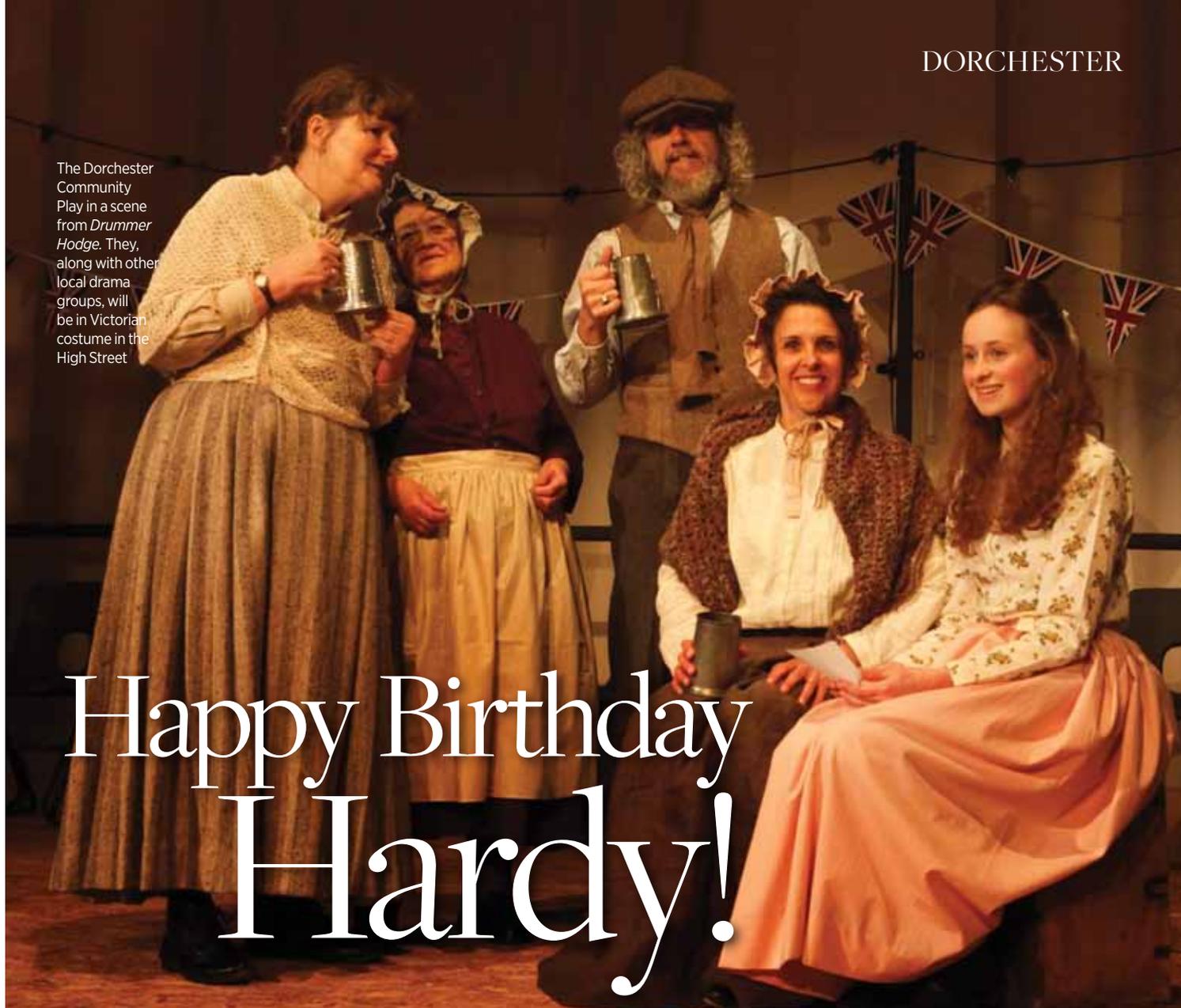


The Dorchester Community Play in a scene from *Drummer Hodge*. They, along with other local drama groups, will be in Victorian costume in the High Street



Happy Birthday Hardy!

The Thomas Hardy Victorian Fair is an exciting new event which has brought the whole town together to celebrate its most famous son in true Dorset fashion

WORDS: Paul Lashmar

Picture in your mind's eye the centre of busy Dorchester in Victorian times. Can you see it? Shire horses and dray carts clip-clopping their way up the High Street to deliver beer to the pubs. Red coated soldiers from the barracks smartly walking into town and farm workers in their smocks shepherding flocks of sheep on their way to market. There are children playing with the hoop and stick, while the town's fine men and women in their best clothes - all crinolines and bonnets, stove pipe hats

and dress jackets - promenade towards Borough Gardens. Well, that's how it will be again on Sunday 2 June when the county town hosts the inaugural Thomas Hardy Victorian Fair. What a wonderful way to mark this famous author's 179th birthday and Dorchester is set to celebrate in style.

