





The only way is
essex

The pretty county of Dorset is often associated with the deep, dark novels of Thomas Hardy - but **Ben Parker** found a vibrant, modern region with quirky, independent shops, microbreweries and gastronomy galore



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alking through the narrow streets of Sherborne, I pass under the shadow of the honey-coloured Abbey, its tower grazing the clouds of an overcast sky. I sense 1,300 years of history in its stone – a Saxon bishopric, the Tudor Dissolution, today's use as a parish church. Today, the setting is Victorian. Horses and carts are pulled by bearded men. A boxing ring stands nearby. The usually inviting shopfronts are today dull and shabbily dressed in a frozen image of a bustling rural market in the 1800s.

I'm watching the shooting of a new film of Thomas Hardy's classic novel, *Far From the Madding Crowd*, with Sherborne doubling up as the fictional town of Casterbridge. The movie stars Oscar-nominated Carey Mulligan in the role of Bathsheba Everdene, with Michael Sheen, Tom Sturridge and

West Bay is best known as the home of Broadchurch, where David Tennant and Olivia Coleman trudged under the golden cliffs



Matthias Schoenaerts as her lovers. Since it went into production last autumn, the Hardy movie has been casting its spotlight on the author's fictional Wessex – a geographical area dreamt up throughout the course of the author's bibliography, which has become synonymous with Dorset, where he lived and worked. Consumed with Hardy fever, every barman started growing a beard in the hope he might be cast as an extra. But to see Dorset as a bastion of quaint agrarian tradition would be a mistake: this is a county with an up-and-coming 21st-century edge.

The brightest spark burns in Bridport, a town that has been associated with making rope and nets since the Middle Ages. Hardy called it Port Bredy. The changing banners and flags that mark upcoming events seem to hang near-perennially across the streets, testament to how much goes on here – from the Bridport Food Festival in June, which



brings in such culinary luminaries as Lesley Waters and Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, to the Bridport Hat Festival in September, which sees everyone from fishmonger to mayor sport their favourite headwear. The town is also home to the Bridport Prize, considered one of the largest and most prestigious English-language creative writing awards.

Bridport's high streets successfully avoid clone syndrome with small independent shops such as Girls Own Store for the modern vintage home – Cath Kidston-esque gifts, picnic rugs and polka-dot teapots – or Malabar Trading, which sells a tasteful mix of homewares, from ceramics to hand-stitched Suzani cushions.

Visits to Bridport are best when they coincide with the town's vibrant twice-weekly street market on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Eclectic stalls full of food and well-priced antiques: a chap in a flat cap selling curries from Devon; an Italian chatting over her charcuterie and cheese; restored furniture flogged by talkative men; a tall man in a top hat and flying-goggles peddling his quirky steampunk wares.

Hardy's Bridport is the setting of his lesser-known short story *Fellow-Townsmen*. The story's recurring location is the Black Bull Hotel, which in reality is based on a coaching inn that houses Bridport's best spot for evening liquid refreshment – a popular Saturday night destination for the cast and crew during the filming of *Far From*. The Venner Bar, tucked inside the Bull Hotel, is an intimate speakeasy where mixology is kept local with the county's Black Cow Vodka – the world's first pure milk vodka. The Venner Bar will also soon feature Dorset's only gin, Conker, which is smooth enough to sip.

For coffee and snacks, the neighbourhood's newest hotspot is Soulshine. This former gallery has been renovated into a café and mini-deli with raw wooden decors and hand-painted flora and fauna on the wall. It's well



regarded for its artisan breads and pastries served by a mob of hipster staff. Further inland is Beaminster (the Emminster of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*). During the filming of *Far From*, nearby Mapperton became the heroine's fictional home, with the Jacobean sandstone manor's stately front courtyard transformed into a muddy farmyard. While Beaminster's town centre has lost a little panache since the closure of 2009 *Masterchef* winner Mat Follas' Wild Garlic restaurant, it is still worth a visit (Tom Sturridge and girlfriend Sienna Miller spent time shopping here during filming). The culinary gap has been filled somewhat by the Deli on the Square, perfect for stocking up on gourmet West Country fare – including piquant Dorsetshire Sauce, a southwest take on the classic from Worcestershire. Just out of town in Melpash is the unassuming Half Moon Inn, a thatched gastropub that serves some of the best Dorset meat and fish. Two miles down the road from Bridport's centre is the



Hardy perennials: Clockwise from the top: Thomas Hardy; bucolic Wessex; Girls' Own Store; coffee time at Amid Giants and Idols; Watch House pizza; Hardy's cottage; Carey Mulligan in 'Far from the Madding Crowd'

coastal community of West Bay. As well as featuring in *Far From*, West Bay is best known as the home of *Broadchurch* – the second series hits screens in early 2015 – and is where David Tennant and Olivia Coleman trudge across the pebbles, under the golden cliffs. The place to eat here is the Watch House Café, an informal spot, which opened right on the windswept shingle in 2012, to demonstrate how classy and unpretentious beachside dining can be. Little sister of the acclaimed Hive Beach Cafe in Burton Bradstock, the Watch House benefits from a lower profile, meaning it's less of a scramble to grab a table. The menu features fresh local fish and wood-fired pizzas that can be washed down with a glass of Hive cider.

