‘ONLY THE QUALITY OF A WORK-GROUND’: PLANNING DISPUTES IN HARDY’S WESSEX

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‘Save Hardy’s Bockhampton from Development’ read one of the many placards opposing the construction of seventy new houses in the village associated with Thomas Hardy’s youth (see Figure 1).[1] Kingston Maurward College, who owned the land, defended the autumn 2014 proposal in terms of the funds that they required to expand their provision of land-based studies.[2] Such planning disputes occur across the British countryside each year, but the distinctive feature of this campaign was the emphasis that it placed on the literary status of the proposed site. Allusions to Hardy and his writing appeared on many of the placards, only to increase when heritage and conservation organisations such as the Open Spaces Society added their support.

My interest in recalling the event for this forum is to consider how Hardy’s work enabled campaigners to articulate otherwise intangible understandings of place. In so doing, I want to think critically about the effects that such articulations have on the governance of space today. Hardy and his writing stood for a set of values that had seemed to be

Figure 1: ‘Save Hardy’s Bockhampton from Development’*: A placard displayed in Lower Bockhampton during the autumn of 2014. Photographed by the author.*

neglected or ignored by the college, builders, and local government. But which interpretations of Hardy's novels did the campaign foreground and which did it neglect? How might other actors have drawn upon Hardy's writing to support their own arguments? The countryside of the novels is already marked by the kinds of change that the protestors oppose: buildings new and old stand on landscapes that have been substantially altered by agriculture, new railway lines, and telegraph poles. In pursuing these questions, this essay does not take a particular position in the dispute, or indeed argue that one side or the other was more or less faithful to the position that Hardy, if he had been alive now, would have taken. We have no way of knowing if Hardy's attention to local particularity would have seen him raise a placard against a homogenous new housing development and the resultant loss of green space. Nor can we know if Hardy's alertness to social injustice would have caused him to side with those struggling amidst a housing crisis, or indeed with those students of Kingston Maurward College seeking livelihoods in the countryside that his work celebrated. Instead, this article takes up Peter Widdowson's call to read Hardy as a 'cultural figure of the present',[3] which means paying attention to the ways that his writing is appropriated for the concerns of today. Hardy's appearance in the Bockhampton campaign tells us something about how, and why, he still matters now.

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Like the Lower Bockhampton planning dispute in 2014, the relationship between the Hardy family and the Kingston Maurward estate had always been defined by building, development, and the competing interests of landowners and residents. In 1801 Hardy's paternal grandfather arrived at nearby Upper Bockhampton with his wife and daughter as tenants in a cottage built for them by Hardy's great-grandfather, John.[4] The cottage was only a mile or so away from the buildings at the centre of the estate and was therefore a convenient location for a bricklayer and stonemason to find work. Records suggest that the Hardys subsequently derived a significant income from the estate.[5] Hardy's cottage, today often understood as a survival from an idyllic rural past, was therefore shaped by the economic circumstances of Victorian estate improvement. The relationship between landowner and tenant developed in the 1840s when the estate passed into the hands of the Martin family, who then established the first school that young Hardy attended in 1848. A fracture soon emerged when Hardy's mother abruptly moved her son to another establishment, Isaac Last's British School in Dorchester. The supply of

estate business on which the Hardy family had relied soon came to an end.[6]

These biographical details informed the planning dispute when the Bockhampton campaigners produced a map showing the proximity of the new development to landmarks captioned 'The Old School House' and 'Hardy's route from home'.[7] 'Save Hardy's Bockhampton from Development' (see Figure 1) also appeared on one of the placards, positioning Hardy as the custodian of an unchanged place in which the residents now lived. Increasing local and national media coverage depicted the Dorset novelist taking a personal interest in the issue, observing or remarking upon matters from his grave in Stinsford that lay down the river path straddling one side of the development. The Open Spaces Society commented in the *Daily Mail* that 'Thomas Hardy would turn in his grave at the prospect of this massive development in his native hamlet'.[8] This image of sage Hardy, wryly observing the passing of events before him, had featured in the previous year's coverage of plans to introduce wind farms in nearby Tolpuddle. In a piece in *The Times* titled 'Wind Turbines Madden Hardy Crowds', a resident at nearby Waterston Manor anticipated the writer's personal judgment by remarking that 'Hardy would probably be able to see these wind turbines from his final resting place at Stinsford'.[9]

