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Whist walking as a boy with his father, he often passed Gad's Hill Place, at Higham, three miles from Rochester. He hoped that one day he would own this fine, though comparatively plain 18th century house. He realised his boyhood dream in 1856 when the house came up for sale and he spent the last 14 years of his life there. Some of the places in Rochester are instantly recognisable in his novels as real places, while others are the product of his own imagination or are composites of several places familiar to him. On this brief tour of places in Rochester associated with Dickens, we hope to give you a flavour of the area and also, perhaps, a little insight into the mind of the great author and why he so loved this ancient city.

Introduction

So profound was the effect on his young Charles Dickens' long association with Rochester and the Medway area began when the Dickens family moved to a small house in Chatham. Charles' father, John, was originally a clerk in the Naval Pay Office in Portsmouth Dockyard. He transferred first to London in 1816 and then to Chatham. The family lived at No. 2 (now No. 11) Ordinance Terrace from 1817 to 1821 and then for a short time at a house in The Brook (now demolished) before moving back to London in 1822. During those formative years the young Charles became very familiar with the Medway area, especially Rochester.



A Dickens trail in and around historic Rochester

In Dickens' Footsteps



Discover the inspiration behind the characters and settings of Dickens' novels



A sense of place



Although many locations in Dickens' novels are the product of his own imagination, others were inspired by real places he was familiar with. One example of this is the delightful village of Cooling, just a few miles from Rochester on the Hoo Peninsula. This marshland village has seen little change since Dickens' time and is thought by many to be the origin of Pip's village in *Great Expectations*. In the churchyard of St James, near Cooling Castle, the rather sombre, lozenge-shaped tombstones can be seen, which Dickens used as the inspiration for the graves of Pip's five brothers. In fact, there are 13 children's graves several of their children to malaria.

Dickens, like many novelists, is believed to have 'borrowed' some of the names for his characters from headstones in local graveyards. One such example can be seen in the small cemetery between the cathedral and St. Nicholas Church. The fourth headstone to the left of the cathedral wall is a memorial to the Corrett family, which may have served as the inspiration for his novel *Little Dorrit*.

The Last Word

Dickens died at Gad's Hill Place on 9 June 1870 of a brain haemorrhage. He had collapsed the day before following a particularly long day writing in his chalet in the garden. He had wished to be buried at one of a number of Kentish locations, including Cobham and Shorne churches and Rochester Castle moat. At the time of his death the moat formed part of the graveyard of St. Nicholas Church, next to the cathedral, but it was closed to further burials. His wish to be buried without ceremony did not come to pass, such was his popularity. *The Times* newspaper took the lead in suggesting

that Dickens should be buried instead at Westminster Abbey, which became his final resting place, although his ghost is said to haunt the castle moat.

The day before he died, Dickens had been working on *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, which remained unfinished on his death and, rather fittingly, almost the last words he wrote were about Rochester, his favourite city:

'A brilliant morning shines on the old city. Its antiquities and ruins are surpassingly beautiful, with the lusty ivy gleaming in the sun, and the rich trees waving in the balmy air.'

EXHIBITION: A DICKENS WHODUNIT: SOLVING THE MYSTERY OF EDWIN DROOD at Eastgate House
Produced in partnership with The Charles Dickens Museum in London.

The *Mystery of Edwin Drood* was Dickens' last, unfinished novel. Dickens was working on the story in his beloved writing chalet at Gad's Hill Place the day before he died. This chalet can now be seen in the gardens of Eastgate House. The exhibition explores the novel, which features several buildings around Rochester. For opening times visit medway.gov.uk



ROCHESTER DICKENS FESTIVALS
Medway's connections with the Great British author, Charles Dickens are celebrated each year at the twice-yearly Dickens festivals that take place in Rochester. For festival dates and programme details visit medway.gov.uk

visitmedway.org



Restoration House
High Street, Rochester, ME1 1EW
Phone: 01634 848520
Email: robert.fucker@restorationhouse.co.uk

Rochester Castle
Phone: 01634 332901
Email: rochester.castle@medway.gov.uk

Rochester Cathedral
Phone: 01634 843366
Email: visits@rochester.cathedral.org

Six Poor Travellers' House
Phone: 01634 845609
Email: admin@richardwatts.org.uk

Eastgate House
High Street, Rochester, ME1 1EW
Phone: 01634 332700
Email: eastgate.house@medway.gov.uk

