

Glastonbury Tor and Town

Distance: 3.6 miles/ 5.7 km leisurely walking but with two hill climbs (total ascent 670ft)

In Pursuit of Spring: Chapter 8 *From Shepton Mallet to Bridgwater*

Refreshments: Many pubs and eating places in the town

Map: Explorer 141

Getting there: Western Bus Services runs from Taunton, Bridgwater or Wells. Walk from the Magdalen St stop down to Bere St and the start of the walk

If driving, park outside the Somerset Rural Life Museum (BA6 8DB) on Bere St.

Cycling south out of Wells, Thomas writes, *The air was perfumed with something like willow-plait which I did not identify. The wind was light, but blew from behind me, and was strong enough to strip the dead ivy leaves from an ash tree, but not to stop the tortoiseshell butterfly sauntering against it.*

For three miles I was in the green land of Queen's Sedgemoor, drained by straight sedgy watercourses, along which grew lines of elm, willow and pine. Glastonbury Tor mounted up out of the flat before me, like a huge tumulus, almost bare, but tipped by St Michael's tower. Soon the ground began to rise on my left, and the crooked apple orchards of Avalon came down to the roadside, their turf starred by innumerable daisies and gilt celandines. Winding round the base of the Tor, I rode into Glastonbury, and down its broad, straight hill past St John the Baptist Church and the notoriously medieval Pilgrim's Inn, and many pastry cooks. Another peat cart was going down the street.

The route from Wells described by Thomas is now the Old Wells Rd, which would have taken him towards the Tor before veering right to the High St.

Glastonbury lies on Jurassic lias, marlstone and clays; the Tor is a cap of Midford sandstone. Alluvium has been deposited by regional rivers, particularly the Brue, and the peaty country surrounding the 'peninsula' is liable to flood, demanding careful land management and the extensive drainage system of the Somerset Levels. Neolithic finds testify to earlier occupation and the nearby lake villages open a vivid window on the Iron Age. The Romans worked the land nearby and the Tor has Anglo Saxon connections.

The abbey was the spur to the development of the medieval town largely as a pilgrim centre. In 1191 it claimed to be the burial place of Arthur which boosted visitor numbers to the town, which clustered round the present market place from where roads led to north, east (High St), south (Magdalene St, formerly Spital St after its 13th century hospital) and west. Cloth manufacture and the production of woollen goods were key industries into the 19th century. Extensive domestic rebuilding took place in the 18th century onwards; the railway boosted the town and with much retail development, later commercial building, domestic housing and industrial estates taking place after WW2. It draws much today from the culture of the occult, legend and myth, as well as from the international attraction of the Glastonbury Festival.

1. With the tithe barn on the right, walk up to and across the roundabout on Chilkwell St (A361) and turn right, along the street's raised pavement. Pass the Rifleman's Arms (dating back to the 16th Century) on the right and the Chalice Well and Gardens on the left.

In the Somerset Rural Life Museum are displays of agricultural implements and recreations of bygone rural life. Local crafts are arranged round the reconstructed Glastonbury Abbey's 14th century tithe barn. It has tearooms and shop



Chalice Well

and has a lively public programme of events.

Chilwell St was named from this limestone well, documented since the early 13th century. Some of the cottages show signs of medieval stonework, including an Agnus Dei over the door of 51. Chalice Well offers water, reddened by iron oxide deposits (hence its name the 'red spring'), originating from under the Tor and rising to a consistent flow and temperature. Pious medieval lore had it that Joseph of Arimathea buried the cup of Christ's last supper here, his blood colouring the waters. Its waters ran to the abbey ground's south eastern corner. Excavations suggest that water has been drunk here for 2000 years from Neolithic to medieval times and in the 18th century for curative purposes. An inn on the site gave way to a seminary and in 1912 it became the Chalice Well, a place for spiritual refreshment, drama and summer schools. Its Trust aims to provide 'religious activities relating to arts, culture, heritage, science, environment, conservation, heritage, human rights, religious or racial harmony, equality or diversity'.

2. Turn left on to Wellhouse Lane.

The White Spring, following a different geological course and bearing calcium, is a few yards up on the right; running water allows the filling of water bottles.

3. Turn immediately right up the winding public footpath. Follow this up through two kissing gates, and by the concrete steps and the path, walk up to the Tor.

