

Shepton Mallet

Distance: 1.6 miles / 2.5 km leisurely walking

In Pursuit of Spring: Chapters 7 *Trowbridge to Shepton Mallet* and 8 *Shepton Mallet to Bridgwater*

Refreshments: Within the town

Map: Explorer: 142

Getting there:

If driving, park in the Great Ostry St car park, the starting point of the town walk.

After cycling through Nettlebridge and dining at Oakhill, Thomas moved on to Shepton Mallet: *We reached the main ridge road of the Mendips soon after this, and crossed it at a point about nine hundred feet high. Shepton is five hundred feet lower, and but two miles distant; so that we glided down somewhat like gods, having for domain an expanse that ended in the mass of Selwood Forest twelve miles to our left, level-topped, huge, and dim, under a cloudy sky. Unprepared as I was, I expected to meet my end in the steep conclusion of this descent, which was through narrow streets; and my brakes were bad. On the other hand, nothing troubled the god-likeness of my companion. In the rush at twenty-five miles an hour he sang, as if it had been a hymn of the new Paganism, a ribald song beginning:*

“As I was going to Salisbury upon a Summer’s day.”

When he had done he shouted across at me:

“I would rather have written that song than take Quebec.”

The Other Man would not stay in Shepton Mallet. He was very angry with Shepton. He called it a godless place, and I laughed, supposing he lamented the lack of Apollo or Dionysus or Aphrodite; but he justified the word by relating his first visit to the church. The bell was ringing. It was five minutes to eleven on a Wednesday, a day of north-east wind, in February. With him entered a clergyman, and except for the old bell-ringer, the church was empty. When the bells ceased at eleven it was still empty. The clergyman and the bell-ringer mumbled together, the old man saying, “You see, nobody has come.” No service was held; the Other Man and the bell-ringer were unworthy. The clergyman struggled up the road against the north-east wind.

“And look there,” exclaimed the Other Man, as we turned out of the long, narrow street of shops into Church Lane, mediæval-looking and narrower, “look there,” he exclaimed, pointing to the remains of a blue election poster on a wall, where these words survived — “Foreigners tax us; let us tax them.”

“Why,” said he, “it is not even in the Bible,” and with this he mounted and rode on toward Wells.

Thomas’s election poster, which he notes in Fieldwork Book 61 (Oct 1912 – March 1913) on his visit to Shepton Mallet, probably relates to that of December 1910 (the last to be held over several days). It was a landmark event. The government, led by the Liberal Asquith, tabled the 1909 ‘People’s Budget’ which proposed to tax the lands and income of the wealthiest to fund a programme of social welfare. It passed the Commons but was blocked by the Lords. Following a general election as an appeal to the nation, and threatened with the wholesale creation of government backers as peers, the Lords gave way. The 1911 Parliament Act ruled that the upper house could no longer permanently halt legislation.

Shepton Mallet, lying below the Mendip scarp and along the River Sheppey, historically derived its growth as a market town for local agricultural produce, a centre for the woollen industry, stone quarrying and water power.

Neolithic artefacts, iron age farmsteads and bronze age burials have been excavated south of the town. The Romans built the Fosse Way, the main artery from Lincoln to Exeter and the south-west, which was serviced originally by military stations and later supported linear civilian settlements and trading concerns. This included the transport of lead from Mendip mines. There is evidence of a Roman settlement in Shepton. There is also Saxon stonework in the parish church.

It is first mentioned in Domesday as *Sceaptin* (the sheep farm), which was owned by Glastonbury Abbey. 'Mallet' relates to the 12th century Malet family who leased Glastonbury Abbey. The town's market and fair charters were granted in 1235 (revoked, as with Glastonbury's, by the competitive Bishop of Wells), and it was a prosperous medieval town. It was devastated by the 1348 Black Death. Its wool trade was strengthened by French refugee weavers, craftsmen and merchants. The town expanded along the river which supported a number of woollen mills along with silk and crepe mills employing thousands of workers, many of whom lived among its huddled and insanitary streets. Some weaver's cottages of the late 17th and early 18th centuries can be found in Garston St on the north of the town. Brewing, silk manufacture and cheese-making replaced the declining woollen industry and the town was cleaned up in the 19th century when its fabric was renewed, roads were improved or new ones made, and bridges were built. The East Somerset Railway arrived in 1858. The brewing industry thrived in the 19th and 20th centuries. The development of retail parks and further urban growth continues.

