

Polden Hills

Distance: 7m/11km Total ascent 118 ft/36m. Leisurely walking

In Pursuit of Spring: Chapter 8 Shepton Mallet to Bridgwater

Map: Explorer 140

Getting there:

A bus service runs from Bridgwater <https://bustimes.org/localities/stawell>

If driving, park in Stawell, close to St Francis Church on Stawell Rd (368:382).

Thomas wrote from Street after Glastonbury, *I was very glad to see the flat slowly swelling up at last to the long ridge of the Polden Hills, which was soon to carry my road.* On the latter he expands, *Even without the wood this road was beautiful. For it was bordered for some way on the left by a broad grass strip planted with oaks, and not common oaks, but trees all based on small moss-gilded pedestals of their own roots above the earth, their bark and branches silver, their main limbs velvety with moss and plumed with polypody ferns. Moreover, they have filled the few gaps with young trees.* Then, *the road travels four miles of a ridge as straight and sharp as the Hog's Back. It was delicious easy riding, with no company but that of a linnet muttering sweetly in the new-green larches, and a blackbird or two hurrying and spluttering under the hedge.*



The richly-biodiverse Somerset Levels are a 160,000-acre wetland area south of the Mendips to the Blackdown Hills, with the Polden Ridge bisecting them. There is much evidence of summer settlement in the Palaeolithic, Bronze and Iron Ages – wooden causeways and lake villages. The county's ancient name was *Sumorsaete* or 'land of the summer people'. Along the ridge, the Romans ran a road from Ilchester to the ports at Crandon Bridge and Combwich, although there was probably a 4000 BC. The Romans extracted salt from the wetlands. The Levels are farmed as arable and grassland. Vulnerable to marine as well as riverine inundation, the reclaimed lands are extensively drained by ditches known locally as rines or rhyens. (pronounced *reens*)

Stawell, (pronounced something near Stoe'l) basically a ribbon development, lies in a shallow valley between the limestone of Cock Hill in the north, the highest point on the Poldens, and Ball Hill on the south. The soil is alluvial and lias caps Pendon Hill and the area of Bawdrip. The earlier houses date from the 16th – 17th centuries. Prosperity in the 18th and early 19th century led to the building of substantial farms and residences. The manor house goes back to Saxon times but under the Conqueror it was held by Geoffrey of Coveston also known as Geoffrey of Stawell. His family held Cothelstone Manor for centuries.

When Thomas cycled above the village it had a mix of arable land yielding wheat, barley, beans and root crops as well as grass lands. The 1910 Kelly's Directory mentions its elementary school, founded in 1872, and post office and lists seven farmers around the village.

1. Walk in a westerly direction through Stawell.

The short-towered church, dedicated to St Francis in the 1960s, goes back to the 13th century replacing a Glastonbury Abbey

2. Walk up Crendge Lane on the left (a cottage named after it lies alongside) and turn right through the garden gate, following the waymark sign through the garden. Go over the righthand stile and then through the gate or stile and carry on leftwards.

3. Go through the next gate and down the fenced slope through another gate.

4. Follow the waymark sign to a kissing gate and through a gate on the far side. Go forward through another gate by an overgrown rhyme. On its right is a post and waymarker pointing to a fieldgate and the road.

5. On the road, ignore the bridge on the left, and walk forward for just over half a mile to Parchey Bridge with its sign for Chedzoy / Bawdrip 1½ miles.



Parchey Bridge, BM

6. Cross the bridge and go right along the Drain footpath (Sustrans track 3).



The King's Sedgemoor Drain and Sustrans Track 3

7. At the end of this stretch and with the Environment Agency depot on the left, follow the sign to the right up Bradney Lane.

chapel. It was subsequently added to and, having declined, was saved by restoration in 1874.



St Francis parish church, Stawell, BM

Pendon Hill with its level top rises gently on the right and Ball hill is off to the left.



Pendon Hill, BM

A variety of trees line the way, chiefly horse chestnut, oak and the ubiquitous willow.

The Quantocks can be seen on the horizon and Knowle Hill dominates Bawdrip as we get closer. The King's Sedgemoor Drain runs along the southern flank of the Polden to discharge into the River Parrett. It was constructed in the 1790s as a flood relief channel, with John Billingsley of Oakhill being a backer. It was upgraded in WW2 and again in 1972.