The path and summit have fine views across the Somerset levels and a panorama which looks back to Wells and the Mendips. The 521 ft Tor is created of sandstone and limestone layers, and the infiltration of hardening minerals has helped it withstand erosion. Beneath it lies a mineral-rich aquifer which feeds numerous springs.

On the Tor Summit died Richard Whiting, the Abbey's last Abbot. Along with his confrères John Thorne, and Roger James, he was hanged,



St Michael's Church



Reconstruction of mediaeval monastic site

4. To the south of the Tor take the stepped footpath down the hill which will follow a course to the north east. Turn right at the T-junction. Go through a kissing gate, down a path and through another kissing gate and on to the road.

5. Turn and keep left past the junction with Stone Down Rd on the right (part of Glastonbury's eastern boundary), to continue along Wellhouse Lane.

6. After a hundred yards, go through the kissing gate on the right and follow the indicated footpath to another kissing gate. Look back at the view of the terraced north flank of the Tor. Go through the kissing gate and along a green way.

drawn and quartered in November 1539 and their gibbeted bodies were viewed for miles around as a warning against defiance of the Henrician Settlement.

The Tor lies on the reclaimed fenland of the Summerland Meadows. It was an island site during flood times, a peninsula when the waters receded. Its seven broadly symmetrical terraces have been variously interpreted as a defensive feature, agricultural or vine strip lynchets or the remains of a Neolithic maze for initiation rites. Excavations suggest 5th to 7th century hilltop settlement and a Saxon monastic site; Norman charters refer to it as such. St Michael's Church was destroyed by an earthquake in 1725 (its epicentre was at Portsmouth and the sturdy Norman keep of Porchester Castle bears a crack on one side). The present ruins are those of the 14th century replacement but only its tower remains after the vandalism of the Dissolution. The Tor is a hallowed site for both Pagan and Christian followers and claims are made for links with King Arthur and Avalon. The National Trust has owned it since 1933.



Glastonbury Tor

7. Go through yet another kissing gate, follow the lane straight ahead to an iron gate and keep on the main path through the lovely Bushey Coombe on the edge of Glastonbury. The Coombe's springs may have augmented the medieval town's water supply.

8. Continue downhill to a stile/kissing gate and on to Dod Lane.

Dod Lane, which may have been of Roman origin, connects Glastonbury Tor via Chalice Hill with the Abbey, lining up with the Lady Chapel. It may have been considered as a Dead Man's Lane, a route along which the souls of the dead travelled to the afterlife. House platforms on the north side and excavated pottery fragments date it to the 12th century. It was one of the many Medieval streets which include Chilkwell St, Lambrook St, Great St (now High St) and South or Spital St (now Magdalene St), all of which are included in this walk.

The Shekinah Yoga Retreat Centre with its range of Tibetan prayer wheels lies on the south side of Dod Street and invites visitors.

9. Bear left as Dod Lane bends and walk to the junction

The abbey precinct walls and the badged gateway to the *faux* Tudor Gothic Abbey House (1830) are straight ahead. Its stone was drawn from the ruined abbey by James Austin who owned the Abbey grounds. Altered and extended in the 1850s – '60s, it became church property, being used as a retreat and conference house from 1931 until 2018. It is now an events venue.

10. Turn right along Chilkwell St and on to Lambrook St and the Methodist Church.

The church stopped me because of its tower and the grass and the daisies and half-dozen comfortable box tombs of its churchyard, irregularly placed and not quite upright. One of the tombs advertised in plain lettering the fact that John Down, the occupant, who died in 1829 at the age of eighty-three, had 'for more than sixty years owned the abbey'. He owned the abbey, nothing more; at least his friends and relatives were

11. Cross the road and walk down High St. St John's Church is on the right.



St John's Church



content to introduce him to posterity as the man who had 'for more than sixty years owned the abbey'. If the dead were permitted to own anything here below, doubtless he would own it still. Outside the railings two boys were doing the cleverest thing I saw on this journey. They were keeping a whip-top, and that a carrot-shaped one, spinning by kicking it in turns. Which was an accomplishment more worthy of being commemorated on a tombstone than the fact that you owned Glastonbury Abbey. The interior of the church is made equally broad at both ends by the lack of a screen or of any division of the chancel. It is notable also for a marble monument in the south-west corner, retaining the last of its pale-blue and rose colouring. A high chest, carved with camels, forms the resting-place for a marble man with a head like Dante's, wearing a rosary over his long robes.



