

Nether Stowey

Distance: 4m / 6.6 km leisurely walking

In Pursuit of Spring: Chapter 9 Bridgwater to the Sea

Refreshments: **The Ancient Mariner** 42 Lime St, Nether Stowey TA5 1NG

The Rose and Crown 5 St Mary St, Nether Stowey TA5 1LJ

The George Hotel 7 St Mary St, Nether Stowey TA5 1LJ

The Cottage Inn Keenthorne, Nether Stowey TA5 1HZ

Various cafes in Nether Stowey

Map: Explorer Explorer 140

This walk, which encompasses the two highest points of Nether Stowey Castle Mound in the west and Pinnacle Hill in the east, can be muddy after rain

Getting there:

Train services run to Bridgwater from where several buses serve Nether Stowey.

If driving, there are two adjoining car parks in Castle St, one for Library personnel and users; the adjacent and slightly bigger one is free for all to use (TA5 1LN) It also has access to public toilets. The upper end of Castle Street usually has space for alternative parking.

On his approach to Nether Stowey, after leaving Bridgwater and having made his diversion to Bradley Green and Blackmoor Manor Farm, Thomas took the main road to Minehead which *was rising once more between banks of gorse. So bright was the blossom of the gorse that its branches were shadowy and nearly invisible in the brightness. For the sun was now as warm as ever it need be for a man who can move himself from place to place. On both hands the undulating land was warm and misty, but particularly on the right. He rode by hedgerows and a few elms among bare ploughland and young corn above, and drabby grass with sheep on it below. ... a blunt, conical hillside of green corn, rosy ploughland, sheep-fed pasture, and a few elms in the partitions; and behind it the dim Quantocks... I was now two hundred feet up in the foothills of the Quantocks. Three or four miles in front bulked the moorlands of the main ridge...*

Nether Stowey begins with a church and a farm and farmyard in a group. Then follows a street of cottages without front gardens, dominated by a smooth green 'castle' rampart a third of a mile away. The street ends in a First and Last Inn on one side, and a cottage on the other, announced as formerly Coleridge's by an inscription and a stone wreath of dull reddish brown. Altogether Nether Stowey offered no temptations to be compared with those of the road leading out of it. Immediately outside the village it was walled by deep banks, and on these grew arum, celandine and nettle, with bushes of new-leaved blackthorn and spindle. Here I saw the first starry, white stitchworts or milkmaids

Nether Stowey lies on marl and gravel. Castle Hill is of slate and grit, and sandstone is bedded to its south. Stowey means 'stone way', and it lay on the Saxon *herepath* (military road) up to the Quantocks. 'Nether' was added to separate it from Over Stowey. It was granted the right to hold weekly markets and an annual fair. Cloth production and weaving were its prime industry in late medieval times; serge and silk were manufactured later. Pottery-making continued from medieval times until the 17th century. In the 19th century the textile industry was overtaken by the great mills of the North but cattle and livestock-rearing, dairying, building, clothing and shoe manufacture were important employers. Between the 18th and 19th century the town was renowned for clock and watch-making, the Cole family being preeminent. In Thomas's day wheat, barley, green crops and root vegetables were grown in the locality.

Among the town's other natives was Robert Persons (1546 – 1610), a key English Jesuit of the Elizabethan counter-reformation. After a short mission in 1580 to support Catholic recusants, he fled to the Continent where he wrote polemical treatises, disputed the queenly rights of Elizabeth I and supported Mary Queen of Scots as well as the Armada. He established an English seminary in Valladolid and a Catholic boarding school at St Omer, the forerunner of Stoneyhurst College. He became rector of the English College in Rome and died aged 63.

1. Walk uphill. At the hill's watershed, with Mount Cottage ahead and the sign for Nether Stowey and Quantock Hills on the right, there is a three-point signpost. Follow the sign to Nether Stowey Castle on the right, through a kissing gate to the Castle ramparts.



Nether Stowey Motte, BM

2. Track along the outer rampart and, a third of the way round and at a dip in the ramparts, a housing development is in view, backed by Hinkley Point and the Bristol Channel. Look for the sharp left, downward footpath to Scots pine trees and the kissing gate and Butchers Lane.

Go down the steps to Butchers Lane and veer left and then turn right at the junction ahead. Walk forward, ignoring Jacksons Lane on the left. The road is now Mill Lane. Continue forward for a quarter of a mile.

3. Walk to the junction with the 1960s A39 bypass.

Walk left to the traffic lights and cross. Go down Stogursey Lane.

This is part of the 51-mile Coleridge Way from Stowey to Lynmouth, opened in 2005. It travels through the Quantock and Brendon hills.

