

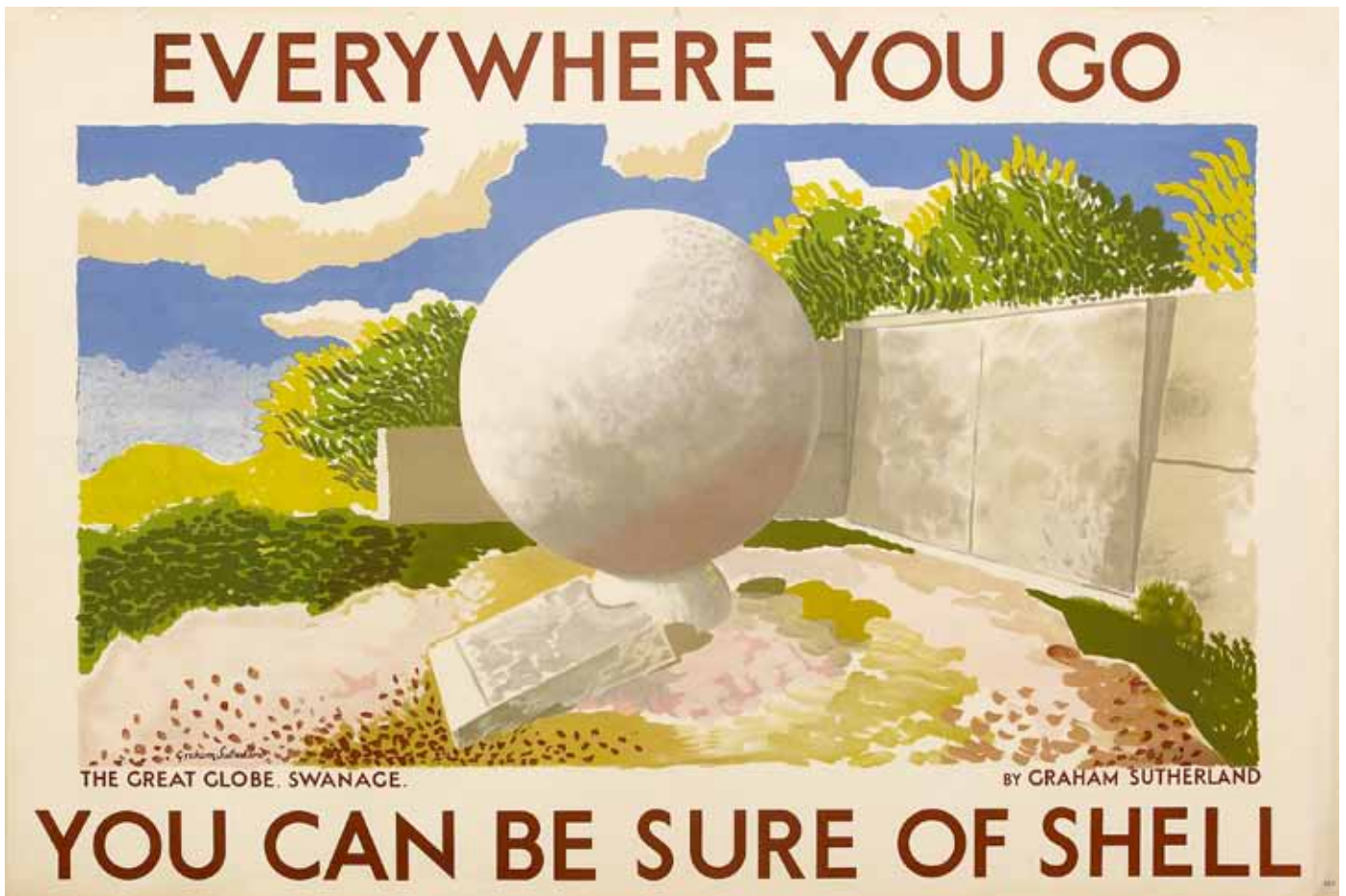
The Golden Age *of* Motoring

By the mid-1930s mass produced cars gave people greater freedom, and a new kind of tourism industry emerged aimed specifically at the touring motorist

WORDS: Martyn Pring



Images: Courtesy Shell Heritage Collection



ABOVE:
Great Globe,
Swanage, 1932.
Illustration
by Graham
Sutherland
(1903- 1980) for a
Shell promotional
poster

LEFT:
The Giant, Cerne
Abbas, 1931
illustration for
Shell by Frank
Dobson (1886-
1963), with some
careful shading
to ensure it didn't
offend!

