

Kilve

Distance: 4.4 miles/ 7 km leisurely walking

In Pursuit of Spring: Chapter 9 Bridgwater to the Sea

Refreshments: The Hood Arms, Kilve TA5 1EA (closed on Mondays) 01278 741114
The Chantry Tea Gardens, Sea Lane, Kilve TA5 1EG

Map: Explorer 140

Getting there:

Trains run to Bridgwater, Minehead and Taunton from where bus services run to Kilve.

If driving, take the A39 to Kilve and park car in car park in Kilve village next to Village Hall and opposite Hood Arms

From the Holford road, Thomas *says two converging hillsides framed a wedge of sea, divided into parallel bands of gray and blue. It came as if it were a reward, an achievement, the unsuspected aim of my meanderings. A long drift of smoke lay over it from the seaward edge of the hills. The bottom of the wedge held the village of Kilve, and, a little apart, the cube of Kilve Court. As if to a goal I raced downhill to Kilve and its brook.*



View of Kilve from the Holford Rd, BM

Kilve was down as Clive (possibly meaning cliff) in Domesday. Artefacts indicate habitation going back to Mesolithic times through the Iron Age and Roman periods. At the end of Saxon rule it comprised Pardlestone in the adjacent Quantock lower slopes, Hill under the neighbouring hill and Kilve itself. It is built on stony clay over marl and gravel. In Thomas's day its five farms cultivated wheat, oats, barley, potatoes and the root crops mangolds and turnips. Besides the public house it had a post office and a wheelwright's workshop. The Queen Anne style Kilve Court was built in 1705 around an earlier residence and embellished further by Clough William-Ellis, creator of the eclectic and idiosyncratic Portmeirion in Gwynedd, North Wales. It now belongs to Somerset Outdoor and Residential

Learning Service (SORLS) which has a focus on outdoor learning.

1. Start from The Hood Arms



The Hood Arms, Kilve, BM

The pub is a 17th cent coaching inn, serving the road between Bridgwater and Minehead. Originally called the Chough and Anchor, its name changed in 1832 to honour the Acland-Hood family, notable local landowners.

I had lunch at the Hood Arms, and made up my mind to stay there for that night. Two o'clock had not long passed when I left the inn and the main road and went north to Kilve Church and the sea.

In Thomas's day, the pub was run by Mr and Mrs Stevens, who were proprietors from 1909 to 1961.

2. Walk to Sea Lane on the far side of The Hood Arms. Turn left and follow the road for 1 mile to the beach.



Cottage in Sea Lane, Kilve, BM

The lane held more older houses than can be seen today, having had many stream-driven watermills. Note the Sun Fire Office fire mark, policy no. 425573, on the wall of the left-hand thatched cottages. Fire insurance companies developed after London's 1666 Great Fire. The Sun Fire company is the oldest documented (founded 1710) and has developed into today's Royal & Sun Alliance. In these early days, the brigade would look for their company's fire mark before tackling a burning building. Lacking such a sign, the firemen would leave or watch along with other spectators.

The byroad accompanied the brook, and skirted its apple orchards and tall poplars wagging myriads of wine-red catkins. The stream rises over 4 miles away up in the Quantocks and is the River Holford. The poplars, along with the oak, willow and alder trees, would have been used in building and crafts such as barrel or basket making. Charcoal was also made for the local smithing and iron-working.

Having passed a mill, a farm, and a cottage or two, the road took me to the church and its big, short-boughed yew tree, and became a farm track only. The small, towered church is a poor place, clean and newly repointed outside, the arches filled in which had apparently communicated with a side chapel, and all its possible crosses lacking. Inside it has a cheap rickety gallery at the tower end, and was being stripped of its plaster to show the wood carving at the cornice. Tablets hang on the wall in memory of people named Cunditt and Sweeting, and of Norah Muriel Sweet-Escott, aged twenty, who died in South Africa of yellow fever.