Hardy largely avoided linking his work to public campaigns. An exception came in 1910 when he reluctantly permitted *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874) to be quoted in opposition to the proposed extension of the church at Puddletown (or Piddletown in Victorian usage), the site of his grandparents' marriage in December 1799.[10] He explained to Hugh Thackeray Turner, Secretary of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB), that his 'imaginary story' was likely to garner public support for the cause 'even though we suppose it bestowed for foolish reasons'.[11] More commonly, Hardy made the effects of building and development the subject of the writing itself. In his poem 'The Levelled Churchyard' (1882), the speaker pleads for the sighs and groans of the dead to be saved from the 'zealous Churchmen's pick and plane'.[12] The architectural critic Kester Rattenbury has recently argued that Hardy should be considered 'the greatest conservation thinker and campaigner of all time' in light of such writing.[13] While Hardy's work certainly shares features with the conservation movement — particularly its appreciation for places, whether man-made or natural, as containers of history — it is more often concerned with registering the unpredictable,

open-ended changes that occur through time.[14] For this reason Hardy's writing sits awkwardly with campaigns against development today. As Catherine Charlwood argued in this journal last year, citing 'The Levelled Churchyard' in a recent campaign to prevent the HS2 railway from running into old church ground evoked 'the same sort of questioning that those poems perform'.[15]

Hardy was even more reserved when it came to the protection of the natural environment. He did not join such organisations as the Commons Preservation Society, whose leader, Octavia Hill, called on 'Government, while there is still time', to protect 'the small portion of unenclosed ground, which is the common inheritance of us all as English men and women'.[16] In 1899 Hardy wrote in favour of protecting the 2000 acres of land around Stonehenge, but his argument to secure 'control of the surroundings of the monument' was made on historical rather than ecological grounds.[17] Neither was he averse to development undertaken for good reason, as shown when in July 1927 he gave a speech (his final public appearance) upon the relocation of Dorchester Grammar School to the outskirts of the town. Noting that the new buildings were pitched in 'open surroundings, elevated and bracing situation, and dry subsoil', Hardy supported the move on the basis that the previous school 'no longer supplied the needs of the present inhabitants for the due education of their sons'.[18] This was entirely consistent with the manifesto of the SPAB, which advised that it was always best to raise 'another building rather than alter or enlarge the old one'.[19] Hardy, then, balanced his fondness for the past with a recognition of the changing demands of the present.

It would be a mistake to assume that the Hardy invoked in the Bockhampton protest referred to the individual writer and the personal views that he expressed on the subject of development. Widdowson reminds us that there have, and continue to be, several 'Hardys', whose 'meaning, status and value' vary according to particular concerns at different times in history. According to Widdowson, the conception of Hardy that has nonetheless become predominant, buoyed by certain nationalist and political discourses, is 'the supreme poet of the English landscape'.[20] Another placard, 'Don't Destroy Hardy's Heritage' (see Figure 2), alluded to Hardy as this kind of literary custodian. Similarly, Lord Julian Fellowes, creator of the television period drama Downton Abbey and resident of West Stafford a mile from Lower Bockhampton, appealed to an image of Hardy as the timeless poet by linking his

Figure 2: 'Don't Destroy Hardy's Heritage'*: A placard displayed in Lower Bockhampton during the autumn of 2014. Photographed by the author.*

writing to the Dorset hamlet that has 'been the same size for hundreds of years'. In contrast, the plans for development, forecast to treble the size of Lower Bockhampton, were by Fellowes presented as a threat to these interwoven natural, historical, and imaginary influences. Fellowes described the new houses as an 'atom bomb' and a 'sledgehammer blow' that will 'obliterate the village'.[21]

