

The Roberts' Trail

*An historic walking trail around
Burton Bradstock*

INTRODUCTION

Although archaeological evidence such as barrows, Roman coins and skeletons show the ancient origins of Brideton (now Burton), the suffix 'Bradstock' was added later, after the village was given to the Abbey of St. Stephen in Caen, Normandy, and later to the Priory of Bradenstoke in Wiltshire. Just before the Conquest in 1066, the manor was held by Edward the Confessor. Details of land-use and population from the Domesday Book (1087), of which a copy may be viewed in the village library, show the basic activities of ploughing, grazing, spinning and milling to have been carried on in and around the settlement by 'villeins', 'serfs', 'cottars' and 'bordars' in lives which, compared with our own, were nasty, brutish and short.

As time went on, fishing and seafaring also became important. But the man who put the village of Burton Bradstock on the map was one, Richard Roberts, born in 1752, who arrived in the village in 1786 to marry a wealthy widow, Martha Best, (nee Hoskins) of the Grove and to hang up his hat in that fine 18th Century dwelling, now known as Grove House. Here he lived and worked to build up his country-wide, and eventually world-wide, trade in flax and hemp-based products.



Grove Mill

The visitor is encouraged to follow the Roberts' Trail from the eastern end of the village, step by step from one key point to the next, enjoying the many lovely buildings and gardens on the way. The map will help the visitor to find the way, using the sequence of numbers from 1-14.

THE ROUTE

1 *A hundred yards or so along the footpath from the end of Grove Road, the roar of water is from the sluices built by Roberts to divert water from the River Bride along the Mill Leat to provide power and fresh water to his mills. Upstream of these sluices beyond the nearby, now neglected, **Withy Beds** (used for rick and house thatching spars and lobster pots) lies a complex of hatches and reservoirs, together with a **retting pond** in which the pulled flax stalks would be laid for a month or so in order to release the fibres, ready for the next stage of processing. Much flax was grown locally at that time.*

2 *The **Grove Mill**, built in 1803, as indicated by the plaque to the right of the entrance, was an extension of the earlier 17th Century Flour Mill on the opposite bank of the Leat, now **Mill House**. The undershot wheel lay between the old and new mills. Water supply was always a problem for Roberts and he complains about its inadequacy in some of his letters. As soon as technology allowed, the new mill had a small turbine fitted, the remains of which lie on one side of the forecourt. In the mill the flax was beaten and crushed by the **swingling machinery** into **tow** (raw flax fibre), preparatory to **hackling** at the second mill downstream. After the time of Roberts and his sons, Grove Mill turned to processing cattle meal and flour for bread, made in the ovens still at the back of Mill House. Former stables at the western end of the new mill have been converted into a garage: the rest into flats.*

3 *The 'Piggeries' started life as a **Stable and Wagon House**, as on the 1837 Tithe Map, this probably housing a wagoner or two upstairs. Opposite lies the former **Coach House** at the end of Grove House garden.*



Grove House



Church of St. Mary

4

Grove House, with its fine and ancient Mulberry tree opposite the front door, is a good example of the small country house typical of Dorset. It was built by Martha Hoskins, widow of a local farmer, whom Roberts married in 1786. They had five children, none of whom inherited the business acumen of their father. One son was to sail with Lord Nelson and was on board his ship at the Battle of Trafalgar. Roberts set out from here, a none too healthy man, on long and fairly arduous journeys to further his thriving business. He was an astute man who “made everybody’s fortune except his own”, and even took in orphan children from London and other parishes to live in his attic and train up as mill workers, making sure that their education and morals were carefully attended to in return for long hours worked. In his day, quiet Grove Road would have echoed to the hob-nailed boots and the chatter of mill workers as they came and went.

5

*Moving on between the ball-capped old gate pillars, turn left into Darby Lane, past **Darby House** and typical tenants cottages or *tenements*, to **number 44** which is virtually untouched from early days and until recently lived in by a ‘true Burtoner’. It is easy to imagine the “wold ‘ooman” (as the local dialect termed ‘the wife’) seated at the door *braiding* a new net by hand from a large hook in the lintel and chatting to neighbours passing by. This domestic industry brought in essential extra pence to support the family.*