Effigy of John Cammell



Glastonbury Thorn

Legend says that an earlier church St John's was built by Bishop Dunstan. A subsequent 12th century church had a tower over the crossing; the fabric degenerated and became dangerous and extensive rebuilding followed in the 15th century, creating much of the present church. A new three-staged tower (with a chiming clock but no face) was built at the western end. In 1534 the antiquarian Leland described the Perpendicular edifice as 'very fair and lightsome'. Built of local lias and limestone, it is cruciform with an aisled nave and clerestorey. It sheltered Monmouth's troops in 1685 and was occasionally used to lock up French prisoners of war in transit. George Gilbert Scott restored the building to Gothic norms between 1856–60. On a tomb brought in from the churchyard stands a case holding a funeral pall made from the cope of the martyred Abbot Whiting. Just inside the 1428 main door are elm carvings of a Madonna and the Risen

Christ by Ernst Blensdorff, a refugee from Nazi Germany. Nearby, on the south wall, is an attractive Sicilian marble relief of the Nativity. Adjacent to the Scott-designed pulpit is the table tomb of John Cammell, possibly an abbey lay treasurer who died in 1487. He is Thomas's *marble man with a head like Dante's* and the tomb has been re-sited from the south-west corner since his visit. The churchyard has a flowering annually twice-flowering Glastonbury Thorn (*Crataegus monogyna 'Biflora'*) from which cuttings are sent to the monarch every Christmas. It is a clone from the Wearyall Hill thorn. The Glastonbury labyrinth was laid out in 2007 to commemorate the granting of a town charter by Queen Anne in 1707.

1. **12. Continue along the High St.**



The Tribunal and museum

13. Walk to the Market Place

On the right is the Tribunal, a 15th century merchant's house and holds that Lake Village Museum. Local amateur archaeologist and medical student Arthur Bulleid (1862 – 1951) investigated earth mounds near Godney in what had once been the peaty marshlands to the north of the town. Excavating from 1892 – 1907 he uncovered a vast range of Iron Age everyday utensils and craft artefacts, roundhouse dwellings, a defensive palisade, all on a 3½ acre village with associated trackways and waterway approaches. Dug-out canoes were found in the area, one of which is displayed in the museum. Bulleid and his team excavated further lake villages at nearby Meare.

Opposite the Tribunal is an arch and courtyard where, on the site of the **Assembly Rooms**, stood the White Horse Inn where the Duke of Monmouth stayed in June 1685, his troops lodging in the parish churches and the cavalry in the abbey grounds. After his defeat at Sedgemoor six rebels were hanged from the Inn sign and five others in the town.

Further along High St is **Thomas's notoriously medieval Pilgrim's Inn**,



Pilgrim's Inn – George Inn

built in the late 15th century. The three-storeyed, crenelated edifice was one of the Abbey's hospices for visitors. It was later called the George Inn. The stonework mimics earlier timber constructions and the bays align with the inn's chambers and halls.

The Perpendicular market cross, a decayed medieval cross which had structural affinities to Shepton Mallet's cross, had been demolished as unsafe in 1806. This replacement was set up in 1846.

14. Walk left to Magdalene St.



Reconstruction of Glastonbury Abbey

The 14th century St Benedict's church and its 15th century tower can be glimpsed off to the right.

Just along the street the entrance to Glastonbury Abbey is on the left, as is the car park with the Tourist Information Office and toilets.

At first I thought I should not see more of the abbey than can be seen from the road – the circular abbot's kitchen with pointed cap, and the broken ranges of majestic tall arches that guide the eye to the shops and dwellings of Glastonbury. While I was buying a postcard the woman of the shop reminded me of Joseph of Arimathea's thorn and how it blossomed at Christmas. 'Did you ever see it blossoming at Christmas?' I asked.

'Once,' she said, and she told me how the first winter she spent in Glastonbury was a very mild one, and she went out with her brothers for a walk on Christmas day in the afternoon. She remembered that they wore no coats. And they saw blossom on the holy thorn.

After all, I did go through the turnstile to see the abbey. The high pointed arches were magnificent, the turf under them perfect. The elms stood among the ruins like noble savages among Greeks. The orchards hard by made me wish they were blossoming. But excavations had been going on;



Edward Thomas



Frederick Bligh Bond

clay was piled up and cracking in the sun, and there were tin sheds and scaffolding. I am not an archaeologist, and I left it.

