

# A Vision for Dorchester

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## Introduction

Before outlining some of my ideas which might constitute “A Vision for Dorchester” I should explain why I have become so passionate about my adopted town.

I was born and raised in Surbiton, a south west suburb of London, and was determined to get to know the capital in order to feel a part of it and to be able to show it off to its many visitors.

After two years teaching as a VSO (Voluntary Service Overseas) volunteer in Borneo and gaining my Geography degree at Queens University in Belfast, I spent several years teaching in the West Midlands before becoming a tour manager with a leading US tour operator. I spent over ten years touring Europe, North Africa and the Middle East as well as leading and guiding many tours within the British Isles. In 1978 I studied for and gained the coveted Blue Badge as a London tourist guide thereby fulfilling my ambition to “know” that city and be able, with confidence, to show it off to others.

In 1985 I moved to Dorset with my family and, after some time working as a teacher, I returned to tourism gaining the Blue Badge for the South West region.

Since then I have planned and promoted tours of Dorset including the “Thomas Hardy Explorer” and a green “Tolpuddle Tour” and put together programmes of Dorchester walking tours including my Ghost Walk.

In the introduction to my book “Dorchester Town Walks” I state, without any hint of exaggeration, “we have as much of interest here as you would find in the cities of York, Bath or Chester.”



This is my starting point, and in many ways my mission, and as much as anything else, it is this which informs my vision for the county town of Dorset.

So, if we can agree that the small market town of Dorchester is uniquely rich in its heritage and associations with an abundance of visible and tangible remains of that heritage and those associations available today for people to see and experience, why don't we make more of them? More particularly why don't we trumpet our extraordinary abundance of treasures and use them to attract visitors and businesses to the town and to the county?

## Question 1

Could it be that Dorchester is somewhat remote and therefore difficult to access ?

### Answer:

Situated just 120 miles from London at the hub of the county road network, with two railway stations connecting us directly to London and Bristol (including all the intervening centres along those two lines), only twenty miles west of Bournemouth airport with its international connections and close to the cross Channel ports of Poole and Weymouth, this is clearly untrue.



### Vision:

We should play to these extraordinary advantages, not to the detriment of other parts of Dorset but rather as a county hub with both its own treasures and easy access to the county's many others. The Brewery Square development will not only provide us with the country's first solar-powered railway station it will also create a stunning first impression of our town combining some spectacular new architecture with new uses for its older conserved brewery buildings and - that most needed of all features in any town - a public square.

We should look at the links to the town centre from Dorchester West station and work up plans to make these considerably more inviting than at present. A good start to this has already been made with care and attention being paid to the station itself by the hard working volunteers of the Friends of Dorchester West Station. Plans to provide disabled access to and from the northbound platform should be implemented as soon as possible.

With the implementation of DTEP (Dorchester Transport and Environment Plan) a much safer pedestrian link will be made possible at the difficult and dangerous Cornwall Road / Damers Road junction.

Spaces in car parks should be easy to find and the car parks themselves look cared for: regardless of when Phase 2 of the Charles Street scheme begins, this important town centre car park should provide a considerably more impressive introduction to the town than it does at present when the visitor is greeted on its western flank by the ugly service areas behind the South Street retail premises. The area around bus stops and train stations should be kept clean and tidy and information about the town should be as clearly and easily available to people arriving by these means as it is for those arriving by car.



## Question 2

Could our varied assortment of town “treasures” be better kept and presented?

### Answer:

The answer has to be “Yes”.

### Vision:

Whether arriving by car, bus or by train a visitor’s first impression should be a good one. The town is the “product” we have to sell to others – it should look and feel as good as it can all the time. If you were selling a second hand car you’d get a better price, and probably sell it faster, if it were clean and well presented. The same applies to the town.

Although the Roman Town House behind County Hall is now well presented, the riverside (Millstream) path improved, the Borough Gardens now well restored, other major attractions within the town are in need of some t.i.c.

Plans for Maumbury Rings need to be expedited to match the success of the nearby skatepark; the Old Crown Court and Cells, scene of the trial of the Tolpuddle Martyrs in 1834, must be presented as the major attraction it so deserves to be (recent comments and actions by WDDC on this issue are most promising); the full length of the High Street constitutes one of our most impressive architectural features but parts of it need “polishing” to put it mildly – waiting for the White Hart hotel site to be developed at some time in the future should not be used as an excuse to leave it looking tired and forlorn.



Coming from the east it is an important gateway into historic Dorchester. The same comment applies to the run-down eastern entrance to the Hardy Arcade – surely, as a community, we can improve on these important but currently negative first impressions ?

Litter IS a problem in the town and, in the same ways as some of the arcades are kept clean, so too should the main pedestrian routes be kept free of disfiguring litter. Re-introducing the role of “Keeper of the Walks”, whose role was to keep the Walks clean and tidy, and including in his/her role the main shopping streets of the town centre, would serve this purpose and demonstrate that we DO take pride in our town. Dorchester should participate in the annual “Spring Clean” supported by WDDC.