Those protestors opposing the new houses were also aided by the Localism Act of 2011, which sought to devolve decision-making from central government to local communities. Despite providing new formal powers to the residents of such villages as Lower Bockhampton, questions soon emerged as to whether the brand of 'guided localism' that

the act endorsed would retain the distinctive voices of local communities within top-down planning procedures.[22] In Lower Bockhampton, Hardy's fiction seemed to at least partly solve this problem by providing a point of reference that local residents, tourists, the media, and the local council understood and valued. Indeed, once the protestors had grounded an understanding of their locality in the literary, the threat that they were opposing could be made more explicit. Another of their signs read, 'Kingston Maurward: Destroyer of the Countryside' (see Figure 3). The very definition of the rural was now up for debate: the countryside as a place of work set against the countryside as unchanging and struggling against destruction.

Figure 3: 'Kingston Maurward: Destroyer of the Countryside'*: A placard displayed in Lower Bockhampton during the autumn of 2014. Photographed by the author.*

A similar opposition is evident in the opening chapters of *Jude the Obscure* (1895), where the modernizing present co-exists with a rural past that is fading in memory. A well-shaft is described standing as 'the only relic of the local history that remained absolutely unchanged'. 'How ugly it is here!', Jude remarks, looking upon the fields on which he has laboured that day. Before him lies an utilitarian expanse grafted on to older ground:

> The fresh harrow-lines seemed to stretch like the channellings in a piece of new corduroy, lending a meanly utilitarian air to the expanse, taking away its gradations, and depriving it of all history beyond that of the few recent months, though to every clod and stone there really attached associations enough and to spare—echoes of songs from ancient harvest-days, of spoken words, and of sturdy deeds. Every inch of ground had been the site, first or last, of energy, gaiety, horse-play, bickerings, weariness. Groups of gleaners had squatted in the sun on every square yard. Love-matches that had populated the adjoining hamlet had been made up there between reaping and carrying. Under the hedge which divided the field from a distant plantation girls had given themselves to lovers who would not turn their heads to look at them by the next harvest; and in that ancient cornfield many a man had made love-promises to a woman at whose voice he had trembled by the next seed-time after fulfilling them in the church adjoining. But this neither Jude nor the rooks around him considered. For them it was a lonely place, possessing, in the one view, only the quality of a work-ground, and in the other that of a granary good to feed in.[23]

This passage captures the various and competing valuations of the landscape at play in Hardy's writing. There is that deep consciousness of the past, the 'associations' that the land retains, with memories still contained within small and disregarded natural objects ('every clod and stone'). Those physical traces carry a nostalgia for the lost days of past lives, from the arguments and promises of lovers to the fulfilment found in engaged physical work: 'energy, gaiety, horse-play, bickerings, weariness'. But, as Ian Duncan points out, the passage does more than infuse the natural world with the joyous associations of distant community. The simple qualification, that 'neither Jude nor the rooks around him considered' the above associations, divorces the present from the resources of past feeling and enacts what Duncan calls 'an austere

refusal of that communal life'.[24] The novel is irredeemably situated in a world in which landscape is understood as 'work-ground', in many ways closer to a new housing development than to a rural idyll. Indeed, 'a tall new building' has already been erected by 'a certain obliterator of historic records who had run down from London and back in a day.' (*JO:* 6) Although the field on which Jude stands has been farmed by generations before him, he feels unusually adrift in its current arrangement, with additions such as the 'brand-new church tower' doing little to ease his plight. The present uses of the land disturb and unsettle its values in the past, working and building upon the ground in ways that are insensitive to the human resonance contained there.