The emergence of motor vehicles at the end of the 19th century triggered a personal transport revolution. In Britain, speed limits were removed by The Locomotives on Highways Act 1896, ensuring a rapid adoption of motorised vehicle transport. By the First World War, there were some 132,000 registered motor cars (including taxi cabs), and these became a familiar sight on the country's expanding network of metalled roads. So, it is no surprise to discover that there was an appetite amongst motorists to use their vehicles for holiday travel.

In these early years, travelling further afield by car required a degree of planning. Railway companies eyed opportunities, viewing a captive market for transporting personal vehicles on holiday by rail. The Midland Railway saw motor car van business as a means of maintaining its prosperous first-class customers, especially on its holiday routes to the Scottish Highlands, and in the other direction the Somerset and Dorset route to the south coast.

Journey times between Britain's major cities and resorts were slashed as trains became faster. On arrival, customers would often stay in company-owned hotels, or privately-owned accommodation where

specific commission arrangements had been set in place.

Post-World War One, British car makers were still targeting the top end of the market; whereas Europe and the US had moved rapidly to create industries for mass vehicle tenure. But within a decade, car ownership on the back of new model introductions, was now a defining characteristic of middle-class life. By the mid-1930s car prices had fallen in real terms with the average cost of a new vehicle almost half of what a car was a decade before. For the salaried middle and lower middle-classes, car access became one of the most popular pastimes. Vehicle manufacturers and fuel companies actively targeted this affluent group for business, going head-to-head with the railway companies for leisure travel expenditure.

There were concerted efforts amongst key motoring supporters – the Royal Automobile Club (RAC) and the Automobile Association (AA) established membership organisations in the early part of the century – to promote a national road authority. Car ownership increased, and the enthusiasm for touring escalated as the gradual tarmacking of hundreds of miles of country roads opened longer-distance travel by car. ▶

TO VISIT BRITAIN'S LANDMARKS



KIMMERIDGE FOLLY, DORSET

PAUL NASH

YOU CAN BE SURE OF SHELL

ABOVE:
Kimmeridge Folly 1937 illustration for Shell by Paul Nash (1889-1946), Nash, who lived in Swanage, was commissioned to write and illustrate the *Shell Guide for Dorset* in 1935

RIGHT:
See Britain First on Shell, Lulworth Cove, 1925 - one of Shell's early poster advertisements which was attached to commercial vehicles



RIGHT:
The 1938 blue coloured *Come to Dorset Guide*. The Come to Dorset Association brought out official county guides for three successive years from 1938

One place they were heading to in droves was Dorset, with picture postcard locations that were later described as tourism honeypots such as Lulworth Cove. *The Western Gazette* in 1923 described the coastal village as a 'tourist resort and one of the beauty spots of England.' Hardly surprising, Shell at the time decided on this location for one of their early poster advertisements attached to commercial vehicles.

In 1935 Dorset was the third West Country location to receive the *Shell Guide* treatment; a series of highly successful county-based motoring guides catering for Britain's growing band of car drivers.

Jack Beddington, the publicity manager for the British division of Shell-Mex was responsible for developing these popular guides, as well as a host of other marketing material including posters. Along with wordsmith John Betjeman as editor - the two had earlier produced *Shell Devon* and *Shell Cornwall* guidebooks. They invited Paul Nash, a graduate of the Slade School of Fine Art and one of Britain's most renowned artists of the period, to collaborate on a Dorset version of the *Shell Guide*. Nash, who lived in Purbeck, used his own photographs and paintings for this pre-war guidebook, which remains highly collectable.

The Shell Guides became part of a newly established PR agenda where film, celebrity endorsement and widely distributed marketing materials were used to influence consumer holiday plans. By the end of the 1930s, fuel suppliers like Shell, car makers and the Big Four railway companies were using the country's considerable artistic talent, such as Paul Nash, Frank Dobson and Graham Sutherland, to influence domestic (and overseas) tourism.

Cars (and the charabanc, an early form of motor coach) became essential components of Dorset's holiday experience. The local tourism economy flourished as visitors wanted good places to eat and things to do during the day. According to *The Bournemouth Graphic*, Swanage was blessed with a new, modern and well-equipped restaurant. The Trocadero Restaurant was so popular in the mid-1930s that light evening meals were 'proving immensely popular not only with residential visitors, but with motorists, who make runs from Bournemouth and other towns adjacent, take an evening meal and return in the coolest and most delightful part of the day.'

