

Nettlebridge and Oakhill

Distance: 3.6 miles / 5.83 km leisurely walking

In Pursuit of Spring: Chapter 7 *Trowbridge to Shepton Mallet*

Refreshments: The Oakhill Inn Fosse Rd, BA3 5HU

Map: Explorer 142

How to get there: South West Service runs from Bruton to Oakhill.

First Bristol 174 runs between Wells and Bath.

If driving, take the Shepton Mallet **road and park in the Oakhill Village Hall Car Park BA3 5AN**

Be aware: in 2021 the route through Harridge Wood was partly closed owing to clearance of ash die-back trees. Check the website to confirm that it is open:

<https://www.somersetwildlife.org/nature-reserves/harridge-wood>

A mile after Stratton-on-the-Fosse *we were seven hundred and twenty feet up, almost on a level with the ridge of the Mendips, now close before us. Running from that point and down to Nettlebridge and its rivulet, and walking up away from them, was the best thing of the day. The gradient of the hillside was too much for a modern road. The Fosse way, therefore, had been deserted and a new descent made, curving like an S: yet, even so, bold enough for a high speed to be attained before we got down to the George and the loose-clustered houses of Nettlebridge. The opposite ascent was also in an S. At the top of it we sat on a wall by the larches of Horridge Wood [sic], and looked back and down. The valley was broad and destitute of trees. Gorse scrambled over its sides. Ducks fed across the turf at the bottom. Straight down the other side came the Fosse Way, denoted by its hedges, and round its crossing of the brook was gathered half of Nettlebridge. The rough open valley, the running water, the brookside cluster of stone cottages, reminded me of Pembrokeshire. There is no church.*

Oakhill is in loamy country over limestone strata, largely used for pasture. It was not always as secluded as one finds it today. The woollen industry was prominent since medieval times and coal mining was carried out in the Nettlebridge valley from 1300 onwards; old maps mark 'Cole Pits'. Local mills predate Domesday. Water power was later fully utilised for cornmills and pumping mines and to cut logwood.

Water-meadows for silage were initiated by the Billingsley family and maintained by the Stracheys at least in part until the 1930s. Both families occupied Ashwick Grove, an impressive 18th century mansion, with formal gardens and landscaped park. Since their time it has decayed and is an overgrown ruin.

John Billingsley (1747 – 1822), an Ashwick man, was a wealthy improving landlord who pioneered agricultural, industrial and transport innovations, including mechanisation, crop rotation and double-furrow ploughing. In the name of encouraging scientific farming, he promoted the dispossessing enclosures. Of these in his own area the poet John Clare (1793 – 1864) said that they put the landless labourer *under a state of anxiety and oppression almost amounting to slavery – when the prosperity of one class was founded on the adversity and distress of the other*. Billingsley was a driving force in the local Turnpike Trusts and his hedge-and-wall-building created much of today's landscape roundabout. His business entrepreneurship involved co-ownership with James Jordan (1746 – 1830) of the Oakhill Brewery; they bought extensive acres of farmland for the enterprise. Surgeon Richard Perkins (1753 – 1821), Billingsley's predecessor at the Brewery, was the friend of William Smith (1769 – 1839) the pioneer geologist and the father of English geology, who created the first geological map of Great Britain. All three men were involved in local canal construction. They serve as an example of the pursuit of scientific investigation for the development of agriculture, industry and rural and urban infrastructures so characteristic of the age.



Oakhill Brewery

The Brewery had been founded in 1767 and became the chief local employer, its presence leading to the growth of the village. It also supplied gas light to surrounding houses as well as running a fire brigade. Later it had its own railway to Binegar. At the time of its peak production, around the time of Thomas's visit, it was sending round 2,500 barrels of its famed stout to the Somerset and Dorset Railway for world-wide distribution. Its future died in a disastrous fire in 1925.

Billingsley also did much to develop coalmining in Nettlebridge. Mendip coal mining went back to Roman times. To the east of Nettlebridge, fields in which the seams outcropped show extensive grassy and distorted hummocky ground, evidence of pre-industrial revolution exploitation, bell pits and spoil waste. 500 ft shafts were dug in Harridge Woods in the early 19th century to get at the thin and almost vertical coal seams in the contorted rocks. Other Mendip mines were more profitable.

