

Background to the Stories

‘Wessex’: West Country life in the
mid-1880’s

Wessex

- Setting for Hardy's stories and novels
- Includes Dorset, Somerset, Cornwall, Hampshire & Wiltshire
- Places renamed e.g. Dorchester, the County Town of Dorset is called Casterbridge

Work and Poverty



- Almost everyone worked on the land
- Sheep & dairy farms widespread
- Farms owned by middle-class farmers who employed local people
- Dorset farm wages lowest in the country
- Average wages about 50p per week in 1840

A community apart

- In 1840's Wessex was cut off
- Cart tracks – no main roads
- Most people travelled on foot
- First railway came to Dorchester 1847
- Most people lived their whole lives without going further than the nearest town



Work

- Male labourers often taken on as casual workers at hire 'fares'
- Women also worked on the land
- Harvesting
- Turf-cutting
- Reed-drawing
- Wood-cutting
- Threshing
- Swede-hacking
- Cider-making
- Milking



Dialect

- Being so cut off, Dorset villagers spoke a dialect which would have been barely understood in London
- Chimmer – bedroom
- Tisty-tosty – round as a ball
- Drawlachinging Jack – a useless fool
- Running to mixen – being sick
- Wambling – being unsteady on your feet

Magic and Superstition

- Hardy claimed not to have invented the 'magical' details in his stories
- Every village was supposed to have its own 'witch'
- Curses
- 'Overlooking'

Conjuring, fortune-telling and cures for curses

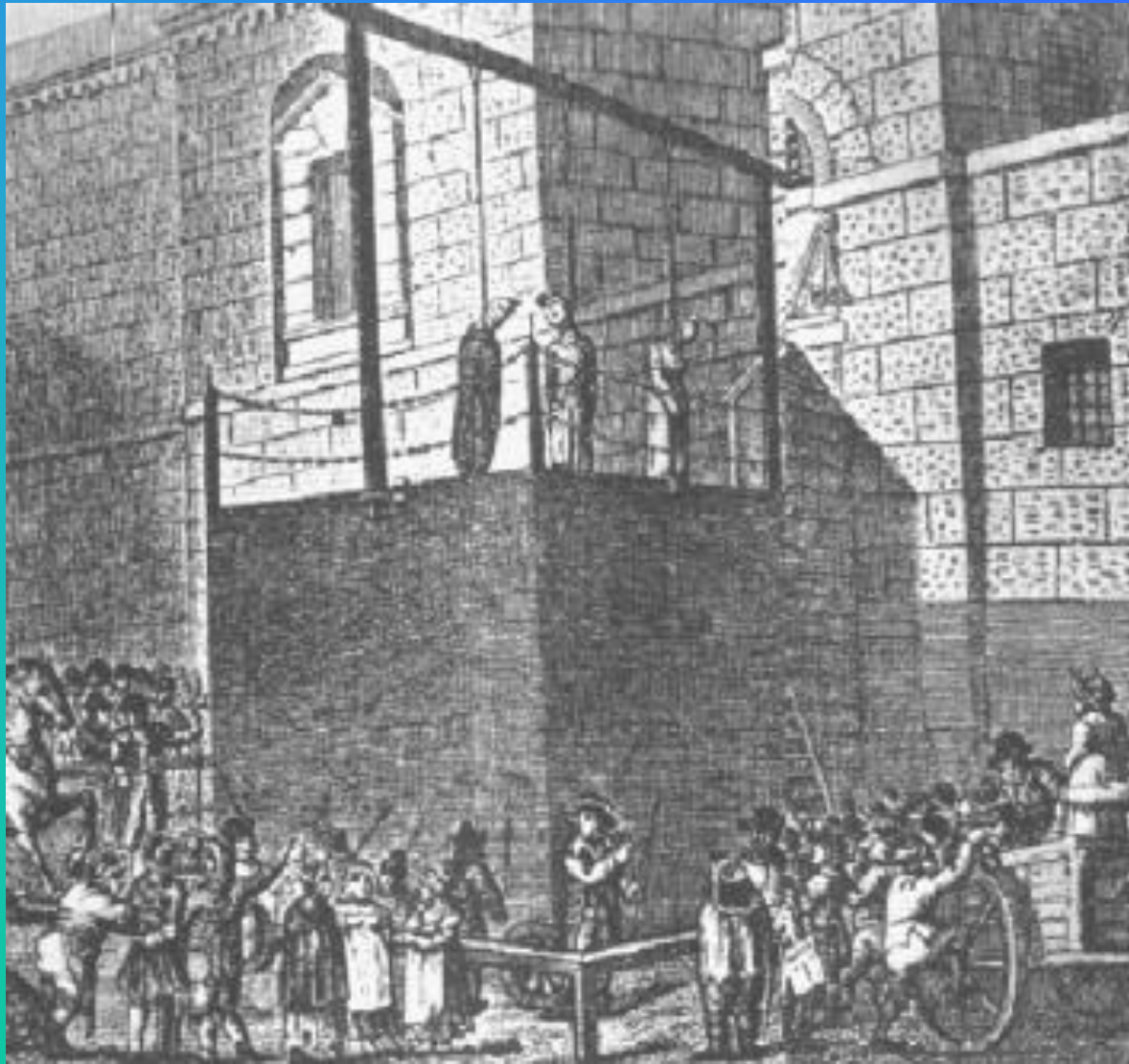
- The 'good' side of witchcraft
- Predict the future
- Help people get rid of a 'blight'
- Pouring egg white into a tumbler showed the shape of who had cursed you
- 'Turning the blood' – holding your injured limb against a corpse, before the body had turned cold

Crime and Punishment

- Brutal legal system
- Labourers had no legal rights
- Tolpuddle Martyrs
- Poachers transported
- Burglary, sheep & horse stealing punishable by hanging
- Drunks were flogged or set in the stocks
- Every jail had its own hangman
- Hardy visited several 'Hang Fairs' in Dorchester



Gibbet in Gloucester Prison (before 1900)



Newgate Prison, London (early C19th)

Rich and Poor

- In Wessex, rich aristocrats lived alongside the village labourers
- Many workers cottages were rented from them and 'tied'
- Rigid class system
- Hardy was one of the few working class, Victorian men from Dorset who succeeded in moving up to a higher class than their own