1. Standing on the pavement, turn so that the church tower of Sts Peter and Paul is in view over the houses. Follow the sign to the Town Centre along a walled passageway, which leads on to Town St.

2. Turn right and enter the Market Place.



Market Cross

I re-entered the main street by a side street broad enough for a marketplace. Here are some inns, and at the edge of the pavement a row of fixed wooden shambles. The market cross stands at the turn. It is a stone canopy, supported by six pillars in a circle, and one central pillar surrounded by two stone steps or seats, and the south side wares a dial, dated 1841.

The 50 ft market cross of dressed Doulting stone is located at the west end of the market place, at the junction of High St and Town St. The original medieval structure has been developed over four centuries. Such crosses have marked liturgical processional stations, commemorated battles or significant deaths (as with the 1290 Banbury Cross to mark, with others, the cortège progress of the body of Edward I's wife Eleanor), acted as places of proclamation or preaching and set up in market places to 'bless' transactions. Those without their cross-head have probably been mutilated by iconoclasts.

In the Market Place Royalist troops confronted the Parliamentarians in a bloodless altercation. Monmouth was later welcomed here in June 1685 on his march towards Bristol and, later, a dozen rebels were brutally executed in this public space. At the junction of the Market Place with Town St and on the right is the former Red Lion Inn, currently a restaurant. At right angles to it, the second house in the Market Place used to be the Bunch of Grapes. On the far side of the Market Cross and beyond the 1868 publicly-erected water fountain is High St. On the lefthand side of a junction is a former HSBC bank which itself was a former hotel, once the George Inn.



Former George Inn

Thomas writes: *To know the yards of the "Red Lion," "George," and "Bunch of Grapes," and all the lanes and high-walled passages between Shepton and the prison, would be a task (for the first ten years of life) very cheerful to look back upon, and it would be difficult to invent anything more amusing and ingenious, as it would be impossible to invent anything prettier than the ivy, the ivy-leaved toadflax, and that kidney-leafed cressy white flower, growing on the walls of the passages. There are no public lights in Shepton, so that away from the shop lamps all now was dark in the side streets and edges of the town.*



Former Temperance Hotel, Market Square

Thomas says he *ended the day at a temperance hotel. Its plain and not old-looking exterior, ordinary bar and public room, suggested nothing of the ancientness within. I found a good fire and peace in the company of a man who studied Bradshaw. With the aid of maps I travelled my road again, dwelling chiefly on Tellisford, its white bridge over the Frome, the ruined mill and cottage, the round tower of Vaggs Hill Farm, and the distinct green valley which enclosed them, and after this, the Nettlebridge valley and the dark house above it.*

This three-storeyed many-windowed hotel was at 3 Market Place, run in Thomas's day by Frederick Holt and is now the town library.

3. Beyond the *row of fixed wooden shambles*, which, in Thomas's day used to extend as far as Town St, is a 1970s archway; go under this on to Church Lane and left to the church of Sts Peter and Paul.



Sts Peter and Paul

4. On leaving the church go left and follow Church Lane as it takes a left right-angle alongside the churchyard, passing the 17th century Merchant's House and the Strode Almshouses. At the kink in the lane, go forward to the high grey wall ahead. This is the precinct wall of HM Prison Shepton Mallet.



Shepton Gaol

The church tower was framed by the end walls of Church Lane, a handsome, tall tower with a pointed cap to it, and a worn statue of the Virgin and two other figures over the door. Immediately inside the door are tablets to seventeenth-century and eighteenth-century Barnards and Strodes of Down Hill, one bearing the inscription:

*"Urna tenet cineres
Animam deus."*

The truth of it sounded like a copper gong in that twilight silence. I went on among the ashes. Two

window ledges, one looking east, one west, form couches for stone effigies. That in the eastward ledge, with his hand across the shield on his breast, looked as if happily sleeping; the other had lost an arm, and was not happy.