Kelly's Directory (1914) indicates a more bustling village than today's, with five farms, a wheelwright, a blacksmith, co-op store, a post office, a brass founder, an engineer, a cycle agent, tobacconist, a butcher and Edwin Plyer and Sons, saddlers.

William Braine (1814 – 1846), a Royal Marine private in the 1845 doomed Franklin search for the Northwest Passage, was born in Oakhill. Franklin's crew were iced up on Beechey Island in the Arctic wastes where some died, the rest perishing in an attempt to reach safety. In 1981 the graves of the well-preserved Braine and two other crew members were excavated under six feet of permafrost and subjected to forensic tests in 1984 and 2017. Theories emerged that they had died of pneumonia though this was not confirmed by later DNA analysis. Franklin's flagship the *Erebus* was discovered on the sea floor in 20014.

The village is no more than the inn, the brewery and a few cottages, and a shop or two, in one of which there was a pretty show of horse ornaments of brass among the saddlery. I almost counted these ornaments, crescents, stars and bosses as flowers of Spring, so clearly did I recall their May Day flashing in former years. It was darkening, or at least saddening, as we rode out of Oak Hill along the edge of a park which was notable for much-twisted, dark sycamores on roots accumulated above ground like pedestals. At the far side gleamed the water, I imagine of the brewery reservoir.

1. Leave the CP and go left down Sion Hill and left again up to Bath Rd and left at the War Memorial. Pass the Methodist Chapel and the gateway to Oakhill House.



Oakhill Methodist Chapel

2. Just after the drive, go through the kissing gate on the left, follow the signed footpath up to the treeline ahead; go through the kissing gate and over the stone stile on the right.

3. Walk right, across the field to the farm buildings and the farm track.



Nettlebridge, Edward Thomas

4. Take the footpath on the right of the red-tiled bungalow and go over the stile. Go through the gate on the far side of the field.

There is interesting vernacular architecture down Sion Hill.

The memorial commemorates 59 killed in WWI and a further 6 in WWII.

The 1825 Methodist chapel is a simple restrained structure which is used for worship as well as having been in earlier days a recreation and reading room. It is said to have been built on a site on which Wesley preached – he is recorded as having preached in the neighbourhood on four occasions in the 1740s. At the western end of Oakhill stood the Little Cathedral, formerly a Congregational Chapel (1837). There is a strong history of Non-conformism in Somerset and ‘chapel versus church’ was often a live issue. Just across the way from the Chapel is All Saints Church on land donated by the Stracheys. It was designed in 1861 by the Gothic Revivalist John Loughborough Pearson (1817 – 1897) whose work is seen in many cathedrals, such as the west end towers of Bristol Cathedral. His masterpiece is Truro Cathedral (1880), the first cathedral built on a new site since Salisbury in 1220.

Oakhill House, with its gateway and long curving drive, is on the left.



The plain stone house, Harridge Farm BM

This settlement of Ashwick is older than Oakhill, being an Anglo-Saxon settlement owned by Bath Abbey. Recorded as Escewiche in Domesday, ‘a farmstead by ash trees’, its name may derive from a Saxon personal name. It was formerly distinct from the smaller Oakhill but now parochially joining it along with Gurney Slade. Between this path and the Bath road is Edward Thomas’s definitive ‘house’, the mid-18th century U-shaped Harridge Farm with its flanking garden walls and outbuildings and a drive that covers a section of the Fosse way.

From that bleak and yet pleasant scene I turned with admiration to a farmhouse on the other side of the road. It stood well above the road, and the stone wall enclosing its farmyard followed the irregular crown of the steep slope. This plain stone house, darkened, I

5. Follow the righthand hedge and cross the stone stile in the corner.

6. Again, follow the righthand hedge, and, passing the red-tiled stone building on the right, continue the gate beyond it.