Guildhall Museum
Phone: 01634 332900
Email: guildhall.museum@medway.gov.uk

Medway Visitor Information Centre
95 High Street, Rochester
Phone: 01634 338141
Email: visitorcentre@medway.gov.uk

All of the places featured in this trail can be freely seen from the road, while others are open to the public, either on a regular or an occasional basis. For admission times and charges for all of our attractions, please visit our website:

Visitor attractions

The Guildhall Museum

THE HULKS EXPERIENCE

Hulks were decommissioned naval ships moored in the Thames and Medway estuaries for use as military hospitals and floating prisons. Conditions on board were appalling. The hulks were disease and rat infested and many prisoners died. Prisoners often escaped, including Dickens' fictitious character Magwitch, who grabbed Pip in the fog-bound and malaria-infested marshes surrounding his village and demanded food, in the opening scenes of *Great Expectations*.



Gad's Hill Place



Gad's Hill Place, Dickens' last home, was built in 1790 for a former Mayor of Rochester. The young Charles often saw this house on walks with his father and promised himself that one day he would own it. His dream became a reality in 1856 when the house came up for sale.

Dickens made several changes to the house during the 14 years he lived there, a number of which still survive, including the restored conservatory and the false bookcase on the inside of the study door. The house is now used as a school.

Opposite the house is the Falstaff Inn, named after Shakespeare's character of the same name. Dickens often drank there, or had beer sent over. The landlord acted as a banker for him and regularly cashed his cheques.

(3) EASTGATE HOUSE

'Seminary for young ladies, Miss Twinkleton.'

Dating from 1590, this magnificent Elizabethan townhouse has had many different uses, from family home to the town museum. During its time as a Victorian boarding school it was a great inspiration to Dickens, and features in his first and last novels. The house appears as Westgate House in *The Pickwick Papers* and as Miss Twinkleton's Seminary for Young Ladies in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. The Grade I listed building has undergone major conservation work thanks to generous funding from Heritage Lottery Fund, and now features a series of displays telling its remarkable story, including its associations with Dickens. For details and opening times visit medway.gov.uk

(2) DICKENS' CHALET

'My room is up among the branches of the trees; and the birds and butterflies fly in and out'

One of Dickens' most treasured possessions, his chalet, can be seen in the gardens of Eastgate House. The chalet used to stand in the garden at Gad's Hill Place and was a gift from his actor friend Charles Fechter. It arrived from Switzerland at Higham railway station in 58 packing cases. Dickens loved to write in the upper room and installed mirrors inside to reflect the light. Also in Eastgate gardens is a horse-gin, brought from Gad's Hill. It is a water pump, which drew water from a well by means of a horse walking around a central windlass. *Plans are now underway to restore the chalet. At present it is too fragile to go inside but it is hoped that in the future it can be opened for visitors.*

(1) SIX POOR TRAVELLERS' HOUSE

'... a clean white house, of a staid and venerable air, with a queer old door.'

In addition to his 15 full-length novels Dickens also wrote a number of shorter stories. One of these was *The Seven Poor Travellers*, in which Dickens himself, as narrator, became the seventh traveller. The house was founded by Richard Watts (M.P. for Rochester in 1563) as a charity for six poor travellers to receive a night's free lodging. The house is regularly open and the original lodgings can still be seen. The house also has a beautiful courtyard herb garden and a series of display panels to show what the house was like in Dickens' time.

(14) JASPER'S GATEHOUSE & MR. TOPES' HOUSE

'...one might fancy that the tide of life was stemmed by Mr. Jasper's own gatehouse.'

In *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, Dickens describes these two buildings as if they were one, linked together by a connecting door. Mr. Jasper, the cathedral choirmaster, lived in the lodgings above the gatehouse, while Mr. Tope, the chief verger, lived next door. Built around 1550, the gatehouse originally led to the cathedral precincts. The doorway under the arch leads to the living apartments above, which are still used today.

(13) THE OLD CORN EXCHANGE

'... oddly garnished with a queer old clock that projects over the pavement ... as if Time carried on business there, and hung out his sign.'

The clock that Dickens described is still there, looming precariously over the pavement. Dickens first encountered the clock as a boy when walking with his father. The Old Corn Exchange, now known as the Princes Hall, was built in 1706 and at one time was converted into a cinema. It features in *The Uncommercial Traveller* and *The Seven Poor Travellers*.