6

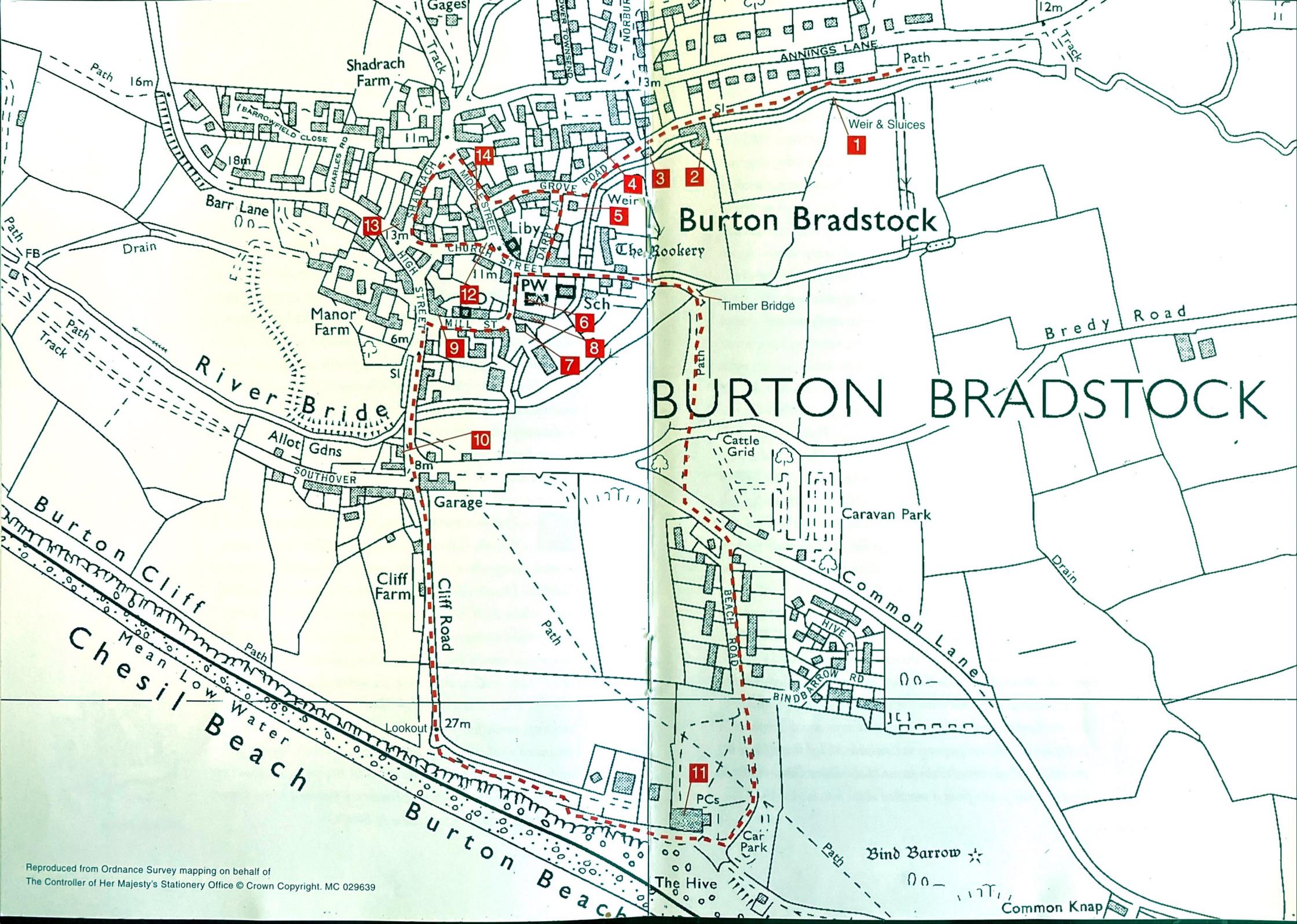
*The Parish Church of St. Mary was regularly frequented by Roberts and his family, even after, later in their marriage, they had “parted brass rags” when he and his wife met only briefly after Morning Service on Sundays. He acted as Churchwarden and Overseer of the Poor. An early photograph, however, shows the Church dominated by his tall steam engine chimney to the south, which powered his second mill, known as **Lawrence’s**. Evidence of Saxon work remains in the Church font, but much of the building dates from the 14th and 15th centuries. There is a fine peal of six bells, a good organ and interesting monuments. The churchyard holds a number of old headstones, including some of the Roberts family and some fine jews. Nearby lies the Church Voluntary School, recently modernised and extended; Roberts no doubt had some finger in the early educational pie, but we have no record, apart from the fact that he made sure that the children knew their Catechism at Sunday School!*

7

*Between the Churchyard and the Rectory runs Mill Street. Before descending the little hill, look south towards a large derelict building in the farmyard to the rear of **Old Mill House**. This is the remains of Roberts’ second Mill, first built in 1778 for wool spinning on the site of an earlier mill. John Lawrence was an 18th Century landowner in the village and owned **mill plot**, and being at one time lessee of the old flour mill at the Grove. It was at this second mill that Roberts carded flax and hemp fibres, a process also known as **hackling**, ready for spinning and weaving, a process which continued well into the present century. Roberts regularly produced spun thread for customers in Bridport and elsewhere from their own **tow**. Burton Bradstock flax and hemp factory competed strongly against those of Bridport.*



Village Green



Burton Bradstock

BURTON BRADSTOCK

8

Proceed down the slope to a sharp right-hand corner, opposite 'Old Walls', and look up to your left. At the top of the gable end lies a stone engraved 'RR', for this long building, now converted into terrace housing, formerly acted as Roberts' warehouse and counting house or office, where he wrote most of his business letters, many of which are preserved in the Dorset Record Office in Dorchester. The steam engine house lay at the far end, water being provided by the Leat before it rejoined the main river a little to the south. The detached house opposite was the mill manager's house, being now appropriately named 'Old Mill House'.