The Perpendicular-style Church of St Peter and St Paul is the town's oldest building, predating the Norman conquest. It was extended in the 12th century, though most of the fabric is 15th century. Pevsner called the complex timbered wagon roof "the finest 15th century carved oak wagon-roof in England". The imposing pinnacled tower (c1380) is in four stages and was intended to have a spire; only its base was constructed. Subsequent 19th century 'improvements' removed the side altars, transepts and box pews. The 1450 pulpit is carved from single block of local stone. The church contains stone effigies, possibly of the Malet family. The Barnard and Strode families, benefactors of the town, are well represented. The latter family built the nearby rectory, almshouses and grammar school.

The churchyard was originally a social civic space. Its fringe of lime trees was planted in 1733. In 1994 the remains of forty excavated Roman burials, presumed to be Christian because they faced eastwards, were reinterred here.

The stone prison and all its apertures, like a great wasps' nest, was a punishment to look at in the darkness. But night added grandeur to the many round arches of the viaduct on which the railway strides across



Execution block



Main prison gate

5. The walk makes a part-circuit of these walls. Ignore Gaol Lane off to the left and walk forward.

6. Continue left down Cornhill and left again at the T-junction, passing the formidable Victorian entrance,

the valley. At this, a sort of boundary to Shepton upon the east, I turned back...

Cornhill is the site of the former Shepton Gaol, the U.K.'s oldest prison, built soon after the 1610 Bridewell Act. The prison held men, women and children in brutalising and insanitary conditions and was condemned by John Howard in a 1773 report to parliament as well as in later reports. Later, it housed Napoleonic prisoners of war. Its greatest expansion was in the 19th century when a William Cubitt-designed treadwheel was installed, driving a grain mill and providing hard labour for forty prisoners. A gatehouse, chapel and further storeys were added to ease overcrowding and the exercise yard was enclosed. A fire in 1904 was extinguished by the Anglo-Bavarian Brewery fire brigade assisted by gaolers and prisoners. At the time of Thomas's visit the prison population had declined to under a hundred who worked at sewing mailbags, making Admiralty hammocks, weaving sheeting for the prison service, wood-chopping and stone-breaking. During WWII it was used as a military prison and a redbrick execution block was built when the American forces took over and hanged 18 men for murder, rape and other crimes. Throughout the war's duration, it stored 300 tons of important national documents such as the Domesday Book, Magna Carta, Nelson's Victory logbooks, the Waterloo dispatches and Chamberlain's 1938 Munich 'scrap of paper'. It reverted to civilian use in 1966 and closed in 2013. It is now a museum.

On the right with an overhead connecting corridor is a four-storey modern wing of the prison; the windows are a giveaway. At the road junction with Cornhill is the prison's 20th century gate to the Prison Museum Reception.

Behind this gateway lie the original buildings, themselves heightened with more accommodation as the growing convict population had necessitated.

7. Carry on downhill.

Note the age of the houses (one fronted by a mounting block), the former factory chimney and the more affluent homes of the 18th century managers and owners of the many mills that clustered in this area alongside the Sheppey. The nearby suburbs of Lower Lane and Garston St were industrialised and held houses for clothiers and weavers as well as mills for wool, silk and crepe mills, watercourses and osier beds.

8. Reaching Leg Square, walk ahead to the 1746 three-storey dwelling, Eden Grove.

This is one of four mill owner residences in the square. Between this and the Old Surgery is Lower Lane. Follow this along the Sheppey and under the bridge, noting the blocked windows and doors, the architectural modifications made to the old buildings. The river was formerly known by the very much older name of the Doulting; it was only the 1884 OS mappers who called it the Sheppey and the name has persisted.

9. Walk under the Waterloo Road bridge.

The alleyways and clusters of buildings indicate the piecemeal development of the 18th century woollen industrial complex. The classical features and faded gentility of the larger houses testify to former prosperity.

10. Reaching the junction, note Longbridge House in Cowl St on the right.

Reputedly, the Duke of Monmouth stayed at Longbridge House when on his advance on Bristol. Originally it included the house next to it at right angles (nothing to do with the Seymour family) and parts of the house date back to the 15th century.