The Blue Pool, near Wareham, opened as a fully-fledged visitor attraction in April 1935 catering for the tourist motorist with special built access roads and fields turned into a car park. The Blue Pool was one of the original supporters of the Come

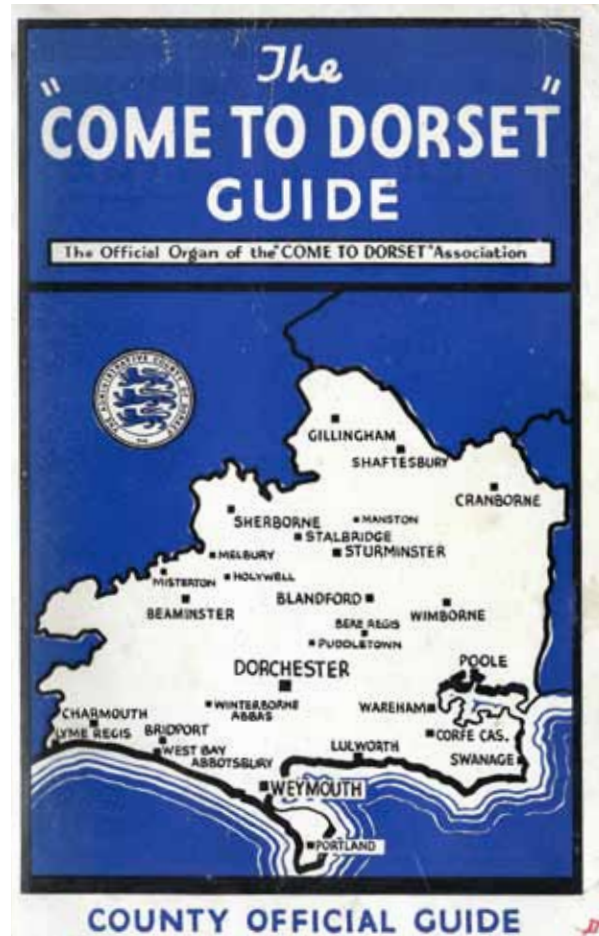


Image: Author's collection

to Dorset Association who brought out official county guides for three successive years from 1938.

Motorists were encouraged to explore the countryside. Thematic excursions to places of interest and specialist attractions featuring history, nature and their contemplative enjoyment of more high-brow trips was appreciated by middle-class customers.

Motoring organisations such as the AA and RAC were more than willing partners in this, with advertorial sections showing an extensive range of travel services including Dorset maps with their roadside telephone and information box entries, suggested drives from selected areas of the county and endorsed hotels appearing with star ratings.

By 1939 the Come to Dorset Association was contemplating more sophisticated approaches to securing tourists. *The Western Gazette* in May 1939 reported that the Association was going to produce 'a colour film of Dorset holiday resorts made for exhibition in at least 300 cinemas.'

World War Two put these grand plans on hold, but by 1946 Dorset's tourism economy was up and running again. Post-war, significant numbers of the public wanted access to the car and freedoms it brought to travel plans. The Blue Pool

reopened for business in June 1946, whilst *The Western Gazette* in February 1947 noted that Dorset Museum had received record visitors during its centenary year.

Special Dorset events drew in huge numbers of visitors. The *Daily Herald* reported that the Southern Railway had put on a special Tolpuddle Express to move expected London crowds to a rally in this Dorset village that was the birthplace of the modern trade union.

By the 1950s new attractions facilitated tourism development. Wimborne Minster's innovative model town opened its one-tenth scale doors in 1951. A press initiative the following year resulted in the model town, which replicated the actual shops, buildings and Minster church of Wimborne, receiving national media exposure.