An English Heritage information and orientation board is on the left. This is a late 11th or early 12th century motte and bailey fortification, which had a deer park and warren nearby. It was abandoned in 1450 when its owner moved to Stowey Court. A climb up the mound gives not only a view of the keep's rectangular foundations below but a 360° view across Bridgwater Bay, the Parrett estuary, Flat Holm in the Bristol Channel, as well as Wales beyond and the Quantock foothills to the southwest – a precursor of Thomas's final view from Cothelstone Hill. It had long been a favourite walk spot for locals, the gentry in Coleridge's day often coming to look at the ships in the Bristol Channel through spyglasses.

It is surmised that the castle consisted of a keep, family apartments and accommodation, a hall and kitchen, and a chapel, stables and a brewhouse.



Rampart view to Bristol Channel, BM

A poor school was set up in Castle St in 1813 by Tom Poole; the new school on the right was built among a new housing development in 1979.

4. After the houses on the left and at the 'National speed limit applies' sign take the stile on the right. Walk along the left field edge and at its corner, strike off diagonally left to the walkers' gate next to a metal gate and footpath directional post.

5. Continue left to the jutting point of the hedge; continue past this in the same direction and through a double kissing gate over the Stogursey Brook.

6. Go uphill under the power lines and to the left to another kissing gate and straight across the field in the direction of Hinkley Point and to the kissing gate and track ahead. Ignore Durborough Farm to the left. Turn right and walk up the lane for half a mile.

7. At a grove on the left is a T-junction of paths. Turn right along a broad track towards Hamlands Corner and up the 97m-high Pinnacle Hill.

8. Go through the kissing gate/gate at the top and continue forward.

9. Go through another kissing gate and downhill with the field edge on the right a copse of oak and ash trees. Pass to the right of this to until a junction is reached via a kissing gate. Follow the footpath sign to the right of the way sign between the fields.

10. Just past the buildings of Budley Farm (198:397) go left and follow the track to the gate and the A39.

Note Harry Prowse Close, named *in memory of Sgt Major Harry Prowse MM and the 108 men from Nether Stowey and Over Stowey who served their country during the first world war*. Eighteen Stowey men out of a population of 232 were killed in WW1; nine more died in WW2



Tree-lined on the left, this is a shallow valley between gentle ridges on either side.

Pinnacle Hill may well have been a Neolithic hillfort and enclosure. From here is a wonderful 360° view of Hawkridge Common ahead, the Polden Hills on the left and Glastonbury Tor beyond them. Stretching along the righthand horizon are the Quantock Hills. A dear leap from the medieval manorial deerpark lies off to the right. The deerpark itself was divided into fields during the 18th century agrarian revolution.

This area is the site of the deserted village of Budley, a pre-Norman settlement which declined and died out by the 1830s.

On the right is the 12th century St Mary the Virgin Church with its 15th century tower. It was completely rebuilt in 1848 – 51. The graves of local philanthropist Thomas Poole and his parents are in the churchyard.



St Mary the Virgin Church, BM

11. Cross the A39 to the pavement opposite.



Stowey Court summer house, BM

12. Go right and follow the signs left into Nether Stowey; walk along St Mary's St.



The Toll House, BM

13. Continue forward up Lime St to the Ancient Mariner pub

Alongside it is Stowey Court which Leland described as a 'goodly manor place... standing exceedingly pleasantly'. It was begun by James, Lord Audley, as an alternative home to the castle. His participation in 1479 in a tax-protesting Cornish rebellion led to defeat and ignominious execution on Tower Hill. The Court retains little of the medieval house; most of it dates from the 19th – 20th century. It was given a make-over in the 1980s. **To visit the church, walk right along the verge.**

Note, on the right, the redbrick, ironstone-based, sash-windowed summer house, part of Stowey Court.

At this *spot where the road twists again at right angles, a brick summer-house perched on the walled roadside bank, at the very corner. Here, as I heard, a few generations ago, ladies from the house nearby used to sit to watch for coaches.*

The cemetery on the left has the Prowse family graves, two WW2 Commonwealth war graves and memorial gates.

Pass the ironstone toll house on the right. The Bridgwater-Watchet road was turnpiked in 1759 by the Bridgwater trust as far as the middle of St. Mary's Street. There the Minehead Trust took over. Pass the 1687 Rose and Crown and the 1804 George Hotel. The 1647 Swan was renamed the Globe by 1743. It was a magistrates' meeting place. It closed in 1850 and is now the Clock House on the left.

