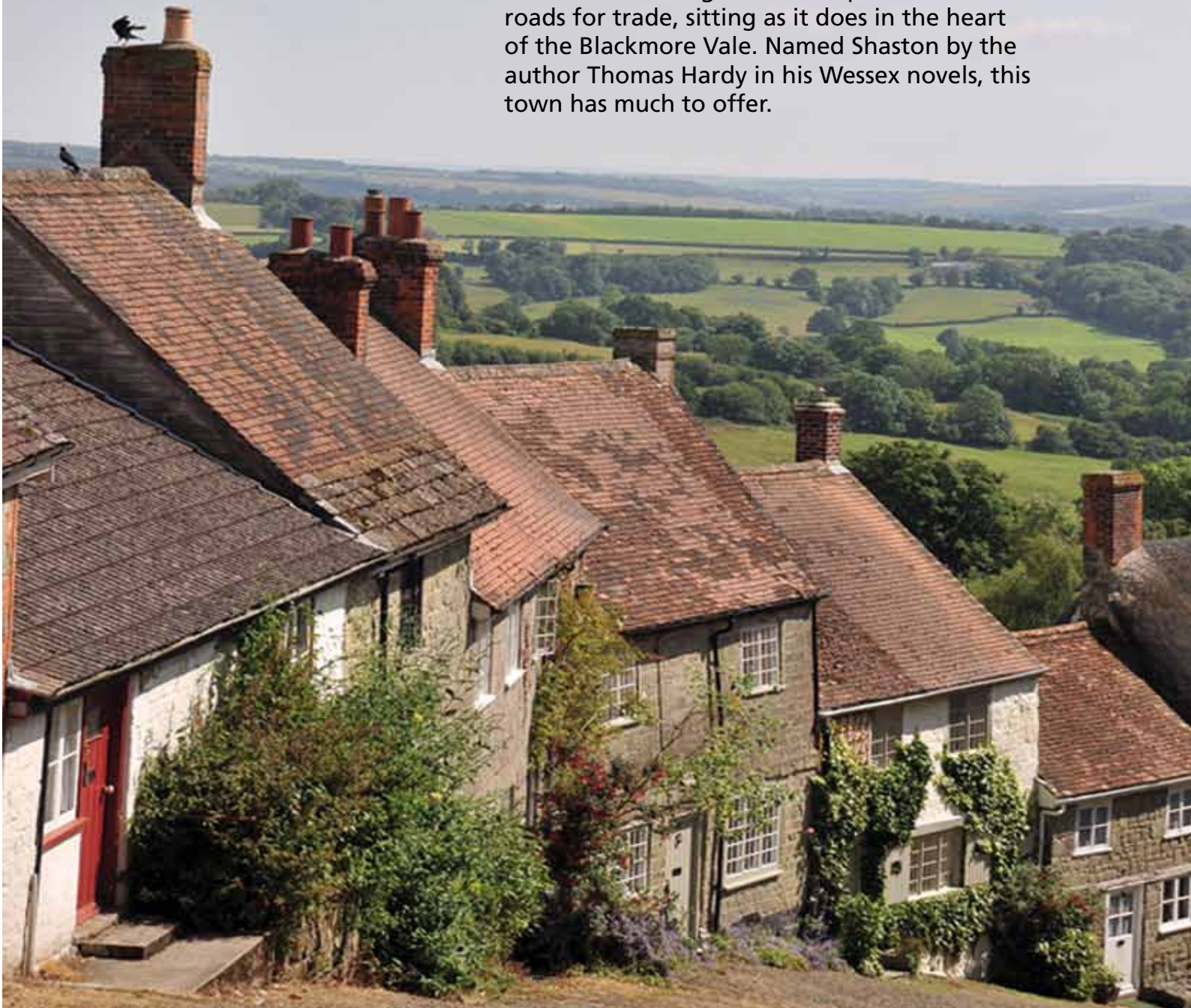


# Out and About in Shaftesbury

Carole Dorran

Shaftesbury in North Dorset is one of the highest towns in England, standing as it does at 750 feet above sea level. As with many high points in the area, the first settlement was established around 8000 years ago in the middle of the Stone Age. The town went on to become hugely important during Medieval times and has long been an important cross roads for trade, sitting as it does in the heart of the Blackmore Vale. Named Shaston by the author Thomas Hardy in his Wessex novels, this town has much to offer.







St Peter's Church and the Town Hall, Shaftesbury.

Its first record as a town is written in the Burghal Hidage, when Alfred the Great, Saxon King, founded a burgh-or fortified settlement-in 880 AD as a defence against Viking invaders. But Shaftesbury really came to prominence when King Alfred established an abbey in the town, placing his daughter Ethelgiva as the first Abbess. It became the wealthiest Benedictine nunnery in England, owning land and property from Purbeck in the south to Bradford-on-Avon in the North. Athelstan founded three royal mints, producing pennies that bore the town's name. In 981, the relics of King Edward, who was murdered at Corfe Castle, were transferred from Wareham and were received at Shaftesbury Abbey with great ceremony, turning the town into an important place of pilgrimage for miracles of healing at his shrine. In 1001, he was canonised and became St Edward the Martyr. In 1035 King Canute, who was a regular visitor to Shaftesbury Abbey, died while in the town, though he isn't buried there. In the Domesday Book the town was known as *Scaeptherbyrg* with its ownership equally shared between king and abbey. In 1240, Cardinal Otto, legate to the Apostolic See of Pope Gregory IX, made a visit to the abbey and confirmed a charter of 1191, the first entered in the Glastonbury chartulary.