7. Walk ahead and go over another stone stile between a gate and another stone water trough and in to the lane.

8. Go up left on the lane to Neighbourne House and turn right, into Neighbourne Lane and, immediately after that, down Ash Lane, passing the houses on either side and Park Farm on the right.

9. Continue forward and down the slope between the houses of upper Nettlebridge.

10. Cross the A367 and go left downhill via the pavement.

11. At the sight of the first house on the left cross over the road so as to be visible to oncoming traffic. Walk past the house then cross back across the road to take the lane down to Lower Nettlebridge.

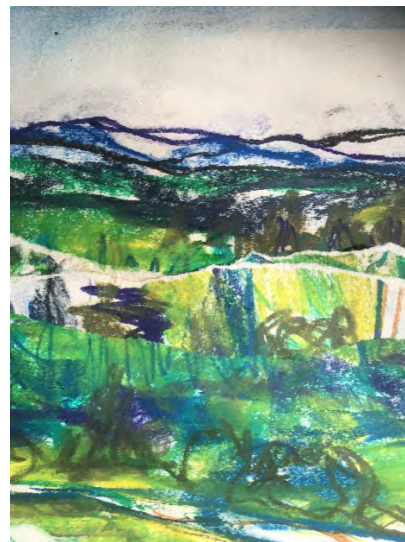
think, by a sycamore, and standing high, solitary and gloomy above Nettlebridge, seemed to me a house of houses. If I could draw, I would draw this and call it 'A House'. For it had all the spirit of a house, farm and fortress in one, grim without bellicosity, tranquil, but not pampered.

This house left a vivid memory with Thomas who, staying in his Shepton Mallet temperance hotel, brooded at the end of his day on the Nettlebridge Valley and the dark house above it.

At this point, the walk parallels, in reverse, Thomas's ascent up the second half of the road's S shape.



Nettlebridge



Harridge Woods, BM

The curve of Thomas's road can be seen ahead, running down at an angle. On the right of its bend is a field showing hummocks, the relics of the old mining activity.

The river will be heard down to the right. Nettlebridge's name relates to this brook, a tributary of the Mells, itself a tributary of the Frome. There were ambitious plans in the 1790s to build a canal from Bristol to the English Channel, which would have involved a length from Nettlebridge to Frome for the transport of coal. Billingsley was a chief proposer and contributor of money, as were the iron-masters, the Fussells of Mells, but funds ran out. This S-shaped down-and-up road is what exhilarated Thomas when he made his way through Nettlebridge to Oakhill.

Against the first building, the former Old George Inn, stands a turnpike mile marker saying Cheltenham 50, Shepton Mallet 4, Bath 13. The exact route of the local Turnpike is disputed and there have been many changes to the local roads to increase their efficiency.



Lower Nettlebridge, BM

12. Walk uphill.

13. Look on the left for the entrance to Harridge Wood Nature Reserve, opposite the former chapel uphill on the right. Go through kissing gate.

14. Continue along the broad path, ignoring two signposted paths off to the right, until a Y-junction is reached – marked by Somerset Wildlife post 2. Go right up the slope.

15. At the T-junction (marked as 3) go left, down the steps and over the stream by the footbridge and up the steps on the other side.

This lane was formerly part of the Roman Fosse Way, the route of which through this location is now obscured, though some evidence suggests it continued on the far side of the A367, passing along part of Ash Lane and the lane by Harridge Farm. Thomas's own uphill route on the right can be seen above the sloping pasture. A former Nettlebridge chapel is on the right.

Edward Thomas's much-admired larches are still there but have been overtaken by conifers and poplars. The plan is to selectively fell them to encourage broadleaf growth. The local name of 'stoggles' refers to the older pollarded ash, oak and alder.

Harridge Wood grows on stream-fretted clay and can be paired with Edford Wood, both being very old with rich woodland flora, ferns, fungi and herbs. Coal mining here was carried out in a variety of ways; bell pits were common, being excavated sections at the foot of a shaft, and their course tracked the predicted seams. They are more common in Harridge Wood East. Remains of adits and leats for the control of water are evident.



