

Thomas Hardy and Wimborne Minster

In June of 1875, at ten at night, having seen a light within, Hardy entered the Minster and sat alone in a stall, listening to the organist practising while the rays from the musician's candle streamed across the arcades. The incident inclined him towards Wimborne. Six years later Hardy and wife Emma returned to live at Llanherne, in the Avenue, Wimborne.

The two-year lease of Llanherne, from 1881 till 1883 was seen as a temporary measure, until a more permanent home could be found, or even built, and preferably in Hardy's native Dorchester area. Hardy, recovering from a serious illness, thought Wimborne ideal for being "clean and airy," and Llanherne, a Victorian villa surrounded by lime trees, full of "old-fashioned flowers in full bloom," eminently suitable.

Hardy was delighted by his local proximity to the Minster, and as an architect, writer and protector of local heritage, cooperated with the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings in its attempts to prevent the destruction of old buildings and to oppose the mutilation of churches in the name of restoration. Hardy bitterly regretted the works of 1871 at St Juliot's church in Cornwall, where as a young architect he did not prevent the removal of Norman walls and a Saxon door.

In his poem, "The Levelled Churchyard," Hardy despairs of recent works to the churchyard in making paving for a path to ease the process of grass mowing. Tombstones were moved, and left in a "jumbled patch," mixed with "human jam."

Hardy's poem of "Copying Architecture in an Old Minster" was first drafted much earlier than publication in 1917. Here he gives life to many celebrated at the Minster, with voices and whispers, and perhaps reflects on his own commitment to architecture.

The novel, "A Laodicean" was published six months after the move to Wimborne. It represented a transition from pastoral themes. Hardy is now exploring competing issues of the Victorian age and testing his own beliefs. The book received mixed reviews.

"Two on a Tower" was published almost one year later, in October 1882. The novel required much scientific research, as again, Hardy moves away from his own background and experiences, to examine Victorian values.

Hardy wrote "The Woodlanders" four years after leaving Wimborne for Max Gate, and used the name of "Fitzpiers," taken from the monument within St George's chapel of the Minster for Doctor Edred Fitzpiers.

Why not come and explore the Minster, following Hardy's poem of "Copying Architecture..." or sit as Hardy did in the stalls.