The High Street will be closed to traffic for the day and St Peter's bells will ring at the start of the street party, launching a host of Thomas Hardy and Victorian themed events. "Hardy put Dorchester - or should I say

Casterbridge - on the map," says the town crier, Alistair Chisholm. "It is high time we, as a whole town, contribute to celebrate our most famous son." Alistair, who is organising the fair with the support of many Dorchester groups and businesses including Dorset County Museum, the Thomas Hardy Society and the Town Council, says the enthusiasm from those taking part has been overwhelming. "This is the first time in my 25 years in Dorchester that we have been able to pull everyone together for Hardy, and boy, can



'It is high time we, as a whole town, contribute to celebrate our most famous son'

we do a good job," he declares.

It will certainly be a day to dress up Hardy style as there will be best Victorian costume competition, for children and adults, judged just before the fair starts. There will be so many special events happening throughout the day including plenty of live music and dance, from the Mellstock Band to the Stomping Boondocks Ceilidh Band and maypole dancing with Steps in Time. There will also be Thomas Hardy Tours of the High Street and Shire Hall, the historic courtrooms where Hardy was a magistrate.

Strolling actors and the New Hardy Players will perform for the crowds. Nothe Fort Artillery Soldiers are bringing a cannon to fire, there are traditional food and drink stalls, Victorian and rural craft demonstrations, a Victorian children's toy stall and Punch and Judy Shows. There will be one solemn moment when a wreath is laid at Hardy's statue.

The fair is a great opportunity for local schools to introduce their pupils to this famous son of Dorchester, as Gary Spracklen, head teacher at the Prince of Wales First School, explains. "Anything that brings history to life is a great help to us. We have not taught Hardy at the school before but this inspirational event allows us to do some pre-learning before the fair."

Local businesses have also embraced the fair with great enthusiasm and are running a separate costume competition for



ABOVE: Prof Gary Wilson's Punch and Judy will be performing by Shire Hall

LEFT: Thomas Hardy was a keen cyclist

BELOW: Alistair Chisholm leading one of his Thomas Hardy Guided Tours in Dorchester.

local shops. Hall and Woodhouse are bringing their carhorses and brewer's dray along, and the Victorian Shepherd will have a Plankbridge Shepherd's Hut to rest in once he has settled his flock of Dorset Down sheep.

Medusa Apothecary, on the High Street, has a particularly special connection with Thomas Hardy as Scott Duncan, Medusa's founder explains. "My great grandfather was friends with Thomas Hardy and Hardy wrote about one of my ancestors 'Conjuring Minterne' in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* – the Conjuror Trendle was loosely based on him. On the day we will be in

Victorian dress and celebrating in-store bringing some aspects of 19th century hairdressing and beauty to light."

Scott hopes the Thomas Hardy Victorian Fair will become a biennial event. "It's such a brilliant idea to use our heritage to plan a diary of events in Dorchester to enrich our town's culture and our tourism."

So dress up in your Victorian finery on Sunday 2 June (11am-4pm) and come and join in the fun at this very special Hardy celebration. ♦

More at [facebook.com/TheThomasHardyVictorianFair](https://www.facebook.com/TheThomasHardyVictorianFair)



Meet Thomas Hardy

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) was born in a cottage at Higher Bockhampton, and attended a local school. At 16 he started working for John Hicks, a local architect in South Street. The young Thomas then went to London, but in 1871 at the age of 31, he returned to Dorchester and published his first novel, *Desperate Remedies*.

A prolific author and poet, his most famous books include: *Far from the Maddening Crowd* (1874), *The Return of the Native* (1878), *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895). Some of these novels have been turned into films or television series.

Many of Hardy's books are set in Dorset but he did not use real place names. Dorchester became Casterbridge and Bridport became Port Bredy. The Georgian house thought to have inspired the Mayor's home for the *Mayor of Casterbridge* is now Barclays Bank in South Street. Having trained as an architect Hardy designed his own home at Max Gate, on the south east edge of Dorchester. Both his birthplace and Max Gate are managed by the National Trust and are open to the public.

Hardy, was a great walker and cyclist. He was a familiar figure around the town until his death in 1928 aged 87.