Thomas calls this pub by its earlier name – *The First and Last Inn* and he singles out Coleridge's Cottage (191:398) which carries a plaque. 'Coleridge's Cottage from 1797 – 1799' (an older plaque says 1797 – 1800) In *A Literary Pilgrim in England*, Thomas writes, *The last day of 1796 [it should read 1797], when his newly-written 'Ode to the Departing Year' was published, was Coleridge's first day in the cottage at Nether Stowey... Now he was settling down to*



Coleridge's cottage, BM



Samuel Taylor Coleridge, BM



Coleridge's cottage (right) and former First and Last, now The Ancient Mariner, BM

cultivate an acre and a half of garden and devote his evenings to literature, and we have his own word for it that the spade produced 'a callum' on each hand.

The now-restored three-bedroomed cottage was rented by the Coleridge family from 1797 – 1799/1800 from local philanthropist Thomas Poole for £7 p.a. It had a small barn attached. It was small but Coleridge was optimistic, writing in February 1798 to his new friend, the radical republican John Thelwall, 'We are very happy, and my little David Hartley grows a sweet boy. I raise potatoes and all manner of vegetables; have an orchard, and shall raise corn (with the spade) enough for my family. We have two pigs, and ducks and geese. A cow would not answer to keep, for we have whatever milk we want from T. Poole.' Despite his initial optimism, he later referred to it as 'the old hovel'. From here Coleridge and the Wordsworths travelled to Germany in 1798. Wordsworth, writing to Poole from Hamburg, indicates the cottage's drawback: *Pray have the goodness to remove those boxes of ours from that damp room at Mr Coleridges, and lodge them in some perfectly dry place at Stowey. I could wish also that they might be well aired. I mean on the outside as I am afraid things may have already sustained some injury. Either let them be put in the sunshine or before a large fire.* A gate and narrow pathway led to the home of Thomas Poole and Coleridge frequently retired there to read and write in the library. Here he wrote *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, part of *Kubla Khan* and *Frost at Midnight*. In 1798 the two poets published *Lyrical Ballads* which became a foundational text of the Romantic Movement.

Edward Thomas reckoned that Coleridge was inspired by this locality: *Coleridge loved equally mildness and wildness, as I saw them on the one hand in the warm red fields, the gorse smouldering with bloom, the soft delicious greenery of the banks: and on the other hand in the stag's home, the dark bleak ridges of heather or pine, the deep-carved coombs. Mildness, meekness, gentleness, softness, made appeals both sensuous and spiritual to the poet's chaste and voluptuous affections and to something homely in him, while his spirituality, responding to the wildness, branched forth into metaphysics*

14. Return back down Lime St.

and natural magic. Some time passed before the combining was complete.



Lime St.

Pass, on the left, the brick and stone double-storey former Quantock Savings Bank, set up by Thomas Poole and others in 1817.

The double-fronted 29 Lime St is thought to have been the family home of the clockmaker James Cole, father and teacher of his sons Thomas and James Ferguson Cole, eminent as two of the finest Victorian clockmakers. Such family clockmaking concerns were not unusual in villages and small towns. Oakhill near Shepton Mallet had the Hardwick and Roper families operating the same business and Somerset had other notable clockmakers of this period in John Millard of Stogursey and Thomas Pyke of Bridgwater.

The junction of Lime St, St Mary's St and Castle St was the core of the town and probable site of the medieval high cross and market house.

15. Turn into Castle St.



Poole House, Castle St., BM

On the left is the three-tiered red-sandstone 1897 clock tower, topped by a bellcote. In front of it is the 2m Portland stone Stowey war memorial.

At 21 Castle St stands Poole House, the sandstone seven-bayed 17th century home of Thomas 'Tom' Poole (1766–1837), Coleridge's benefactor. The son of a tanner, he was pressed by his father into the business and, despite his dislike of it, mastered it to the admiration of others. Self-educated in the humanities and social sciences, ancient and modern languages, he was also a democrat and a disseminator of radical writings, combining idealism with common sense. After initial Home Office mistrust, his research on the living conditions of the poor and his later work on statistics helped create the Poor Laws. His interests ranged over government and the common ownership of property and he was an advocate of anti-slavery.