During the Middle Ages, the abbey was the central focus of the town. A charter to hold a market was granted in 1260; in 1392 Richard II granted an increase to two markets. The mayor had become a recognised figure by 1340, sworn in by the steward of the abbess. Sometime between 1400 and 1539 Edwardstow, which is Shaftesbury's oldest surviving building, was built. The centre part of the house predates the Dissolution of Shaftesbury Abbey in 1539. Also around this time a medieval farm owned by the Abbess of Shaftesbury was established, although sadly these days it is now the site of a Tesco supermarket car park. In 1501, Catherine of Aragon stayed at the abbey on her way to marry Prince Arthur, older brother of the future Henry VIII.

St Peter's church is the most ancient of all the town's churches. Built in the latter part of the fifteenth century outside

the walls of the abbey, it was originally a pilgrim church and is noted for its vaulted porch and crypt. The church occupies a prime position where the cobbled Gold Hill meets the High Street; any visitor to Shaftesbury should spare a little time to see this beautiful Saxon church.

The abbey prospered for nearly 700 years until the Dissolution of the Monasteries; in 1539 under the orders of King Henry VIII, the last Abbess of Shaftesbury, Elizabeth Zouche, signed a deed of surrender. The abbey was extremely wealthy at that time; the lands were sold and the abbey was demolished, leading to a temporary decline in the town. Much of the abbey materials, notably the unusual green sandstone, were salvaged and used to build local houses. There are still thatched cottages existing today around the town whose walls were built from the abbey stones. In 1540, Sir Thomas Arundel of nearby Wardour Castle purchased the abbey along with much of the town. However, he was later executed for treason and his lands were forfeited. The abbey and town passed to the Earl of Pembroke, then to Anthony Ashley Cooper, 7<sup>th</sup> Earl of Shaftesbury, before passing to the Grosvenors. It wasn't until 1919 that a syndicate of three local men bought the town of Shaftesbury for £80,000, after which they held an auction to sell over 300 lots to local householders and shopkeepers.

Since then the ruins of the abbey have been excavated and lie within a peaceful walled garden, along with a museum recounting the history of the site. The modern day visitor can walk amongst the ruins and view where St Edward the Martyr's relics once lay, as well as see the medieval-inspired orchard and extensive historic herb collection. A statue of King Alfred the Great looks over the abbey grounds.

During the Civil War, Shaftesbury was largely Parliamentary but was in Royalist hands. In August 1645, Parliamentary forces surrounded the town and Colonel Charles Fleetwood surrounded and dispersed 1000 Clubmen, many of whom were arrested and sent to trial in Sherborne.

The historic Georgian town hall, which is next door to St Peter's Church, was built in 1827 by Earl Grosvenor after the



Guildhall had been demolished to widen the High Street. The clock tower was added in 1879. The building has since been designated a grade II listing by English Heritage. Inside the town hall is a beautiful mural depicting the history of the town which local artist Phyllis Wolff was commissioned to paint in 1979.

During the eighteenth century, Shaftesbury became an important stagecoach centre due to five main roads meeting in the town, although extra horses were required to pull the heavy coaches up the very steep Tout Hill. There were at that time some 30 inns in the town, including 3 major coaching inns. However the coming of the railways in the mid 1800's did much to damage Shaftesbury's coaching trade; the town became a backwater for a time after the railways completely bypassed the town.

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth century the main industries in and around Shaftesbury were agriculture, button making and weaving, although mechanisation later caused unemployment and emigration. The town museum is situated behind the town hall at the top of Gold Hill and has many displays of Dorset Buttons which were made locally, as well as many more interesting local artefacts, including the town's very first fire engine dating from 1744, making it the oldest in Dorset. The museum building itself was once a doss house, providing accommodation for the drovers, jugglers and traders who came to the town's markets and fairs.

No visit to Shaftesbury would be complete without seeing Gold Hill. This ancient steep and cobbled street runs beside the walls of the abbey and used to be the main street in Shaftesbury. With far reaching views across the Blackmore Vale, Gold Hill is picturesque; however, it's probably best known for having been the location for a 1973 Hovis bread television advert featuring a boy on a bike. The voiceover was distinctly Northern-accented, leaving many people convinced that the advert was filmed in Yorkshire. The street also featured in the 1967 film version of Thomas Hardy's *Far From the Madding Crowd* starring Julie Christie and Terence Stamp. The view is instantly recognisable to many people from seeing it on television but it really needs to be viewed in reality to appreciate just how glorious it is.

At the bottom of Gold Hill lies an area of the town known as St James, which is the oldest part of Shaftesbury. The terraced stone cottages each side of St James Street were once tenements but today are attractive and highly sought after properties. Just off St James Street is the picturesque Pump Yard which still

The pumpyard, St James, Shaftesbury



Holy Trinity Church



The fire engine, dating from 1744, is Dorset's oldest.



has an ancient pump in its midst. Due to the town's steep position, water had to be pumped up the hill from wells to be sold in the market square. It wasn't until 1852 that a well was sunk 125 feet deep at Barton Hill so that water could be piped around the town. It was once said that it was cheaper to buy ale than water in Shaftesbury.

Now today Shaftesbury is an important tourist centre, attracting people from all over the world. Surrounded by some of the most

stunning countryside in England, there is much to offer in the area, though these days it is the car that transports people into the town and brings trade.

Carole Dorran has had a lifelong interest in history, in particular British history. She is also an amateur genealogist with 15 plus years experience; is a keen photographer and loves to photograph things of historical and architectural interest.