St Mary's Church, BM

St Mary's Church (146:439), a 14th century Grade II listed building of blue lias stone and slate, was a 12th century foundation. It was much renovated in the 19th and 20th centuries. The tower was built in 1636 to house its two bells.

Thomas adds:

As I was leaving the church, entered the Other Man. Laughing nervously at the encounter, he explained that he had come to Kilve to see if it really had a weathercock. He reminded me of Wordsworth's "Anecdote for Fathers," where the poet pesters his son of five to give his reason for preferring Liswyn to Kilve, until, a broad, gilded vane catching his eye, the child gives the inspired answer:

*At Kilve there is no weather-cock;
And that's the reason why."*

"There is no weather-cock," said the Other Man, laughing a little more freely and disappearing for the last time.

3. Passing the church, the road meets the Chantry, with the Tea Rooms next door.



The Chantry, Edward Thomas

A white-fronted farmhouse, the heavily ivy-mantled chantry adjacent, green mounds of long submerged masonry, and a big knobbly poplar with wine-red catkins, are next neighbours to the church, a stone's throw from the churchyard. The chantry has come to this by several stages. Part of it, for example, has been used as a dwelling, and adapted to purpose by makeshift methods, which now add a sordid, contumelious element to the buildings. Fowls pecked about the chambers in the dust, in the bramble, ivy and nettles. The big poplar stands, or, rather, reclines just off the ground between the chantry and the brook.



Cottages and chantry, BM

The poplars still stand nearby, where a carp pond would have existed to supply the monks of the Chantry. Another protein source were the doves and pigeons; note the dovecots embedded in the walls. The chantry was founded in 1329 as a prayer chapel for Simon de Furneaux and its monks served Kilve. Originally it housed a collegiate monastery and comprised a chapel, solar, refectory and granary. Its decline in 1411 predated the dissolution of the monasteries. The two cottages beside it were once a low-eaved hall and date back to the post-monastic stage when it became the manor house and later Kilve Farm. Local tales say it was used as a smugglers' store. It was gutted by fire in 1848, supposedly fuelled by the secreted contraband brandy barrels.

4. Follow the path to the right of the oil installation.

The 13-foot-high redbrick block building with its cast iron chimney is in fact a retort, a relic



Oil at Kilve, BM

5. Join the West Somerset Coast Path and track it leftwards to the beach.



Kilve Beach, Edward Thomas

of an anticipated oil boom. The cliffs hereabouts hold compacted oil-bearing strata in the fossiliferous shale and lias beds. The oil was discovered in 1916 and the Shaline Company was created by Dr Forbes-Leslie in 1924 for the production of petrol, paraffin, fuel and lubricating oil, with associated cement, tile and brick-making from the shale residue. Authorisation was sought to build an 11-mile railway to Bridgwater. Insufficient funds were raised to develop it and the project collapsed. Forbes-Leslie, a criminal fantasist, was later jailed for fraud.

The running water led me seaward, through a tangled thicket of scrub oak, gorse and bramble, filled in with teasel and burdock, and through a small marshy flag-bed. A low cliff, pierced by the stream, separates the beach from the rough, undulating, briery pasture. This cliff of sand and rock gave me shelter from the wind; the flat gray pebbles gave me a seat; and I looked out to sea. A ragged sky hung threatening over a sea that was placid but corrugated and of the colour of slate, having a margin of black at the horizon. The water was hardly distinguishable, save by its motion, from the broad beach of gray pools, blackened pebbles and low rock edges. Only the most fleeting and narrow lights fell upon the expanse, now on a solitary sail, now on the pale lighthouse of Flat Holm far out. Between the island, which just broke the surface of the sea on the left, and Brean Down, the last post of the mainland on the right, the cloudy pile of Steep Holm towered up.