This lane was on the night route march of The Duke of Monmouth to attack the royalist



The battle of Sedgemoor



Sedgemoor battle memorial, BM

8. Walk up into Bawdrip, passing between the primary school on the right and the church of St Michael and All Angels.

troops at Westonzoyland. James Scott, Duke of Monmouth, illegitimate son of Charles II, contested the throne after the accession in February 1685 of his Catholic uncle James II. Landing at Lyme Regis, he made his way through Dorset into Somerset, raising an army of impoverished weavers, fullers, artisans, apprentices and agricultural labourers, mostly nonconformist. They were poorly equipped but towns like Bridgwater and Shepton Mallet declared for him to ensure a Protestant succession. He marched north, initially on the Polden Ridge, with the intention of taking Bristol. His route covered much of that ridden by Edward Thomas – along the Polden Ridge, Glastonbury, Shepton Mallet – and, having turned back at Pensford, winding back through Norton St Philip to Bridgwater, where his return was less enthusiastically welcomed. From the tower of St Mary's Church, the Duke noted the 3000 royal troops, cavalry, artillery and infantry, led by The Earl of Feversham and Churchill, future Duke of Marlborough, camped behind the Bussex Rhine at Westonzoyland. He led his ill-armed 4000 troops in a silent march across the north of the Levels to Bradney Lane at Bawdrip, passing Peasey Farm and on to Marsh Lane. His position was revealed accidentally as his army was crossing the Langmoor Rhine. In the battle that ensued (6 July) his force was routed with 1,300 killed. People on the Polden Ridge watched the pursuit and massacre of the fugitive rebels. The starving and bedraggled Monmouth was captured. He was messily executed on Tower Hill and in Judge Jefferies' Bloody Assizes, held throughout the region, 320 followers were executed and 750 transported.

Bawdrip, the parish of which also includes Bradney and Horsey, is built on red sand and marl. In Thomas's day it was chiefly given over to pasture though wheat, beans oats and barley were also grown. It is mentioned in Domesday as being a grant to Walter of Douai, a fellow combatant of William's at Hastings. It grew on the moor's edge, much of it in 17th and 18th centuries, along the Stawell-Crandon road. Kelly's Directory lists a sexton, bellringer, post office, school



St Michael and All Angels, Bawdrip, BM



9. Walk up to the junction and turn right along East Side Lane alongside the retaining wall of the Bridgwater Railway, walking uphill past the village hall, where Bawdrip Halt was located, and downhill, passing Barker's Farm.

10. After the houses, and with King's Farm Farmhouse on the right, ascend the slope up the Sustrans 3 path on the left, signed for Cossington 1 mile /Glastonbury Follow the path.

teacher, tobacconist, blacksmith, a tailor and innkeeper in neighbouring Knowle, nine farmers and a water bailiff.

In the church the effigy of the wealthy Sir Simon de Bradney, who died in 1375, lies under a decorated arch; the heart between his hands indicates that only that organ is interred here. The church's corbels with their meek-looking faces are interesting. There is a tradition that the body of locally-born John Atherton, Bishop of Waterford and Lismore lay under the chancel. He was hanged in Dublin in 1640 on charges of buggery, the allegations of which may well have been born more of vituperative opposition to his episcopal taxes than the truth of his moral life. His remains are said to have been moved in the 19th century and buried in ashes in the churchyard.

The church was enlarged in 1865, with the loss of medieval floor tiles and stained glass. A popular 19th century ballad *The Mistletoe Bough*, is supposed to derive from the tragic death in 1681 of Eleanor, bride of Lord Lovell. In their wedding day revels and a game of hide-and-seek, she was trapped in her hiding-place, a chest which had snapped fast. Not found by her grieving family, a mouldering corpse was discovered some years later. Bawdrip Rectory claims to be the location of this macabre story, but then, so does Minster Lovell in Oxfordshire, Brockdish Hall in Norfolk, Exton Hall in Rutland... and a few others.

The farm bears the date 1705 but predates this to Tudor times. Manor Court Rolls indicate that the Symon family owners were negligent and the tenement in disrepair. The Barkers held it in the 18th and 19th centuries and leased it out and its acreage diminished.

Thomas writes of his ride on the ridge above that he was *soon at the level of the railway, and Bawdrip behind the embankment showed me a pretty jumble of roofs, chimneys, a church tower and a green thorn tree over the rim.*

The 1890 railway was built to link the Somerset and Dorset Joint Railway line at



11. At Cossington, go right onto Brent Rd, crossing the bridge, which lies just to the south of its former station.

12. At the T-junction follow the road right on to Manor Rd.

13. Walk down Manor Rd; the church of St Mary the Virgin will be on the right.



St Mary the Virgin, Cossington, BM

14. Take the small footpath opposite the church entrance and on the left, parallel to Middle Rd, passing the original site of the Big Tree of Cossington.

Edington Junction, to the north of the ridge, with Bridgwater. Bawdrip had its own halt, built in 1923. Lias stone yielded by the cutting was used for the building of bridges, stations and platforms. The line was fully closed in 1954. The track has now become a delightful greenway with art installations in metal origami and carved wooden seating. It also has the added advantage of passing under the busy A39 via bridge 305.