In *Jude* more generally development and building tend to exclude and divide: the narrator frequently sides with those characters who escape from windows and wander from one house to the next. In contrast, *The Woodlanders* (1887) affirms the necessity of buildings as a basis for human security and comfort. The 'countryman' Giles Winterbourne loses his rightful property due to the unfair leases that his family members have been obliged to sign.[25] Mrs Charmond's ruthless acquisition brings financial precarity and damages Giles's relationships and livelihood: 'by those houses hung many things', the reader is told. When Michael Henchard and his family arrive at the village of Weydon-Priors in the opening chapter of *Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) the housing issue exposes similar inequalities. Henchard asks if any new and affordable housing is available, but, in response, is told that in the last two years eight houses have been destroyed and their occupants left homeless. *A Laodicean* (1881) depicts more prosperous developments: 'half-a-dozen genteel and modern houses, of the detached kind usually found in such suburbs' stand 'without the town boundary' of Markton, the spread of 'mushroom modernism' bringing an 'air of healthful cheerfulness' – an at least partly sardonic allusion to the rapid spread of this kind of late-nineteenth century suburban architecture.[26]

In Hardy's fiction buildings are depicted in markedly diverse ways. If *Jude* comes closest to a conservationist outlook, sceptical of change, *A Laodicean* explores the positive consequences of development. Subtitled a 'Story of To-Day', the novel considers how technologies and architectural styles can help to support new kinds of social relations. In an early chapter, the London architect George Somerset notices 'a single wire of telegraph running parallel with his track on tall poles', emitting 'a hum as of a night-bee' arising 'from the play of the breezes' above

it. Telegraph poles, which began to appear across Britain following the Electric Telegraph Company Act of 1846, are described supporting a 'friendly wire' that orientates Somerset on his journey through the darkness, and thereby the plot of the story. The modern infrastructure 'sang on overhead with dying falls and melodious rises that invited him to follow' while he makes his way towards the mediaeval castle where he will find romance; the reader is told that 'it was not the first time during his present tour that he had found his way at night by the help of these musical threads which the post-office authorities had erected all over the country'. (*AL*: 21). The telegraph network amplifies the particularities of place in a text that is intrigued by change and alert to its unexpected effects.[27]

The telegraph poles of *A Laodicean* also remind us of the connections between the local and the nation that were being forged at the time of Hardy's writing, connections that also drove the reception and popularity of his literary creation Wessex. Hardy's readers were very often city-dwellers from outside the region and, from the 1900s onwards, legions of what he called 'hunters for the real' arrived in Dorset to look for the places that had inspired the fiction.[28] In 1912 he noted how the 'press and the public' had welcomed his 'fanciful plan' of 'imagining a Wessex population living under Queen Victoria' until it had 'solidified into a utilitarian region which people can go to, take a house in, and write to the papers from'.[29] Wessex outlived the writer who had first imagined it, as it soon became reproduced in heritage, education, and tourism discourse, thereby establishing the terms in which Hardy's writing was to appear in planning disputes.[30] This Wessex, now free of its creator, tended to exclude work, building, and even conflict as features of the countryside – a Wessex separate from, rather than implicated in, modernity and change.

The Wessex brand, which in the twenty-first century has become global in reach, served a crucial function in the Bockhampton dispute. In the *Daily Mail* Fellowes, whose own television production 'Downton Abbey' makes imaginative use of the nineteenth century, asserted that 'people from around the world come to visit to see where Hardy lived and where he wrote and the places that inspired him'. 'One cannot understate how much the local area inspired Hardy', he continued. The Open Space Society similarly positioned the village as a 'popular tourist destination because of its association with Hardy' and for this reason opposed the 'alien and overpowering development'.[31] Lower

Bockhampton remained in view as a location that 'inspired Hardy', but the real work was performed by an idea of Wessex upheld in the minds of the readers and the tourists from outside the region. In the end it was this national media coverage and its direct appeal to global visitors that ensured the campaign's success. By January 2015, *The Telegraph* could report 'Fellowes' delight after Hardy country planning application is withdrawn'. Kingston Maurward's decision to reverse the application before it had been fully considered by the Council was more likely prompted by the negative press coverage than the 250 or so formal objectors to the scheme. 'I don't think the college completely understood their role as carers in the Thomas Hardy story', wrote Fellowes.[32]