Longbridge House

Sales House originally comprised a mansion, mill and dye houses. It is named after Francis de Sales (1567–1622), Bishop of Annecy and founder of the order of nuns, driven from France during the Revolution,

11. Go ahead, down Draycott Road, passing Convent Cottages and St Sales House.



12. At the end of the lane, go forward through the kissing gate to the footpath and follow it along the river.

13. Go through another two kissing gates and pass the Old Sluice House, the Coach House and the Old Silk Mill and on to Old Bowlish House.

14. At the junction with Forum Lane, with the Horseshoe Inn on the left, note the classical 1732 Bowlish House over the road in Darshell.

15. Walk back up Pike Hill to Shepton Mallet.

who settled here in 1810. They ran a free school for the town's children – until continuous flooding enforced the 1831 relocation to Bristol.



Sales House

The river is not visible in the town because it is culverted; here is its best view. Above on the left is the road to Wells which Thomas took after his Shepton Mallet stay, passing through Bowlish and Darshell.

Built in 1618, Old Bowlish House belonged to the wealthy George Strode and his family, commemorated in the church of St Peter and St Paul. The Palladian front was added in Georgian times. In WWII it was requisitioned by the navy. It is now a private home.

Bowlish House was built over a former farmhouse and was extended over time. Its cellars contain a stream which keeps the temperature close to 50°, favouring the storage of wine. The Clarks of shoe fame bought it and completed major restoration work. It is now a hotel.

This road is Thomas's route on to Wells via Croscombe.

On the higher levels all round can be seen the 20th century housing developments which, along with the creation of retail centres, helps to ensure the town's future. Towards the top of the hill, Sts Peter and Paul will be visible on the left and, on the right, the former Anglo-Bavarian Brewery, now the Anglo Trading Estate.

I set out for Wells. The road led me past the principal edifice in Shepton on the west side, as the prison is on the east—the Anglo-Bavarian Brewery, which is also the highest in position. It is a plain stone heap and a tubular chimney-stack of brick. A lover of size or of beer at any price might love it, but no one else.



The former Anglo-Bavarian Brewery

The limestone four-storeyed Italianate Anglo Trading Estate, with its towers on both sides, was originally the Pale Ale Brewery renamed the Anglo-Bavarian Brewery in 1872. It ran from 1864 to 1920. It originally held barley and malt bins and water tanks – fed from a stream in nearby Bowlsh – on the top floors, malting floors and kilns below. It is claimed (and disputed) as the country’s first lager brewery; advertisements of the mid-1870s trumpet pale, mild and strong ale, porter, stout and amber ale – but not lager. Nearly 2 million bottles per year were sold across the Empire and South America. Its waste polluted the River Sheppey to the discontent of farmers downstream. On the upside, the brewery’s fire brigade served the town and the region. Anti-German feeling during and after WWI, as well as recession and the temperance movement were factors in the brewery’s decline and closure. Although it revived in the 1930s, the Bavarian name was removed as war loomed again. When peace returned it was renamed the Anglo Trading Estate which is now the base for numerous business concerns.

1. **16. At the roundabout (617:436) return to the starting point in the Great Ostry car park.**



Darshill 1912



Shepton Mallet 1903

Thomas concludes his Shepton Mallet visit by cycling *in whirls of dust down to Bowlsh and into the valley of the Sheppey. To within a mile of Wells I was to have this little river always with me and several times under me.* Telegraph posts also accompanied the road. *It was a delightful exit; the brewery was behind me, a rookery before me in the beech trees of the outskirts. On both hands grassy banks rose up steeply. The left one, when the rookery was passed, was topped with single thorn trees, and pigs and chickens did their duty and their pleasure among the pollard ashes below. Most of the*

cottages of Bowlish are on the other side, their gardens reaching down in front of them to the stream, their straggling orchards of crooked apple trees behind within walls of ivy-covered stone. Where Bowlish becomes Darshill, the cottages are concentrated round a big square silk-mill and its mill pond beside the road. Up in the high windows could be seen the backs or faces of girls at work. All this is on the right, at the foot of the slope. The left bank being steeper, is either clothed in a wood of ivied oaks, or its ridgy turf and scattering of elms and ash trees are seldom interrupted by houses. A sewage farm and a farm-house ruined by it take up part of the lower slope for some way past the silk-mill: a wood of oak and pine invades them irregularly from above.

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