

## On The Poets' Path

*by Marion Shoard*

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Marion Shoard walks the Gloucestershire woods that, on the eve of the first world war, inspired some of this century's finest poetry.

Somewhere between the Malverns and the Wye lies a patch of England of which few have heard but many have unwittingly read. The unspectacular fields, orchards and oak woods full of wild daffodils round the northwest Gloucestershire village of Dymock are not on any tourist beat. Yet they have left their mark on this century's poetry on both sides of the Atlantic.

When Rupert Brooke wrote of "... laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness, In hearts at peace, under an English heaven", he was probably recalling days around Dymock. Brooke, Edward Thomas, W.H. Davies and Robert Frost, the American poet, all spent the fateful summer of 1914 in this small area. They were brought together by Lascelles Abercrombie, the poet, who had decided that the Dymock countryside was the perfect crucible for the poetic chemistry of the moment.

Like so many of their contemporaries, the Dymock poets wanted to get away from the extravagance of their Romantic predecessors and address real life in everyday speech. Walking and talking their way through the fields and woods, the poets drew inspiration from their surroundings: By the time war scattered them, they had helped give the poetry of their time a new direction.

In his best-known poem, Frost includes the line "The woods are lovely, dark and deep", and if you visit Dymock's woods of oak, beech, pine and small-leafed lime, you will find it hard to believe he was not recalling them. Many paths thread their way through these woods, and one of the path junctions prompted some other famous Frost lines: "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I - / 1 took the one less travelled by, / And that has made all the difference."

What Frost had in mind was the decision that his friend Edward Thomas made during the Dymock summer to abandon prose and reviews and to devote himself instead to writing the 170 poems he produced before he was killed on the battlefield only three years later.

Frost's poem talks of "a yellow wood", and wild daffodils still carpet the Dymock woods each spring, crisscrossed by paths along which the poets walked. The scenes through which the visitor passes retain the elements which enchanted them. Hedgerows drip with elderberries, snowberries and wild pears, and tie the woods into an intimate patchwork of sheep pasture dotted with fine oaks, fields of corn, streams and sudden, vermilion quarries.

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Old apple orchards - like those which probably inspired Frost's After ApplePicking - survive still, planted with full-size trees.

Dymock still has its own village school, where the poets stopped by to play hopscotch and marbles. People continue to speak with the richly distinctive intonation, tone and tempo which coloured the poets' diction. Then it was to be heard in every field. Today's traveller should try the country buses, which ply the many routes out of Ledbury loud with local laughter and anecdote. Buildings, too, are as the poets knew them. Isolated cottages and farmhouses stud the fields and roadsides, their colours echoing the pink-red soils and russet orchards.

Three miles north of Dymock lies a lone 17th-century cottage, where Frost brought his family in 1914. Today it is still easy to imagine him arriving here to turn into verse the sights and sounds of a forgotten spot which remains as enchanting now as it was inspiring then.

"Poets Paths" leaflets are available from the Friends of the Dymock Poets (0531890416).

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