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Ancestry and Birth

Tradition, family and local, is often invoked to support the unverifiable, and it pleased Thomas Hardy in his later years to think that the descent of the Dorset Hardys from Clement le Hardy, Bailiff of Jersey, whose son John probably landed at Wareham, then a port, and settled at Weymouth in the fifteenth century, was confirmed by oral tradition. Descendants included Admiral Hardy, captain of Nelson's flagship in the battle of Trafalgar, the Elizabethan Thomas Hardye of Frampton who endowed Dorchester Grammar School, and others who had been landed proprietors of standing in the Weymouth area and in or near the Frome valley from Woolcombe, Toller Whelme, Frome St Quintin, and Up Sydling down to Dorchester and on to Wareham. Hardy was reminded of all this on 30 September 1888, when he walked from the railway station at Evershot past the site of Woolcombe House to Bubb Down, whence he gazed over Blackmoor, 'the Vale of the Little Dairies', with his own family decline and the genealogical 'down, down, down' theme of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* very much in mind.

In his letter of 18 April 1881 to Kegan Paul he writes with less assurance of his Jersey ancestry, but thinks it is confirmed by strong physical resemblances between his family and the other Dorset Hardys. Of his direct progenitors he says that 'from time immemorial' they have all been 'master-masons, with a set of journeymen masons under them'; he has 'certain knowledge of four generations'. There must be a considerable element of exaggeration in this status claim. An entry in one of his notebooks reveals his discovery in 1908 that John Hardy, a widower, lived alone in Back Street, Puddletown, early in the eighteenth century. The marriage in 1777 of Hardy's great-grandfather, another John Hardy of Puddletown, to Jane Knight of Woodsford in the Frome valley explains why Hardy took pleasure in tracing many of his Knight relatives of the past in the register he borrowed from the vicar of Stinsford in 1921. John Hardy had two sons, the elder of whom, Thomas, married Mary Head in December 1799, and it was for this couple that he built, two and a half miles away, the

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thatched cottage on the western fringe of Puddletown Heath where the author, the third successive Thomas Hardy, was born. The land on which it stood had been leased on a lifehold basis from the lord of the manor, one of the Pitt family of Kingston Maurward House, not far from Stinsford church.

Baptized on 30 October 1772, Mary Head was five if not six years older than her husband. No evidence has been discovered to explain why and when she came to Puddletown. After being orphaned, she had spent several years at Fawley in Berkshire (her birthplace, the Marygreen of Jude the Obscure), and then a period at Reading. Her memories of Fawley were ‘so poignant that she never cared to return to the place after she had left it as a young girl’, Hardy wrote. Whether she was the person to whom his cousin Theresa darkly alluded when she told Hermann Lea that the fate of Tess had been suffered by ‘a relative of theirs’ remains conjectural, although an illegitimate child was born to a Mary Head in 1796 and christened Georgiana Reed at Reading in 1803.

The house to which Thomas Hardy moved from Puddletown with his wife and baby daughter Martha, when it was ready for habitation in 1801, was the only one in that outlying part of Stinsford parish. Behind it, on the northern side of the Frome valley, stretched the wild uneven heath, an extensive upland bright with gorse in spring, and with heather in summer, the sombre wintry tones of its foreground eventually supplying the Egdon Heath overture to The Return of the Native. At first heath-cropping ponies were their only friends, Mary Hardy told her grandson Thomas. Adders and lizards were common in summer, and bats flew alarmingly about the bedrooms in the evenings. A path flanked by tall bracken in the summer led westward down to a dip and continued for a short distance up to the road which gave Bockhampton, further south, access to the Puddletown or London road from Dorchester, which ran almost immediately to the north. Several tracks had been worn by vehicles over the neighbouring heathland. So isolated was the Hardy cottage that until about 1805 it was used as a dumping-station by smugglers from the south coast. At one time up to 80 tubs, each holding about four gallons of spirits, were hidden in the closet under the staircase. They were brought at night, either in carts or by men on horseback, and deposited outside; a whiplash across a windowpane summoned Thomas at two or three o’clock in the morning to stow away the contraband, which was collected after dusk the next evening,