

Farnham

Distance: 3.1km / 1.9 miles leisurely walking

In In Pursuit of Spring: Chapter 3 Guildford to Dunbridge

Refreshments: Multiple pubs and eating places

Map: Explorer 145 (Guildford)

Getting there:

By public transport or by car, this walk starts in the car park in South Street, next to Sainsbury's supermarket.

Edward Thomas's route from The Hog's Back took him *down among the market gardens and florists' plantations, past the Shepherd and Flock at the turning to Moor Park, to the Wey again, and the first oast house beside it, and so into Farnham at a quarter to nine, which I felt to be breakfast time.*

Farnham lies in the Wey valley at the junction of the chalk North Downs (the Hog's Back is their western end) and beds of Gault Clay, Upper and Lower Greensand. Originally a Saxon village, the town grew as a staging post and trading place at the crossing of a London route to the Southwest and the London-Southampton road. The building of an episcopal garrisoned castle gave it greater prominence. The medieval woollen industry and the preparation of cloth was important as was greenware pottery manufacture, which benefitted from a clay supply and turfs in nearby heaths. Wheat and hop-growing and the associated brewing dominated in the 17th – 19th centuries. The town population more than doubled to 9,265 between 1801 and Thomas's 1913 visit. The advent of the railway in 1848 and the town's attraction as a locale for fashionable villas contributed to its growth. As a commuter town it has grown rapidly since WWII.

1. Go on to South Street and right along Union Rd.

2. Cross this and through Gostrey Park going diagonally to the left.

This leisure ground was laid out on former wasteland in 1910.

3. Cross the bridge

Thomas writes, *The whole of this waterside is attractive, rustic, but busy. The Wey is already a strong stream there, and timber yards and warehouses abut on it.* On the left is Abbey St where he notes the **Lamb Inn**, a pub since at least 1867 and rebuilt in 1928.

4. Straight ahead is The William Cobbett pub (841:465).

In Thomas's day, this was The Jolly Farmer. *The sun shone for me to go to the Jolly Farmer across the Wey, in a waterside street of cottages and many inns.... Cobbett's birthplace, a small inn standing back a little, with a flat back and a white front, was labelled Cobbett's birthplace, in letters as big as are usually given to the name of the brewer. It is built up against a low sandy bank, which*



The Jolly Farmer, Cobbett's birthplace 1909; Hugh Thompson



Cobbett, Sheila Mitchell

5. Go back over the bridge and walk up Longbridge.

6. Turn left onto Union Street which becomes Downing Street. Before following this right, a short walk ahead along **Lower Church Lane** leads to **St Andrew's Church**.

continues above the right shore of the Wey, somewhat conspicuously, for miles. Behind the Jolly Farmer, this bank is a cliff, hollowed out into caves (no one knows how old, or whether made by Druids or smugglers), and overgrown by bushes and crowned by elms full of rook's nests.

In the pub car park there is currently a larchwood screen. Peer behind it and the mouths of the caves can be seen, bricked up and choked with rubbish. The elms have gone but the cliff face still rises above, shrouded in shrubs and trees.

Cobbett was born here in 1763. He was a reformist MP, a radical writer of courage, forthrightness and plain speaking for which he suffered exile and imprisonment. His career was tumultuous but influential. Famed for his *Rural Rides* amongst his many writings, he was critical of the secrecy surrounding parliamentary debates. He initiated the reporting of Parliamentary reports in 1802, printed by Thomas Hansard, his appointed printer, from 1809. Both men were punished in a vindictive trial for seditious libel in 1810. His body lies outside the main door in St Andrew's churchyard in Upper Church Lane, which is an 11th century building on a 7th century foundation.

On the left is a statue of Cobbett on horseback, with his attentive dog at his side. Thomas had commented, *I looked in vain for a statue of Cobbett in Farnham. Long may it be before there is one, for it will probably be bad and certainly unnecessary. So long as Rural Rides is read he needs not to share that kind of resurrection of the just with Queen Anne and the late Dukes of Devonshire and of Cambridge.* The late Sheila Mitchell, a resident artist of Farnham, regretting the lack of memorial to him, created a small bronze which has been sized up (not enough to my mind) and now stands within the forecourt of the Churchill retirement complex.