Not even the sea could altogether detain the eyes from the land scene westward; for there massed and jostled themselves together the main eminences of Exmoor, of a uniform gray, soft and unmoulded, that was lost from time to time either in the wild, hurrying, and fitfully gleaming sky, or in tawny smoke rolling low down from the Quantocks seaward. Hardly less sublime was the long, clear-cut ridge between me and Exmoor, low but precipitous, projecting into the sea a mile or two distant, and bearing a dark church



Kilve Beach from *In Pursuit of Spring*



Kilve Pill

tower like a horn. The fire on the Quantocks now burned scarlet.

The Kilve brook on my left was twisting over the pebbles and the slanting, gray, mossy-weeded rock down to the sea, tossing upon a light but unceasing spray; and pied wagtails flitted from the fresh water to the salt over the rocks. But what I was most glad to see was the meadow pipit. Feebly, like a minor lark, and silently, he launched himself twenty or thirty feet up from the wet dark rock; then, with wings uplifted and body curved to a keel like a crescent, he descended slantwise, singing the most passionate and thrilling-sweet of all songs that 'o'er inform this tenement of clay' until he alighted. Before one had finished another began, and not a moment was the song silenced. Here, too, and among the briers of the rough pasture behind the cliff, the wheatear, as clean as a star, flirted his tail and showed his whiteness.

Jesse Berridge, a dear Oxford friend of Edward Thomas, accompanied him for a large part of the preparatory bike ride for the book. In 1946, long after the poet's death, he wrote of this Kilve visit in 'Edward, a memoir': *As an illustration of his extraordinary talent for giving an intense significance to a single, almost momentary, experience, I recall on that occasion lying on the beach at Kilve. We had just confirmed the fact that there was no weathercock on the church, and were resting in peace and almost in silence. Then he turned and bade me listen. A little melodious twitter sounded from somewhere, and a tiny bird dipped and swooped between us and the sea. 'A meadow pipit,' he said, and the moment became unforgettable. But indeed, he made all things lightly passed over or unnoticed to possess a value only perceived when he made us see with something of the vision he himself possessed. I hold it to be a spiritual value, and whether he would have acknowledged the word or no, there was something of a mystic in his poet's vision.*

The beach, looking out across Bridgwater Bay to South Wales and the Brecon Beacons, is composed of large pebbles, rock and sand. The unstable cliffs derive their contorted

composition and colour from banded blue lias, shale and limestone strata. This Jurassic coastline is rich in fossils of ichthyosaur and plesiosaurus bones, fish remains, bivalves, belemnites, ammonites, crinoids and brachiopods. When the tide retreats it exposes a wave-cut platform with the edges of angled strata creating parallel sinuous lines which hold the water and create rockpools. Kilve Pill, built where the river from Holford meets the coast, was a small port for the importation of an inferior Welsh coal used for lime burning, the remains of the jetty and kiln being still discernible. Tales of smugglers abound.

Regarding the walk ahead: The walk is designed as a circular walk from Kilve to East Quantoxhead and back to Kilve. If desired, it can be cut shorter by taking one of the footpaths off on the left signposted for Kilve or East Quantoxhead

6. Go left, passing the pools, and onto the West Somerset Coast Path, which is part of the England Coast Path. Pass through gate with its warning to keep away from the cliff edge.

Over Exmoor storm and sun quarrelled in the cauldron, but here only one drop fell in each dry, warm pebble and vanished. The wind slackened; the heat grew, the warm, soft grey sky closed in and imprisoned the air which the earth breathed. It was pleasant to get hot out of doors in March.

7. The footpath turns left to avoid a gully. Follow it and then go right, down some concrete crossing steps and follow the coastal path. Go over the stile/gate and continue on the path, now marked the Quantock Hills Waymarked Trail/English Coastal Path. The cliff heights looking over to Wales, which can be seen from Kilve Beach, are now on the right.

It was pleasant to cycle up out of Kilve on the Minehead road, which carried me well up round the end of the Quantocks.

That lovely view of the southern slopes of the Quantocks lies ahead.