**DURNOVARIA**

**DORCHESTER**

**CASTERBRIDGE**

### Question 3

Do Dorset residents know enough about our treasures to take a real pride in them?



#### Answer:

Not nearly enough "locals" know how richly the town is endowed in terms of heritage and association, compared with many other towns.

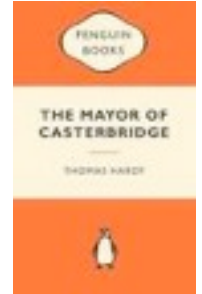
#### Vision:

Local people both young and old need to be made aware of our unique heritage and associations in ways that are both entertaining, enjoyable and informative. During the years of compulsory education children and young people should be given more than one opportunity to tour the town and its nearby attractions – thus growing up recognising and respecting how special and how rich their hometown is.

While many local groups and societies, mindful that there are always people "new" to the area, build in a town walk / visits to the Old Crown Court or the County museum's Dorchester Gallery, and invite local historians to address them on prehistory, the Romans or Rev. John White etcetera, some others, such as the Chamber of Commerce, do not.

### Question 4

Could we promote our town's heritage and its activities more effectively?



#### Answer:

Once again the answer is Yes.

#### Vision:

I'm pleased to say that more carefully researched and well-presented information boards are being produced under the auspices of the Dorchester Heritage Joint Committee and these will play an important part in helping our visitors to understand and appreciate our treasures.

Both traditional and new ways should be used to make our "secret" treasures more readily available. The following means of achieving this objective should be considered and, where possible, implemented: Geocache. Phone Apps. Taxi Driver Guides. Voluntary Tour Guides inc. costumed guides. Audio Town Trails, Email newsletters and social marketing.

Those of us who live in the town know that a lot of different activities and events take place throughout the year. This important part of Dorchester's vibrancy is seldom made clear to our visitors and we must rectify this using both traditional means and more modern ways of communicating.

I envisage a well produced annual calendar of events covering both the town and its surrounding parishes being readily available to visitors both in the town (printed material, posters, banners across the main streets etc.) and beyond through a dedicated website, phone apps and other 21<sup>st</sup> century means.



We need to “sell” the town as the special place we know it to be and promotion should focus on its unique heritage assets rather than its businesses.



## Question 5

Could it be that we don't want other people to know what we know – that we don't actually want to share with others what is peculiarly and particularly “ours”?

## Answer:

I do not believe this to be true to any meaningful extent. Since the foot and mouth crisis of 2002 we have been made aware of the significance and vital importance of tourism to the local economy. It was by no means only the farming community that suffered during that crisis.

## Vision:

We do not “own” our heritage, we simply have the twofold responsibility of maintaining it and sharing it with others. What is “ours” is the good fortune to live in Dorchester and Dorset all year round unlike our visitors who may have travelled thousands of miles to be here for just a few days ! The sooner we learn to abandon rude comments about “grockels” invading every season the better.

These visitors contribute and keep alive many businesses in the town and the county. I believe we should welcome our visitors with open arms and do our best to ensure that the time they spend here is both enjoyable and memorable. It is our visitors who should be our best ambassadors for future growth and development in tourism – after all word of mouth remains the best sales technique.

Of course this growth and development needs to enhance our town and our county and there is an important role for checks and balances – unchecked growth could easily destroy that which people delight in.



## Question 6

Who is the best known and, worldwide, the most widely respected person from Dorchester's past?

Answer:

Thomas Hardy



Vision:

The town is truly situated in the heart of "Hardy Country" – that title now being used by the National Trust to promote his birthplace cottage in Higher Bockhampton, Max Gate, his home in Dorchester and Clouds Hill, his friend T E Lawrence's cottage near Bovington. Dorset County Council have been working over the past few years to reinstate the heathland behind the cottage to recreate it as Hardy knew it as a child. A "Hardy Steering Group" already exists which has brought together various interested parties, both public sector and voluntary sector, to work together to make more of Dorchester and Dorset's most famous son.

Among the schemes which are going ahead is the provision of a small educational unit being built on the site of the Rangers base close to the car park in Thorncombe woods where visitors park to walk up Cuckoo Lane to the cottage. This small unobtrusive but much-needed facility will, at last, provide much needed toilet facilities for visitors.

While some local people are connected to Thomas Hardy through membership of the Thomas Hardy Society, or as volunteers at the National Trust's Hardy properties, more connections need to be made to the local audience to encourage a wider understanding and appreciation of his importance.

This year, being the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Charles Dickens, a vigorous spotlight is being shone on his life, his works and the places he was most closely associated with. We need have no doubt whatsoever that this roller coaster of media

attention will come to Dorchester in 2040 for the bicentennial of Hardy's birth. BUT we don't need to wait another 28 years before playing to our greatest strength. The town should recognise that Hardy's work, his novels, short stories and his poetry, which is held in such high esteem around the world, give us the key to unlock Dorchester and Dorset's many secrets.