The new theories of place put forward in recent years may help to account for the complexities of Wessex that have been the subject of this article. Rather than seeing place in physical terms, cultural geographers have suggested that places are 'always being re-articulated through the social interactions that happen there'.[33] As Tim Ingold writes: 'the forms people build, whether in the imagination or on the ground, arise within the current of their involved activity, in the specific relational contexts of their practical engagement with their surroundings'.[34] Even a setting such as Egdon Heath in *The Return of the Native* (1878) that seems to transcend human influence – 'unaltered as the stars overhead' and resistant to 'pickaxe, plough, or spade' – depends upon 'intelligible facts regarding landscape' from the Domesday Book to make the place intelligible to the reader.[35] The examples from *Jude the Obscure* and *A Laodicean* considered above also rely on human creations in order to interpret the countryside. Moreover, this account of place helps us to understand the Wessex of Hardy's imagining and the Wessex of the Bockhampton campaign as distinct but related interpretations of surroundings that their creators know well. The writing and the protest both cherish the forms that land has taken in the past and puzzle over how it will be used in the future.

NOTES

[1] This article draws on research supported by Great Western Research and the National Trust. Early ideas were presented and developed at Jos Smith's 'Vibrant Localism' conference at the University of Exeter. Many thanks to the anonymous reviewer for their constructive suggestions.

[2] 'Thomas Hardy "Would turn in grave" at Lower Bockhampton housing plans', *BBC*, 25 November 2014, www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-dorset-30200622, accessed 21 October 2019.

[3] Peter Widdowson, *Hardy in History: A Study in Literary Sociology* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 6.

[4] Michael Millgate, *Thomas Hardy, a Biography Revisited* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 12.

[5] Millgate, p. 13.

[6] Millgate, pp. 44–48.

[7] For this map and other images of the placards see Dan Bloom, 'Stay far from the madding crowd', *Daily Mail*, 27 November 2014, www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2851523/Stay-Far-Madding-Crowd-Downton-Abbey-writer-Julian-Fellowes-fights-plans-new-housing-estate-near-cottage-Thomas-Hardy-wrote-famous-novel.html, accessed 21 October 2019.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ben Webster, 'Wind turbines madden Hardy crowds', *The Times*, 4 November 2013, www.thetimes.co.uk/article/wind-turbines-madden-hardy-crowds-xqplx3n8fvm>, accessed 21 October 2019.

[10] Kester Rattenbury, *The Wessex Project: Thomas Hardy, Architect* (London: Lund Humphries, 2018), pp. 211–13; Millgate, p. 12.

[11] Thomas Hardy to Turner, 7 Feb 1910, quoted in C. J. P. Beatty, *Thomas Hardy: Conservation Architect* (Dorchester: Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society, 1995), p. 44.

[12] Thomas Hardy, *Collected Poems of Thomas Hardy*, II vols (London: Macmillan, 1919), I, p. 145.

[13] Rattenbury, p. 217.

[14] Benjamin Cannon, '"The true meaning of the word restoration": Architecture and obsolescence in *Jude the Obscure*', *Victorian Studies*, 56.2 (2014), 201–24.

[15] Catherine Charlwood, '"What Profit?": The morality of mourning and remembering in Hardy's verse', *Thomas Hardy Journal*, 33 (2017), 25.

[16] Octavia Hill, *Our Common Land and Other Short Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1877), p. 17.

[17] Rattenbury, p. 213.

[18] Thomas Hardy, *Thomas Hardy's Public Voice*, ed. Michael Millgate (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 464.

[19] Quoted in J.W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris*, 2 vols. (London, 1899), p. 343.

[20] Widdowson, p. 55.

[21] *Mail,* 27 November 2014.

[22] Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG), 'You've got the power: A quick and simple guide to community rights', www.gov.uk/government/publications/youve-got-the-power-a-quick-and-simple-guide-to-community-rights/youve-got-the-power-a-quick-and-simple-guide-to-community-rights,

accessed 21 October 2019; Patrick Devine Wright, Jos Smith, and Susana Batel, '"Positive parochialism", Local belonging and ecological concerns: Revisiting Common Ground's Parish Maps project', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 44.2 (2019), 407–21.

