Henry Tudor, alongside whom he fought at the battle of Bosworth in 1485. For this and for his support of the Crown against Cornish rebels, Henry VII loaded him with honours, titles and wealth. He added the name 'de Broke' to signify his love of his birthplace.

Historic England notes: 'The medieval settlement of Brook and its associated field systems represent a succinct and complete example of a small rural settlement in the low-lying clay vale of Wiltshire. As well as the settlement itself, two contrasting forms of medieval land use are represented; the typical strip field system and a less common division of the land into paddocks, probably associated with forest clearance.'

Conservationist Andrew Townshend of George Townshend, Architects writes in 2018: *At the time of Thomas's visit, the building was, as he notes, used for agricultural purposes and later fell into serious disrepair, with the building at risk of collapse in various places... Contrary to Thomas's theory about the chapel (which perhaps consciously blurs the boundary between fact and folklore, as with various other episodes in In Pursuit of Spring), the building was originally an accommodation wing to an even grander complex of late medieval buildings, and is remarkable in how much of the original structure remains – including the magnificent 'high, intricate rafterwork' (and the graffiti) mentioned by Thomas in 1914... I know that Thomas was a big fan of Morris, and I believe the recent work on the Lodging Range has been completed in a manner Thomas would have approved of.*

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