Bridge in Harridge woods

Here stand the ruins of a cottage - junction 6. This is known as a gamekeeper's cottage, though originally it was a mill-driven edge tool factory. Now it is a sanctuary for the pipistrelle, brown long eared,

A signpost indicates paths to Nettlebridge to the right and Oakhill to the left. Follow the latter.

16. Walk alongside the river and go past signpost 7 on the left.



Cliff faces

17. At signpost 8 a route is indicated going uphill on the right. Opposite this is a post marked Limekiln Lane indicating a path to the left. Walk forward between these.

18. At a post indicating Fosse Way, turn left and follow the path, walking under the overhanging branches and through the bracken undergrowth which can be thick in late Spring and Summer. Persevere. Work a way along to the right and a kissing gate and up the slope with a hedge on the right side. Bear right through trees to a signpost and barbed wire fence.

19. Cross the stile and, bearing slightly left, cross over to the double stile under the ash tree. Cross it.

20. Bear slightly left and walk over to the fence ahead and along to the left and through an iron kissing gate.

Daubenton's, natter, lesser as well as greater horseshoe bats living in the woods.



Ruins of reputed gamekeeper's cottage, BM

The course is lined with slender ash trees and hazel. Rectangles of iron railings, known to locals as lion's cages, indicate part of the Bristol Water Board extraction system. The leats and sluices for controlling the water are associated with the earlier mining.

From late Autumn to early Spring, upthrust limestone cliff faces can be seen on the right

This is the uphill older route which took Oakhill labourers to and from the mines and workings.

Oakhill and Ashwick are built on the Roman Fosse Way. To the left of Fosse Farm (formerly Lower Fosse Farm, with the Strachey crest showing on the face) is the track carrying this ancient road, running for 2½ miles to Charlton in Shepton Mallet, with, at some points, the ditches clear on both sides. The full road ran for 182 miles from Exeter (Isca Dumnoniorum) to Lincoln (Lindum), via Ilchester, Bath and Cirencester and Leicester, linking along its way with Watling Street and Ermine Street. Originally a military road, its *fossa* (ditch) marked the first boundary of the Roman occupation.



Oak Hill Inn

Thomas mentions *a shop or two* in the village. The Oakhill Village Trail mentions a slaughterhouse, blacksmith, butcher, bakehouse and the Oakhill Co-

21. Bear left again to go through a gate in a hedgerow. Continue to bear left through an orchard to an iron kissing gate and walk forward and on to Fosse Rd.

22. If you are going to use the pub, go right along Fosse Road and walk into Oakhill. The pub will be on the corner. Afterwards, cross the road and turn right to the footpath on the left (from the first part of the walk). At the top junction, turn left to regain the car park.

Alternatively, passing The Fosse Farm, walk to the start of the terrace of houses on the left. Opposite these on the right is a stile. Cross it and walk diagonally left through the parkland, as indicated by the marker, and down to the Nettlebridge Rd and the gateway to the left of the school. Cross the road and go up the footpath ahead (from the first part of the walk). At the top junction, turn left to regain the car park.