The church was originally a chapel of ease for Waverley Abbey. Cobbett is buried opposite the north door. The present cruciform limestone church originated on a Saxon site in the second half of the 12th century. It was



Hop harvest, Surrey early 20th century

adapted and extended in the 14th century and its nave was reconstructed in the 15th. It has a hammer-beam roof. The 16th century tower was heightened to 115 feet/35m in 1865 after the church had been 'restored'. It has undergone many subsequent improvements. Its stained glass is mainly Victorian and the east window was designed by Augustus Pugin and exhibited in the 1851 Great Exhibition before installation in the church. There are memorials in the west tower to Cobbett and George Sturt (1863 – 1927), the latter with lettering by Eric Gill. Edward Thomas reviewed many of Sturt's books written under the pseudonym George Bourne. There is also a memorial to Augustus Toplady, author of the hymn *Rock of Ages*, who was born in Farnham and baptised in the church in 1740.

Thomas had an appraising eye for public houses, noting many in Farnham which, being in hop-growing country, was well supplied with them. Originally, they would have served yeoman farmers and labourers as well as the many pilgrims heading for Canterbury along the Pilgrim's Way. Hops and beer-making later became a staple of Farnham's economy: John Aubrey said that hop-growing began in the area in the late 16th century. It flourished, particularly from the 18th century, because of the encouraging combination of the slopes on either side of the River Wey, a supportive temperate climate and a moderate rainfall. By 1800 there were with over 1000 acres of hop grounds around the town and there were regional hop grounds in nearby Alton and as far south as Petersfield. Farnham's hops, particularly its 'Whitebine', were highly prized. The building of nearby Aldershot as an Army camp in 1854 led to an influx of military personnel who enjoyed Farnham's services; many pubs were built to meet the demand. Local brewing companies amalgamated in 1889 as Farnham United Breweries. Peak acreage of 1,592 acres had been achieved in 1875 and the early Autumn hop-picking and drying season dominated the town. Local writer George Sturt quotes Grover, his gardener, as saying of 19th century Farnham, 'A good many men used to make purty near a livin' goin' round brewin' for people.'

7. Return back to Downing Street and follow it to the left.

8. Turn left into West Street.



West St, Farnham 1904



Willmer House, Farnham Museum

9. **Cross over and return back along West Street.**

10. **Turn left and go through The Lion and Lamb Yard** (plenty of eating places)



Augustus Toplady

11. **At the end turn right and walk to Castle Street via Longarden Walk.**

12. **Cross Castle St; turn left and walk uphill.**



Farnham Castle, 1909; Hugh Thompson

Competition from Kent and the Continent led to price-erosion and decline. Farnham's last hop ground closed in 1976 – the owner blamed European Union regulations. Office accommodation, retail outlets and car parks now cover the old hop grounds.

In Downing St, Thomas mentions **The Bird in Hand** and **The Hop Bag**. The former was at 43 and was a brick-built and timber-framed alehouse in the 1750s. It closed in 1928 and was later demolished with shops being built on the site. The latter, another brick-built inn, was at 63 but was demolished in 1989 and offices stand in its place. This alehouse was renamed from the Adam and Eve in 1755 to the King of Prussia in 1794. It became The Pocket of Hops and was destroyed by fire in 1868. It was later known as The Hop Bag, and reconstructed in 1906 as the pub which Thomas noted.

West Street was Edward Thomas's eventual route out of the town. *Farnham West Street was for the moment warm in the sun as I walked slowly between its shops to where the porched brick fronts of decent old houses were scarcely interrupted by a quiet shop or two and the last inns, the Rose and Thistle and the Holly Bush.* West Street is also on the Pilgrim's Way. The Holly Bush, 37 West Street and on the corner with Bishop's Mead, was a beer house in the 1880s and closed in 1939. The Rose and Thistle which stood at 47 West Street, on a corner with Mead Lane, was closed in 1933 and is currently an Indian Restaurant. Between these two former pubs is the Museum of Farnham, a small museum in the former Willmer House (named after Miss Wilmer who ran a girls' boarding school here in the 1820s), built in 1718 over a medieval edifice. Charles I stayed here on his way to London and execution. It houses a range of displays from archaeology to art. It has a study room with material on the town and holds original copies of the works of Cobbett, of whom there is a bust in the garden.

Thomas says of this street, *it is one of those streets in which a hundred houses have been welded into practically one block. There are some very old houses, some that are old, and some not very old, but altogether compose one*

13. Ascend the Bishop Fox steps to the keep. If visiting this, go right.

14. Go left at the top of the steps to Farnham Park by skirting the castle walls which will now be on the right.

15. Follow right, past the Farnham Cricket Club, and enter the park itself.

16. Go down the slope to the path at the base of the castle and follow it round to the right.

17. Follow the direction of the waymarker on the fence down Scholars' Greenway between the redbrick walls.

18. With Bear Lane ahead, turn right along Park Row to the junction with Castle St. The Nelson Arms will be on the right.