Cossington farms grew oats, wheat and barley when Thomas cycled above it. Farming of the heavy alluvium remains the area's chief activity. In 1910 it had a post office and school and occupations are listed as carriers, a blacksmith, shopkeeper, laundress, innkeeper, dairyman, wheelwright and sexton.

The manor, built round a 17th century core and enlarged in Georgian times, lies on the west of the village as does the church.

The blue lias 13th century church, largely Perpendicular, was a foundation of Glastonbury Abbey. It has a three-bay nave, a chancel with memorials set in the floor, a porch and three-stage tower. It was extensively 'improved' in 1834 and 1900. A brass to the Tudor John Brent and Maud Pouncefoot is on the south wall, and a fragment of stained glass in an adjacent window shows their heraldic arms. There are many memorials; perhaps the most affecting is to 36-year-old Muriel Weson who died in 1916, "worn out by her exertions nursing the wounded in France during the Great War and now lies sleeping in the churchyard here".

The Big Tree was set up in 2015 to commemorate a lofty and dominating 80ft high elm which, like the majority of elms was felled in the 1970s' elm disease incursion. The original stone surround and seating remain. Local legend says that Jefferies hanged local rebels from this tree and that Wesley preached in its shade.

15. Continue along Middle Rd, passing the Grange, set back from the road on the right.

16. Continue walking towards the eastern end of the village. At Whispering Elms turn right on to a footpath (in past times known by locals as Muddy Track) which will lead round to the left onto a route called Ditch Furlong Road.

17. Passing a barn on the left, continue forward along the green way with its fossiliferous fields on the left. Go through a gate and walk between hedgerows and through a stile/gate.

18. Ignoring a stile on the right go forward and through two kissing gates. A farmyard on the left stands opposite a track between two field gates. Follow this.

19. Where the track turns right, go left through a kissing gate and follow the left-hand hedgerow.

20. Go through a metal gate and turn right along Priory Rd. Walk up to the A39.



Zodiacal signs in the landscape

The classically-fronted Cossington Grange is late 18th century and was much remodelled in Victorian times in a mixture of styles to create what can fairly be called 'a pile'.



The Triangle, Cossington, BM



Chilton Priory, BM

Chilton Priory will be on left. Thomas mentions it as a 'sham', *a towered residence close to the road, with Gothic features*. It was built in the 1830s for the antiquarian William Stradling. It had fashionable elements – a crenelated tower, an observatory, grotto and tunnel all set among lawns and gardens. It incorporated decorative features from Somerset churches and archaeological sites. Later, Bligh Bond, who conducted the Glastonbury Abbey excavations at the time of Thomas's 1913 research, developed the grounds for John Maltwood, managing director of Oxo Ltd, who had amassed a fortune through the widespread sale of Oxo cubes to the First World War troops. His artist wife Katharine (1878 - 1961), deeply drawn to mysticism, Arthurian mythology and eastern philosophy, interpreted the Glastonbury region as holding in its various features, an ancient assemblage of the zodiacal signs,

known as the Temple of the Stars. The Priory has been severally owned over the years.

21. The lane will turn right; at the turn, go through the tree screen and up steps on to the busy road.

22. Cross the road with care and engage with Thomas's description from this viewpoint, which heads this walk.

23. Facing Ball Hill, go downhill towards Stawell. In wet or muddy conditions **follow the road until it winds to the junction and the village off on the right.**

Alternatively, **after a few yards, take the stile by the gate on the right and walk forward, following the contours through a field boundary ahead.**

24. After 100 yards turn left via a gate and steps on to a field. Cross this to a footbridge in the hedge opposite and, in the same direction, cross to the far hedgerow and go over the footbridge.

25. Walk right and then left along a plantation. Follow this as it bends left and goes down to Stawell road. Go right through a stile /gate and walk back to the starting point.



Edward Thomas, View from Polden Ridge

Moving on, Thomas writes: *Though the lines of these hills and their decorated slopes are definitely beautiful, during the dusk on that silver road in the first Spring innocence they were a miraculous birth, to match the Spring innocence and the tranquillity of the dusk as I slid quietly on that road of silver. Cycling toward Knowle he adds, Those green trees in the last of the twilight seemed exceptionally benign. After turning I immediately crossed the deep-cut King's Sedgemoor Drain – with a flowering orchard between it and the road I had left – and in a few yards the single line of the Somerset and Dorset Joint Railway.*

With thanks to Dave Bown of Bawdrip, Laurel Smart and Ikuko Shiratori and Chris Sanders, Bristol Ramblers

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