He befriended the similarly-minded Southey and Coleridge, settling the latter in his cottage and, further, helped the Wordsworths lease Alfoxton. He supported them financially and practically and both poets visited him to read and write in his 'bookroom' and garden. Through them he came to know Charles Lamb, William Hazlitt, the Wedgewoods and Humphrey Davy. After the Peace of Amiens, he travelled the Continent and



Thomas Poole

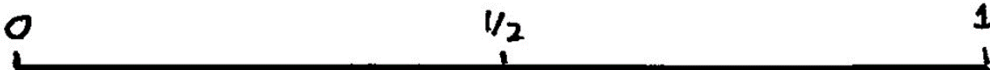
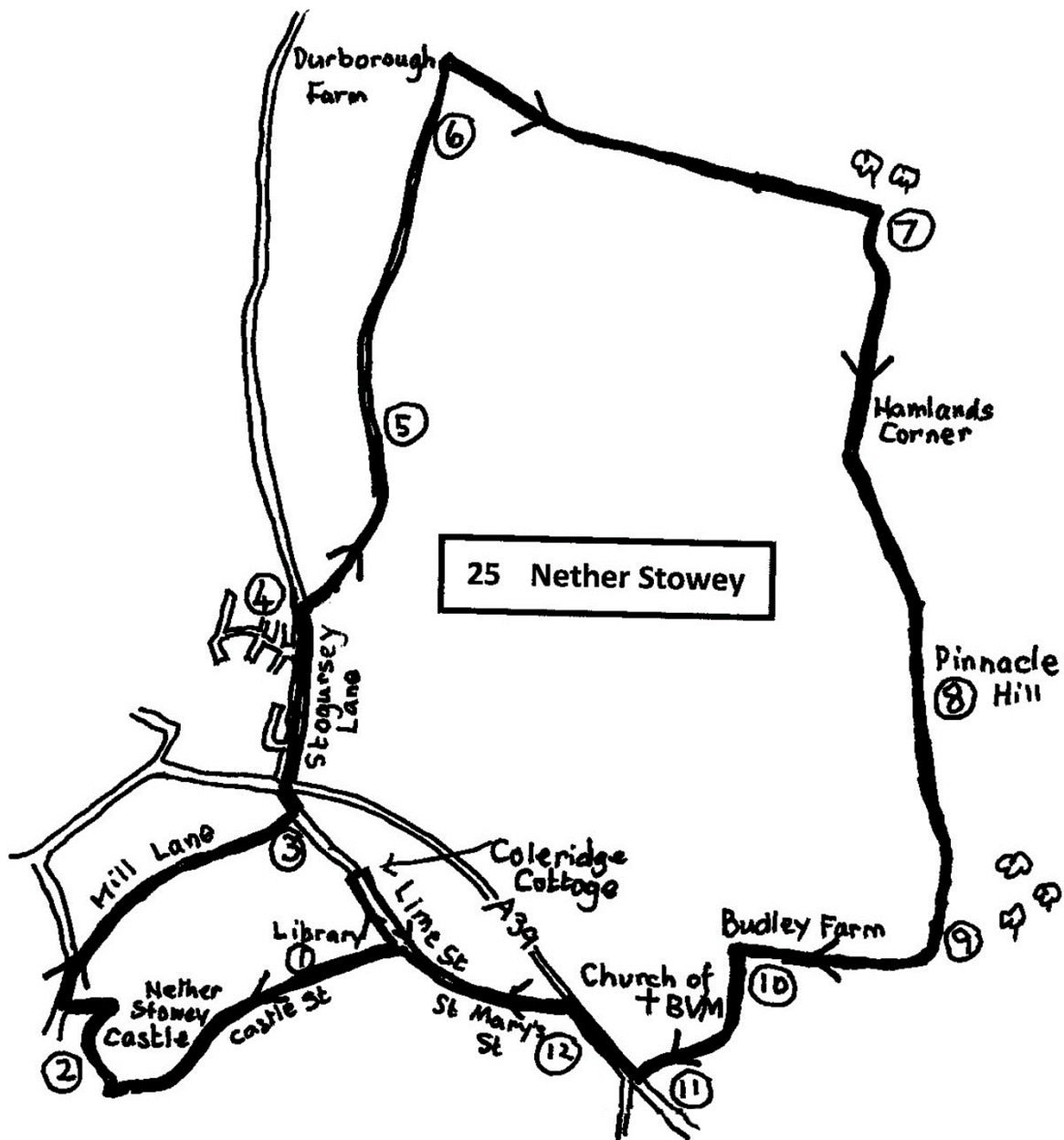
met Thomas Paine in Paris. Stowey benefitted from his generosity in the founding in 1812 an elementary school, the country's second free school (ornately gabled and now the community-run village library and museum) in Castle St as well as a women's Benefit Society.

Thomas de Quincey wrote of him: "for many miles around he was the general arbiter of their disputes, the guide and councilor of their difficulties; beside being appointed executer and guardian to his children by every third man who died, in or about the town of Nether Stowey..."

**16. Return back to the start point
in the car park.**

With thanks to Wendy Britton, Bristol Ramblers and Catherine Carberry

© Benedict Mackay 2021



Approximate scale: 1 mile