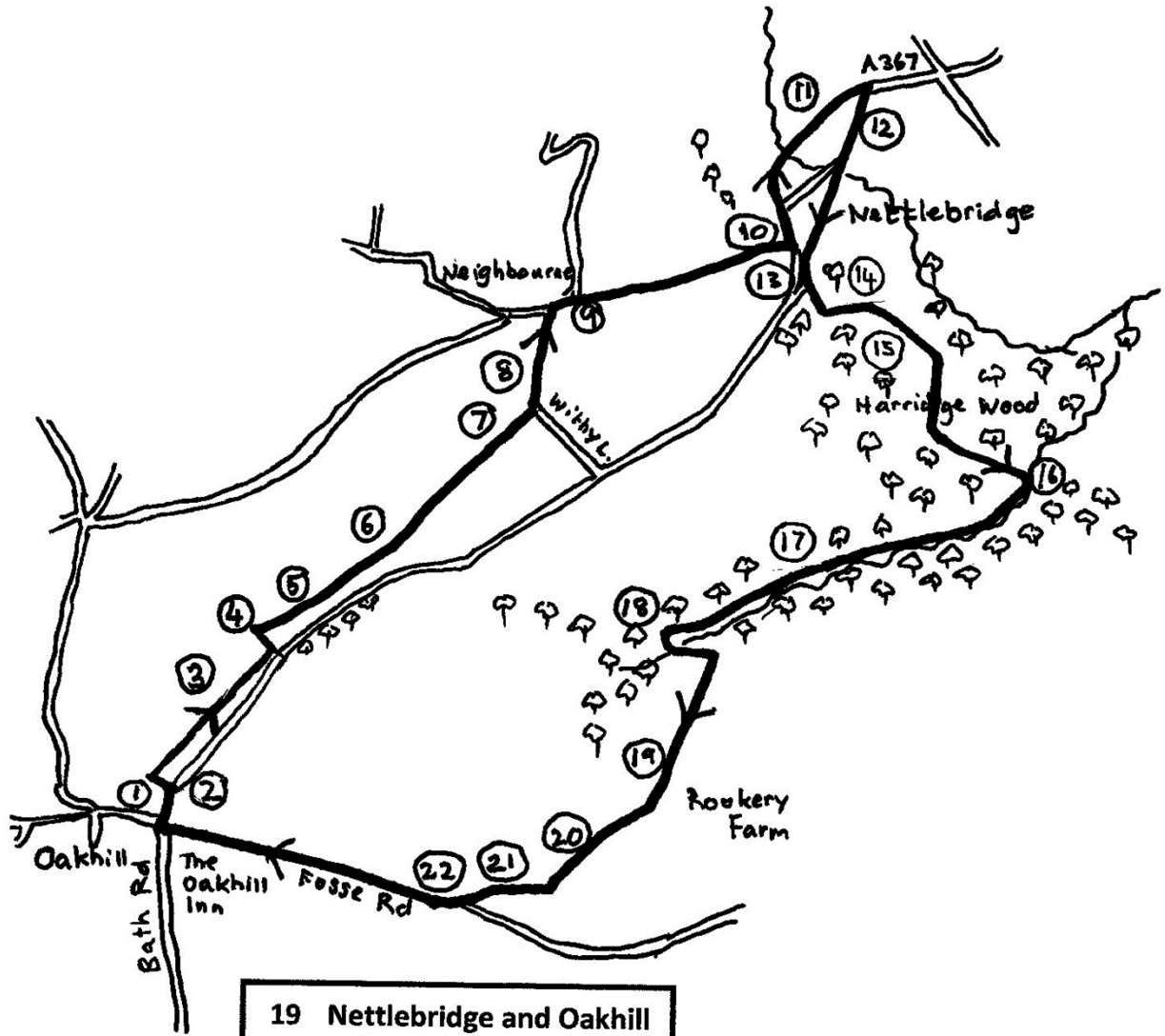
operative Society manager's house, all along this stretch of Fosse Road.

Ahead in Thomas's day would have been the Co-op's general shop, currently an upholstery business. The narrow way on its left, Dye Lane, was once the main route through Oakhill. At the junction with the Bath road is the limestone Oakhill Inn which probably belonged to the Oakhill Brewery under a previous name. The earliest record is of it is 1803 but it is likely to be rather older.

Presently, at Oak Hill, we were well up on the main northern slope of the Mendips. The Oak Hill Inn, a good inn, hangs out its name on a horizontal bar, ending in a gilded oak leaf and acorn. I had lunch there once of the best possible fat bacon and bread fried in the fat, for a shilling and for nothing the company of a citizen of Wells, a hearty, strong-voiced man, who read The Standard over a beefsteak, a pint of cider and a good deal of cheese, and at intervals instructed me on the roads of the Mendips, the scenery, the celebrated places, and also praised his city and praised the stout of Oak Hill. Then he smacked his lips, pressed his bowler tight down on his head, and drove off towards Leigh upon Mendip.

Grateful acknowledgment to Lin Thorley of the Oakhill and Ashwick Local History Group, Andrew Chan, Patsy Hudson, Bristol Ramblers, and Daisy Hudson

© Benedict Mackay 2021



19 Nettlebridge and Oakhill