Through Thomas Hardy's writings we are made aware of the extraordinary wealth of pre-historic and Roman sites in and around the town, we learn of its role in the Bloody Assize of Judge Jeffreys, we read of the difficulties faced by farm labourers - the very difficulties that led the Tolpuddle Martyrs to be found guilty and transported. He writes of Dorchester ("Casterbridge") as a garrison town and one of our treasures remaining from that role is the Military Museum at the Top o' Town. The Writer's Gallery in the County Museum recreates his study from Max Gate and is a "must visit" for the Hardy pilgrim.

Hardy describes most eloquently the landscape which, those of us privileged to live here, delight in. He is, probably more than any other single person, still serving as the town and the county's greatest promoter.

We should recognise and respect this and use his massive contribution to enhance the many and varied attractions we have in the town. We do not need to be reticent about him more than 80 years after his death – in fact we should be doing the very opposite and championing a man whose writings have placed Dorchester and "Wessex" so firmly in people's mind.

In the same way as the town should make more of the annual Tolpuddle Martyrs weekend in June every year (they were referred to as "the Dorchester labourers" in the early days of their struggle), so too we should lend all the support we can to the biennial Hardy Conference and Festival.

## Question 7

Do we want Dorchester to remain attractive to young people and families and strive to remain "balanced" in terms of its age profile?

Answer:

Yes

Vision:



We already attract families with our excellent local schools, even though local house prices are high. A more pressing concern, and one which I'm pleased to say is currently being addressed by both the public and the private sectors, is the shortage of employment opportunities in general and the distinct shortage of more "professional" opportunities for our well-qualified young people.

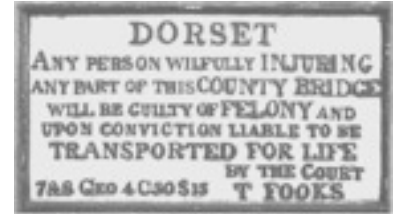
At present it is probably true to say that, in many different areas, if you want to progress in your career/ chosen field then the first thing you have to do is leave Dorchester ! Poundbury is attracting employment and some of it is high-tech but we'll need more of this in the future. High speed broadband, when fully operational, should allow more home working and, together with the encouragement of entrepreneurs, may yet signal a new dawn in which it proves possible to combine really challenging high tech employment opportunities with the ability to work in an attractive environment.

## Question 8

Is Dorchester aspirational?

Answer:

Not nearly enough.



Vision:

Dorchester is superbly placed geographically to be the "centre" of Dorset, to be the county's vibrant heart.

The town should play to its uniqueness and status as a county town, one ideally situated in the middle of its county and, simultaneously, the focal point of the local transport system, and should be bold and assertive in its championing of the county of Dorset as a whole.

We should be leading the way in making our town disabled friendly. This is not only inherently the right thing to do, but the "grey pound" and the "disabled pound" are rapidly growing parts of the market. Dorchester should be offering disabled buggies for a modest hiring fee to all those who wish to get about and view our many and varied attractions. Allowing them to go where they choose when they choose is a very basic way of demonstrating respect for their independence and individuality.

We are getting there: the Roman Town House is now accessible to wheelchairs and buggies as are the Borough Gardens and the delightful Millstream path. Plans to be implemented shortly will make Maumbury Rings accessible and plans for the Old Crown Court will include access for the disabled. The fine collections in the County Museum are disabled friendly and the Corn Exchange and Town Hall are now both wheelchair/buggy accessible.



BUT where is the dropped kerb at the entrance to the Hardy Arcade from South Street – the absence of which has caused much understandable irritation when a visiting market stall sets up in front of Specsavers and, unwittingly, prevents wheelchairs and buggies from reaching the properly pedestrianised part of South Street ?

**“Come to Dorchester and enjoy both a unique town and a special county.”**

This should be the town’s message based on its easy accessibility and central location. We should challenge with the utmost vigour those parochial politicians who feel that every market town in Dorset should be viewed and treated equally. Each has its special characteristics but, without doubt, Dorchester has considerably more in terms of its heritage and associations than any other. We should be trumpeting this fact whilst at the same time pointing out what an excellent base Dorchester is for touring all the other places and attractions within the county.

# Conclusion

I am aware that many of the ideas and hopes for the town that I have referred to are being worked on as I write.

However, I would comment - from my observations over a number of years - that much of what is being done is being done by separate organizations and agencies without much joined-up thinking. I have little doubt that, by working together, all the varied pieces of the jigsaw that make up our community would be infinitely stronger and therefore achieve their objective much more speedily.

Working alone - working in a ‘silo’ - will only add to the time taken to realize this town’s plethora of unique selling points which, taken together and well presented, make Dorchester a truly ‘must visit’ destination.

*Alistair Chisholm*  
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