[23] Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*, ed. Patricia. Ingham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 5, 8, 8–9. Subsequent references to this text are to this edition and given parenthetically in the text.

[24] Ian Duncan, 'The provincial or regional novel' in Patrick Brantlinger and William B. Thesing, eds., *A Companion to the Victorian Novel* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2007), p. 321.

[25] Thomas Hardy, *The Woodlanders*, ed. Dale Kramer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 98, p. 91.

[26] Thomas Hardy, *A Laodicean*, ed. Jane Gatewood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 44, 43. Subsequent references to this text are to this edition and given parenthetically in the text.

[27] For an in-depth account of Hardy's depiction of telegrams see Karin Koehler, *Thomas Hardy and Victorian Communication: Letters, Telegrams and Postal Systems* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), chapter 6. The extent to which Hardy's work positions itself within these new networks of communication is discussed by Ruth Livesey in *Writing the Stage Coach Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 206–19.

[28] Ralph Pite judges this exchange between near and far to be the defining feature of 'Hardy's Geography'. See Ralph Pite, *Hardy's Geography: Wessex and the Regional Novel* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); John Barrell, 'Geographies of Hardy's Wessex', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 8.4 (1982), 347–61. Thomas Hardy, 'General preface to the novels and poems [Wessex Edition], 1912', in *Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1990), p. 47. For the various guidebooks and other writings that drove this craze see Simon Gatrell, *Thomas Hardy's Vision of Wessex* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 234–38.

[29] Hardy, 'Preface to *Far From the Madding Crowd* for the Wessex Edition, 1912', in Orel, p. 9. For the gradual development of Wessex in Hardy's work see Simon Gatrell, 'Wessex', in Dale Kramer, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Hardy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 19–37.

[30] Widdowson, *History*. For the particular function of Wessex in national heritage culture see Allison Adler Kroll, 'Hardy's Wessex, heritage culture, and the archaeology of rural England', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 31.4 (2009), 335–52.

[31] *Mail,* 27 November 2014.

[32] 'Julian Fellowes' delight after Hardy Country planning application is withdrawn', *The Telegraph*, 15 January 2015, www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/11348176/Julian-Fellowes-delight-after-Hardy-country-planning-application-is-withdrawn.html, accessed 21 October 2019.

[33] Devine Wright, Smith, and Batel, p. 1; see also Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage, 2005).

[34] Tim Ingold, *The Life of Lines* (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 186.

[35] Thomas Hardy, *The Return of the Native*, ed.Simon Gatrell and Nancy Barrineau (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 12, 11.

HOW DO YOU WANT TO BE REMEMBERED? HOW HARDY HELPS US NEGOTIATE DEATH

CATHERINE CHARLWOOD

Last November I put to the test my hunch that Thomas Hardy's poetry helps us cope with death, a universal and timeless concern but one which – in this technologically-advanced, digital world – we are still spectacularly bad at tackling. As part of the Being Human Festival 2018, I ran a free workshop called 'How Do You Want To Be Remembered?' at Liverpool Central Library. With the festival's theme being 'Origins and Endings', Hardy seemed an appropriate starting point, since he – according to his self-written biography – is one of the few people whose life both began and ended with death. As Michael Millgate's notes to *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy* show, the narrative originally included the fact that

> Had it not been for the common sense of the estimable woman who attended as monthly nurse, [Hardy] might never have walked the earth. At his birth he was thrown aside as dead till rescued by her as she exclaimed to the surgeon, 'Dead! Stop a minute: he's alive enough, sure!'.[1]

Hardy is also a writer associated with morose and morbid topics, even – impressively – by people who haven't really read any of his work! However, as part of my thesis on memory in the poetry of Hardy and Robert Frost, I came to see Hardy's use of person memory as positive and, ultimately, redemptive.[2] I wanted to share this perception with the public.

Led by the School of Advanced Study (University of London), in partnership with the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and the British Academy, the Being Human Festival is the only national festival of the humanities. It aims to engage the public in humanities