(12) THE GUILDHALL

'The hall was a queer place, I thought, with higher pews in it than a church'

In Dickens' time the Guildhall was also used as a magistrates' court. It was here that Pip was brought by Mr. Pumblechook, in *Great Expectations*, to be bound over as an apprentice to Joe Gargery. Today it houses a fine museum with several displays, including a reconstruction of a prison ship – the *Hulk Experience*.

Look out for Dickens' plaques that can be found on the various buildings with connections to the author.



(11) ROYAL VICTORIA and BULL HOTEL

'Good house – nice beds.'

Unusually for Dickens, he used the real name of The Bull Hotel in *The Pickwick Papers*. Dickens himself stayed here and it is still used as a hotel today, although when he visited coaches arrived by the now blocked back entrance and left by the front archway. The hotel also features in *Great Expectations* as The Blue Boar. It acquired the prefix *Royal Victoria* following an overnight stop by Princess Victoria in 1836.

(10) RIVER MEDWAY

'Running water is favourable to day dreams'

Dickens witnessed the destruction, in 1856, of the medieval stone bridge at Rochester, which was blown up by the Royal Engineers amidst great excitement. It was replaced by a cast iron structure, which was replaced again with the present bridge in 1914. The original balustrade of the medieval bridge can still be seen along the Esplanade.

(4) MISTER Pumblechook's house

'...eminently convenient and commodious premises'

Standing opposite Eastgate House is another large, timber-framed mansion, built in about 1684. Originally, this was one large house but is now, and probably was also in Dickens' time, divided into three separate premises. It features in *Great Expectations* as Mr. Pumblechook's House, where he carried on business as a corn chandler, and again in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* as the offices of Mr. Sapsea, an auctioneer.

(5) RESTORATION HOUSE

'...I began to understand that everything in the room had stopped, like the watch and the clock, a long time ago.'

Restoration House is a fine Elizabethan red-brick mansion. In *Great Expectations*, Dickens renamed the house, home to Miss Havisham, *Satis House*, borrowing the name from a real house of that name near the castle. It takes its name from an occasion in 1660 when Charles II stayed there on his return to England to be crowned.

(6) THE VINES

'...the nooks and ruins where the monks had once had their refectories and gardens.'

Laid out as a public park in 1880, the Vines were formerly the priory vineyard of Rochester Cathedral and feature in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* as the Monks' Vineyard. It was the presumed route taken by Pip in *Great Expectations* when visiting Miss Havisham. In Dickens' time it was a meadow. Dickens was seen leaning against a fence in the Vines just two days before he died.

(7) MINOR CANON ROW

Close to the cathedral is this row of fine 18th century houses built to accommodate the minor canons and organist which are featured in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. Dickens likened the front porches to 'sounding boards over old pulpits.'

(8) ROCHESTER CATHEDRAL

'...it's like looking down the throat of Old Time..'

The cathedral, which is the second oldest in the country and dates from 604, features in *The Pickwick Papers* and takes centre-stage in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, with the plot revolving around the ancient church and the people who worked there. The Dean and Chapter have erected a brass memorial tablet to Dickens in the south transept of the cathedral.

(9) ROCHESTER CASTLE

'Magnificent ruin!...What a study for an antiquarian!'

The impressive Norman castle at Rochester had a humbling effect upon Dickens, reminding him perhaps of his own mortality. In *Household Words* he wrote:

'I surveyed the massive ruin from the Bridge, and thought what a brief little practical joke I seemed to be, in comparison with its solidity, stature, strength and length of life.' In Dickens' time the castle looked very different. Houses and workshops filled much of the moat by the cathedral, the keep and towers were adorned with ivy and the waters of the River Medway lapped the base of the walls.

The Tour

Starting at the Visitor Information Centre, which has a fine range of Dickens souvenirs, turn left from the exit and we begin this short tour at the point marked **i** on the map, the Six Poor Travellers' House, stopping briefly at each spot to discover something of interest about Charles Dickens or his books along the way.

By following the map you are welcome to devise your own tour, looking at each place in any order you choose. With only minor changes to the route, the tour is manageable for wheelchair users. Please contact the Visitor Information Centre on 01634 338141 for further information.