8. Continue forward as the path climbs Quantock's Head with fine views across the Bristol Channel to Wales.



Quantoxhead, Edward Thomas

9. At the kissing gate is a junction of three paths. Leave the coastal route and go left through a metal gate in a southerly course for ½ mile on the permissive path of the West Somerset Coast Path.

10. Continue forward through two fields and their metal gates.

11. Pass a mound on the right in the third field and go through the gate at the four-way signpost. Ignore the field gate on the immediate left and go down, taking an easterly course along the ancient pathway of the green lane to East Quantoxhead.

12. At the road go left and follow it to a junction in the village.

13. Walk left towards St Mary's Church and the Court House, fronted by a walled pond.



East Quantoxhead, BM

I took the second turning seaward to East Quantoxhead. The cottage gardens in the lane were rich in wallflowers, daffodils and jonquils; and japonica was blood-red on the walls. Still better were the hedges past the few cottages, because they were green entirely, and were the first I had seen so in that Spring. Nor were they mere thorn or elder hedges, but interwoven elm, thorn, brier and elder, all with their young leaves expanded... The pale Court House and contiguous church of East Quantoxhead, homes of the living and of the dead Luttrells for many centuries, as men go, were still a quarter of a mile away across a wide meadow with oak trees, and I never got nearer.

The Norman family, the Luttrells, owners of Dunster Castle, built the Court House in 1273. It retains its four-storey battlemented tower from the 1400 manor house and most of the rest was constructed in the 1620s with a Jacobean frontage; it was used as a farmhouse till the last century. It has a hall, gallery and bedrooms with fine Flemish plasterwork. Its kitchen range had the capacity to roast a whole cow. It is set in eight acres of garden and woodland. Its name derives from the fact that the 1860s quarter sessions were held here. A small room off the kitchen was used to hold inebriates awaiting sentence.

14. Retrace your steps and continue forward between thatched cottages. This is Frog St; walk for approximately half a mile. On the left are the last houses – 47 and 49 – take the gate/stile immediately on their left.

15. Walk straight across to the hedgerow and stile. Then, follow the signposted direction and walk diagonally rightwards and uphill towards a tiled house on the near horizon.

16. Look for a signpost on the left in the hedgerow and go through a gap into the next field.

17. Walk straight ahead to a small tree clump and go over the stile and across the field to a stile and turn right onto the A39.

18. Cross the road to the hedge opposite and go through the gate. Walk left down the permissive path (with a Kilve Court maze off on the right), through a gate and back to the car park.

Returning to The Hood Arms after his excursion to Williton, Thomas wrote:
Now although I had seemed to be riding continually downhill into Williton, I found it nearly all downhill back to Kilve. The road was like a stream on which I floated in the shadows of trees and steep hillsides. The light was slowly departing, and still on some of the slopes the compact gorse bushes were like flocks of golden fleeces. Robins and blackbirds sang while bats were flitting about me. Day was not dead but sleeping, and the few stars overhead asked silence. By the turning to East Quantoxhead some cottagers talked in low tones. Kilve, dark and quiet, showed one or two faint lights. Only when I lay in bed did I recognize the two sounds that made the murmurous silence of Kilve – the whisper of its brook, and the bleat of sheep very far off.

The next day, he left Kilve for the last day of his journey to the ‘grave of winter’ on Cothelstone Hill:

When I awoke at six, the light was good, but it was the light of rain. One thrush alone was singing, a few starlings whistled. And the rain lasted until half-past eight. Then the sunlight enshrined itself in the room, the red road glistened, a Lombardy poplar at Kilve Court waved against a white sky only a little blemished by gray, and I started again westward. The black stain of yesterday’s fire on the hill was very black, the new privet leaves very green, and the stitchwort very white in the arches of the dense grass. The end of rain, as I hoped, was sung away by missel thrushes in the roadside oaks, by a chain of larks’ songs which must have reached all over England.

With thanks to Wendy Britton, Bristol Ramblers, Claire Reddeman, Edward and Nicholas Mackay,

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