After the Dissolution the abbey remained in private hands till 1908 when it was purchased by the Church which appointed Frederick Bligh Bond (1864 – 1945) to excavate the site in 1909. This prolific Bristol-based architect was a copious writer on archaeology and psychic matters. He uncovered the dimensions of a number of buildings, particularly the Edgar and Lady chapels. In this he claimed to have been guided through psychic ‘automatic writing’ dictated by long-dead spirit monks. He was dismissed in 1921. He designed Glastonbury’s war memorial, using decorative motifs he had uncovered in the excavations, a screen in St John’s Church and the Chalice Well cover (1919). Richard Coates (UWE, 2015) says he has *a modern status as the unwitting midwife of the “New Age” pretensions of today’s Glastonbury*. It was his work that Edward Thomas would have seen. Thomas’s friend Hudson recalls Bligh Bond inviting him to listen to blackbird song on the garden of his High St home and noting down the melody to help him retain the melody.

Thomas continues:

As I was approaching the turnstile an old hawthorn within a few yards of it, against a south wall, drew my attention. For it was covered with young green leaves and with bright crimson berries almost as numerous. Going up to look more closely, I saw what was more wonderful – Blossom. Not one flower, nor one spray only, but several sprays. I had not up till now seen even blackthorn flowers, though towards the end of February I had heard of hawthorn flowering near Bradford. As this had not been picked, I conceitedly drew the conclusion that it had not been observed. Perhaps its

15. Cross and continue down Magdalene St.

16. Carry on to the roundabout and turn right along Street Road. Cross it at the pedestrian crossing and, after the terraced houses and the residential care home, pass through the kissing gate and walk up Wearyall Hill via the second righthand turf path.

17. Stop at the first bench just beyond the vandalised thorn tree (which may be beribboned)



The Glastonbury Thorn



Glastonbury from Wearyall Hill

conspicuousness had saved it. It was Lady Day. I had found the Spring in that bush of green, white and crimson. So warm and bright was the sun, and so blue the sky, and so white the clouds, that not for a moment did the possibility of Winter returning cross my mind.

On the right, at St Margaret's, are the chapel and some of the Magdalene almshouses, remaining from the original 13th century 'spital'.

Turn to look back at Edward Thomas's view.

Pleasure at finding the May sent me up Wearyall Hill, instead of along the customary road straight out of Glastonbury. The hill projects from the earth like a ship a mile long, whose stern is buried in the town, its prow uplifted westward towards Bridgwater; and the road took me up as on a slanting deck, until I saw Glastonbury entire below me, all red-tiled except the ruins and the towers of St John ad St Benedict. At the western edge the town's two red gasometers stood among blossoming plum trees, and beyond that spread the flat land. The Quantocks, fifteen miles distant, formed but a plain wall, wooded and flat-topped, on the horizon northwards.

Wearyall Hill, like the Tor, would have been an island during times of flood. Legend has it that Joseph of Arimathea had visited the area with his young nephew Jesus, and returned later bearing the grail and objects from Christ's crucifixion. It said that, travelling by boat on the inundated Levels, and being weary, he landed on this hillside. He allegedly thrust his hawthorn staff into the ground



Decorated remains of the Glastonbury Thorn

whereupon, like Aaron's in the Book of Numbers, it blossomed miraculously. Puritanical hatred of Papist idolatry led to its mutilation and destruction under Cromwell. But the original tree had been propagated many times and had been planted not only in the abbey and at St John's but, subsequently, across the world. The Wearyall Hill thorn was replaced in 1951 but was topped in 2010 by a disgruntled vandal; a 2012 planting of a sapling from the 1951 tree was irreparably damaged and new shoots from the old tree are surreptitiously cut away, too. The stump is still honoured by Avalonian enthusiasts. Glastonbury abbey also had a celebrated walnut tree, which, reputedly, always flourished for St Barnabas's day, 11th June. A walk further up the hill reveals the pollarded willows fringing the rhines of the billiard-table-flat Somerset Levels and a view of the Poldens beyond Street in the southwest.

18. Walk back down the hill and follow the ridge along the broad turfy track on the right. Go through the kissing gate on the right and turn left down Hill Head.

19. At the crossroads, go over Butleigh Rd, then over Old Butleigh Rd on to Bere Lane and back to the starting point at the Somerset Rural Life Museum.

The Mendips lie ahead and to the west is the wall of the Quantocks

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