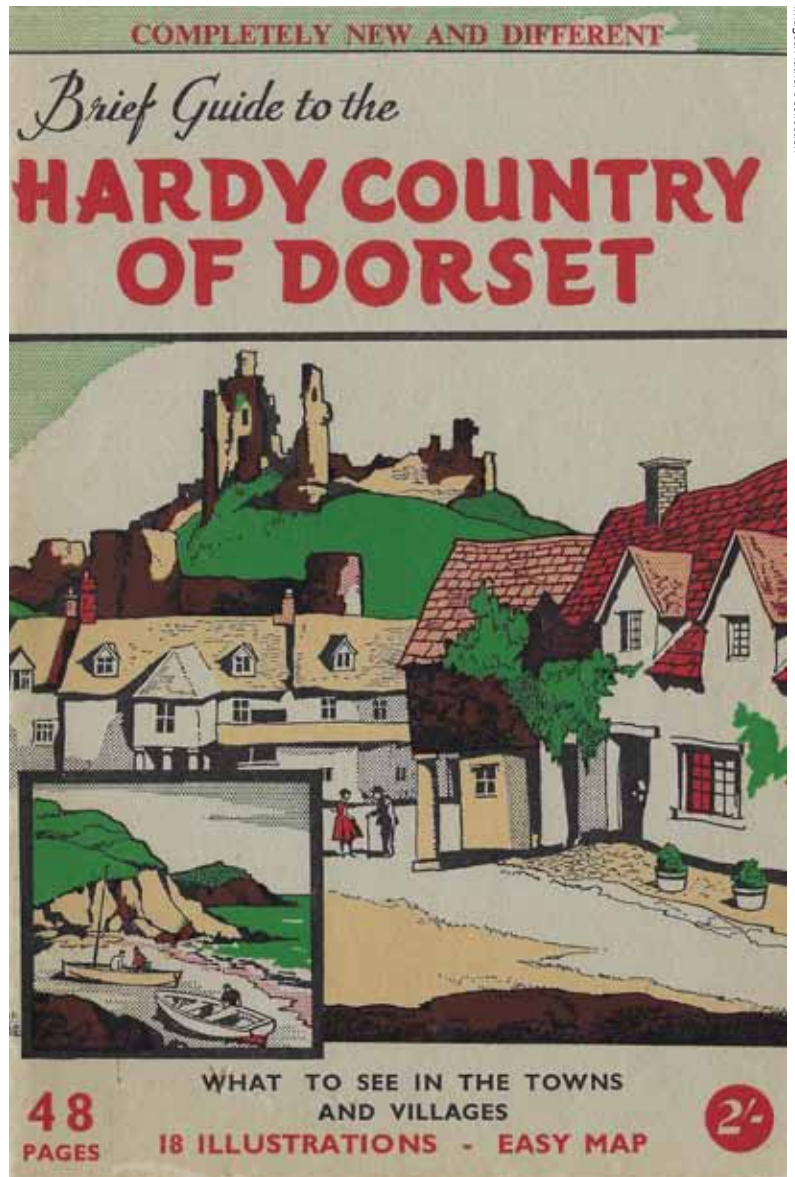
Local authorities began to produce home-grown guides for almost every destination along the coast. In the early 1960s, the Raleigh Press produced a series of 2/- guides under the editorship of E.R. Delderfield. *The Hardy Country of Dorset* guide, written by Monica Hutchings, was part of an agenda to move tourists around the county by car, coach tour or bus, thus allowing the county's small market towns and rural areas to feel the economic benefit of tourism activity.

'The local tourism economy flourished as visitors wanted good places to eat and things to do during the day'

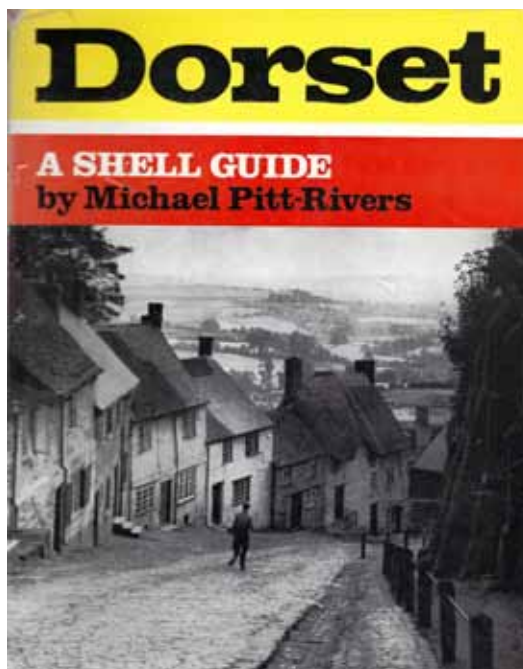
In 1966 Shell produced a new edition of the Dorset guide edited by Michael Pitt-Rivers, forming part of a revised series of county and regional tourist guides. Though this 1966 edition included a lot of new material - Pitt-Rivers noted the county had changed much since the original 1935 publication - Paul Nash's *The Face of Dorset* essay was included without amendment.

The car remains an essential component of a Dorset visit; there are limited train and bus routes around the county, though some tour its quieter lanes by bike. The popularity of the Jurassic Coast, with landmarks such as Durdle Door, the golden cliffs of West Bay that played a starring role in ITV series *Broadchurch* and the 2012 sailing events hosted off Weymouth means that Dorset's beauty is now known globally.

Over a century later from when those first intrepid motorists came to explore the county, it is still a desirable destination to tour by car. ♦



Images: Author's collection



ABOVE: The 1960s *Brief Guide to the Hardy Country of Dorset* written by Monica Hutchings, aimed to move tourists around the county to smaller towns and villages

LEFT: In 1966 Shell produced a new edition of the *Dorset* guide edited by Michael Pitt-Rivers, with a view of Gold Hill in Shaftesbury on its cover