9

Further along Mill Street, past the ancient Shadrach Dairy Farm on the left, lies the Three Horse Shoes, just beyond the village Post Office. The old Post Office lay beyond the original 'Shoes', and is now incorporated into it behind the bow window at the far end of the building; in Roberts' day, this would have been a very low class and rough inn. Note the mysterious little stone head of a woman on the gate post. The village Reading Room is just around the corner.

10

Turn left along High Street, past Bridge Stores, the village's Award-Winning shop, and the bus shelter completed in June 1953 to commemorate the Queen's coronation, to the Old Smithy just beyond the bridge over the Bride, now derelict but working up to the 1950's. Opposite lies the Garage, behind which is a fine exposure of the local Bridport Sands, an important fossil site. Cliff Road leads to the sea, and Southover is the home of the Dove Inn with its famous table made from a wrecked ship's hatch. Ask the



Hive Beach

landlord for the story. If you climb up Cliff Road you arrive at 'Lookout' where spectacular views of the English Channel, Portland and Lyme Regis may be had on a fine day. The sea here was carefully watched by experienced fishermen for signs of shoals of mackerel, at which cries of "Macke'l straying" could have been heard along the quiet village streets, summoning all fishermen from their beds to their boats on **Hive Beach**. A couple of miles away lies **West Bay** (formerly called Bridport Harbour) with a once important port through which Roberts traded his tarpaulin, sailcloth, fine linen, towelling, nets, hammocks, mailbags, twine, and even billiard table nets, for provisions like butter and bacon, coal, timber, flour, slate and other raw materials and machinery from other parts of Great Britain, Europe and the world. He owned much land on the east of the River Brit, and even had his own warehouse there. There is a good shipping and rope museum.



Church Street Bridge

11 A quick stroll down to Hive Beach where the National Trust cafe will refresh the body for a visit to the site of **Burton Castle**, on **Bind Barrow Hill** (an ancient burial ground) to the east. There may have been a timber lookout post there in former times, but no castle as such. Make your way up Beach Road and cross the main coast road, past Larkfield Caravans, to a footpath across the field to the old '**Timber Bridge**' (now iron) at the end of Church Street. On the right lies a fine early house, monastic in origin, later to be extended in the 16th and 19th Centuries. This is the '**Rookery**'. Over the clapper bridge across the Mill Leat lies **Rookery Cottage**, an early longhouse. In past centuries, Church Street has lost several cottages to fire and demolition for the school and the Leat stream which was built by Roberts.

12 At the top of Church Street lies *Parish Pump* - the local name for the Green - with its tree and memorial seat to the accession of Edward VII. Here, the villagers of the 18th and early 19th centuries drew their water from a pump like that at the entrance to *White House*, which bears a date stone of 1635 and was once the Rector's house. Next door is the former *Wesleyan Methodist Chapel* of 1825, once in the Roberts' family, and now the Public Library. Opposite lies the Rectory with its former Coach House, now a separate dwelling. On the other side of the Green is the *W.I. Hall* (1931). *The Red House* completes this cluster around the key point of the village.

13 If you feel fit, walk on up Church Street to the *Anchor Inn*, the third village pub (there were once, so it is said, fifteen!). Opposite lies a cottage formerly known as '*Chapple House*' constructed on the site of a chapel to St. Lawrence, and later to become the dreaded Poor House. Note its gothic window. You are now in Shadrach, at the end of which lies *Girt House* (Great House) where a fine 18th Century brick front conceals an old cottage. The house is said to have been built by Admiral Ingram, a contemporary of Roberts, whose memory is perpetuated in *Ingram House* halfway along Middle Street which joins Shadrach on the far side of the little green known as *Five Elms*. Roberts lived in *Girt House* during the latter part of his life.



Reading Room

14 Walk along Middle Street to the end of Grove Road and leaving *Ingram House* at your back, enjoy the walk along this pretty lane, where, in former times, lay the village meat shop ('Old Butchers') and slaughter house. Your tour ends at the junction of Grove Road and Darby Lane with a view across Rookery Mead to the Vale of the Bride, celebrated so well in '*This Gentle Place*', poems by Douglas Northover.

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Thanks are due to Mrs Elizabeth Gale for her many helpful suggestions over the text: to the director of the Ordnance Survey for permission to use the large scale map of the village (Reproduced from Ordnance Survey mapping on behalf of The Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office © Crown Copyright. MC 029639): and to many village residents for their advice and encouragement. Thanks are also due to Dorset Community Action for their generous financial help, and to Dorset County Council for assistance with the production of this booklet.

The Village Library holds a small collection of books for local reference.

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The aim of the Roberts' Trail is to introduce the newcomer to the village of Burton Bradstock and its many delightful buildings and open places.

Richard Roberts was an 18th Century entrepreneur of extraordinary energy and vision who came to live in Grove House in 1786 through his marriage to a wealthy widow. The ensuing thirty years or so were to see the life of the village transformed as the result of Roberts' introduction of two water-powered mills to process local flax into a variety of manufactured goods. The trail takes the walker to many locations familiar to Roberts and, it is hoped, whets the appetite to find out more about this remarkable man.