From West Bay, it's possible to charter a boat to explore the shoreline further and berth at Lyme Regis, a pretty town of pastel-coloured houses facing the sea and an ancient harbour protected by the horseshoe Cobb. Slightly outside the typical Hardy trail, Lyme has conjured its very own literary heritage, inspiring parts of Jane Austen's *Persuasion* and John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the latter becoming a movie starring Meryl Streep, filmed on location. The epicurean highlight is celebrated chef Mark Hix's Fish and Oyster House, which takes full advantage of Lyme Bay's sweeping waters from its perch above the beach and serves a vast array of seafood with flair. Hix, a former ➤



chef-director of Caprice Holdings who was born and trained in Dorset, can sometimes be found in the restaurant, but if not you'll find his spirit shot through the daily menus, from suggested dishes to his very own Oyster Ale.

The old town mill is Lyme's artisan quarter, where restored mill buildings surround a cobbled courtyard. Based here is an award-winning cheesemonger, microbrewery, art gallery and the cosy Mill Café and Super Club, where simple, home-cooked Italian food is done well. But the place that has got people talking is coffeehouse culture at optimum coolness, Amid Giants and Idols. This joint selects beans from far-flung parts of the globe and roasts them in-house, under the watchful eye of barista, Xanne Carey.

On the esplanade, independent surf shop Boylos caters for the poseurs and the pros, with bumper stickers through to longboards. They also offer kayak hire and stand-up paddleboard lessons.

The star of Lyme's shops is Susie Cole, a dainty boutique of antiques, furnishings and gifts, mixing one-off items, both old and new, with a Scandinavian bent. It provides respite from the resort clichés of fudge, ice-cream and "I HEART LOCATION" T-shirts; instead its shop is subtly influenced by the seaside mis-en-scène, with pebbles, beach picnic baskets and accessories matching the colour of the tides. Take home pieces such as a floral-print armchairs or a vintage dressing table.

Further additions for the house and garden can be found in the Purbeck area. Dorset Reclamation Yard in Bere Regis has been supplying impressive salvaged stock for 25 years, with Belfast sinks, cast iron fireplaces and gargoyles. From here, drive to Studland Bay, 20 miles southeast of Bere Regis, and

The white stuff: Hix's Fish and Oyster House has clean lines and delicious fare

try dinner at The Pig on the Beach, a new restaurant-with-rooms beside Old Harry Rocks, where ingredients are sourced within 25 miles. If The Pig is fully booked, wander to smuggler's favourite The Bankes Arms, which brews many ales in-house. No sojourn through Hardy Country would be complete without a visit to the county capital of Dorchester, the author's Casterbridge, where it's impossible to escape Hardy references, from Max Gate – the home Hardy built for himself, and now in National Trust stewardship – to the nearby parish of Stinsford. Hardy was born here, baptised in St Michael's church and his heart is buried in the churchyard.

Back in the centre of town, I visit the King's Arms for a quiet drink, stepping under the iconic bow windows prominent in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. This hotel features in five Hardy novels and was a popular dining spot for the author. Under the exposed wooden beams, I picture Robert Louis Stevenson and Thomas Hardy conversing here in dim light.

I get chatting to a retired local architect. He tells me that Dorchester these days is too focused on Hardy, not putting enough effort into promoting the town's Roman past. I disagree, but don't insist too hard. With the release of *Far From the Madding Crowd* set for late spring 2015, he will have to battle Hollywood on that point – and the footfall that will surely follow. 🏠

Details

To find out more and for an essential visitor's guide to the area, please go to hardycountry.org



Come hither

BEST WESTERN ROYAL CHASE HOTEL, SHAFTESBURY



Situated on the outskirts of Shaftesbury, this Georgian ex-monastery has been transformed into a lovely hotel with an award-winning restaurant and indoor pool.

BEST WESTERN KINGS ARMS HOTEL, DORCHESTER



A traditional coaching inn dating from 1720 right in the heart of historic Dorchester, this hotel still manages to offer all the mod cons you could need for a memorable stay.

BEST WESTERN THE GRANGE AT OBOURNE



Formerly a manor house, The Grange has undergone a transformation to a luxury country house hotel with 18 bedrooms and a restaurant overlooking pretty gardens.