19. Proceed left down the frontage of the almshouses

long, uneven wall of rustic urbanity. Note **Malthouse Yard** on the left with its setts and brick hop worker's cottage. Thomas has a well-observed description of hop-drying in Ch 16 of *The South Country*. Cobbett wrote in *Rural Rides*, *There appear to be hops, here and there, all along from nearly at Dover to Alton, in Hampshire. You find them all along Kent; you find them in Westerham; across at Worth in Sussex; at Godstone, in Surrey; over to the north of Merrow Down, near Guildford; at Godalming; under the Hog's Back, at Farnham; and all along that way to Alton. But there, I think, they end.*

On the site of Elphick's, formerly a Victorian department store, was 10 West Street, the birthplace of Augustus Toplady of *Rock of Ages* fame.

This market street has many gracious Georgian townhouse frontages which mask much earlier buildings. The wealth from corn and hop-growing made possible such fashionable transformations, using locally-made red bricks. Castle Street remains as Thomas found it, named, he says, *from the Bishop of Winchester's castle, a palace of old red brick and several cedars standing at its upper end. Being about three times as broad as West Street, it is fit to be compared for breadth with the streets of Marlborough, Wootton Bassett, or Epsom. Most of the houses are private and not big, of red or of plastered or whitened brick; but here is a baker's shop, a Nelson's Arms and a row of green-porched almshouses. At the far end the street rises and curves a little to the left, and is narrowed by the encroachment of front gardens only possessed by the houses at this point. A long flight of steps above this curve [836:472] ascends a green slope of arum and ivy and chestnut trees, past an episcopal fruit wall, and two black, many storied cedars towering at its front door.* The story goes that these steps, which mount in sets of seven, seven paces between each section, were built to aid Richard Foxe (1448 – 1528), a cleric experienced in politics and diplomacy and successively Bishop of Exeter, Bath and Wells, Durham, and Winchester. Blind in his later years, the

20. Return left along West Street.



George Sturt

steps are said to have helped him negotiate his way to his castle-home. The castle, where Cobbett worked as a farm labourer in his youth, is run by English Heritage and admission may be had to the keep. Parliament held Farnham Castle during the Civil War and they slighted the keep. The site was owned by the Bishops of Winchester and they used its buildings as a residence until 1927.

The castle ruins and the former domestic range will be seen over the intact walls.

An option at this point would be to explore the park. The town walk itself will carry on from point 17.



21. Take the footpath to Victoria Rd, go up to the traffic lights and cross to return to the starting point.

The Nelson Arms was an amalgam three medieval cottages, which are marked by the low ceilings at its rear. It was first known as The Hand and Pen, being the alehouse for the pen-pushing scribes in the episcopal courts. It became a Jug and Bottle in the 17th century. As the Baker's Arms, the pub was extended in 1729 and became The Nelson in honour of the admiral who used to visit Lady Emma Hamilton who lived nearby on Firgrove Hill. Note the 1619 alms-houses and the plaque on Lloyd's bank (its Victorian predecessor of Thomas's day was replaced by the current building in 1932) which commemorates the first two-minute silence held here prior to an agricultural fair at 11 a.m. on 10 May 1916, predating by two years Cape Town's claim to be the first place to hold this commemorative act.

Ahead, at the junction with South St is East St. In 1923 Sturt published the autobiographical work *The Wheelwright's shop*, based on the

family business. It stood as Sturt and Goatcher, coach builders, at no 84 East St and is now buried under 21st century developments. Thomas reviewed several of his earlier works: *The Bettsworth Book* (1901), *Memoirs of a Surrey Labourer: A Record of the Last Years of Frederick Bettsworth* (1907), *The Ascending Effort* (1910), *Change in the Village* (1912) and, in 1914, *Lucy Bettsworth*.

In his chapter *Guildford to Dunbridge*, Thomas writes of Sturt as one *who combines the true countryman and the writer. I mean, of course, George Bourne, author of "The Bettsworth Book," a volume which ought to go on to the most select shelf of country books, even beside those of White, Cobbett, Jefferies, Hudson, and Burroughs... he shows himself a man with a ripe and generous, if staid, view of life, and a writer capable of more than accurate writing... No one has told better how a peasant who has not toned his other virtues with thrift is deserted in the end by God and even the majority of men. The "Memoirs" are shadowed from the first by the helplessness of Bettsworth's epileptic wife. The whole of his last year was a dimly lighted, solitary, manly agony... Now, a statue of Frederick Bettsworth might well be placed at the foot of Castle Street, to astonish and annoy, if a sculptor could be found.*

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