

An exploration of the area Dickens loved as a boy, and the place he chose to spend the last years of his life.







Charles Dickens in his Study by William Frith 1819 ~ 1909

When you hear the name Charles Dickens, visions of the Medway area probably spring to mind, and many Medway landmarks provided the inspiration for Dickens' most famous works.

So it could be said that both were a catalyst for the development of each other. Dickens' childhood years in Rochester and Chatham greatly influenced his future life and career. It was here that he went to school and where he first discovered his passion for books and the theatre. It was his nostalgic fondness for the area which drew him back to live here as a world famous author.

But what was life like for most people when Dickens lived here?



Chatham Dockyard, seen from Fort Pitt around 1830. Drawn by G. Sheppard, engraved by R. Roffe.

The Dickens family moved to Ordnance Terrace in Chatham in 1817, during the reign of George III. The house (which still stands today) had been recently built on the brow of a hill above the hustle and bustle of Chatham and overlooking corn fields. Charles was just five years old and the move came about when John Dickens, his father, took up a clerical post at the dockyard.



Oil painting by N.T. Glibber; naive scene at the White Swan, Chatham.

At this time Chatham was bustling and rowdy full of pubs, second hand clothes shops and oyster sellers.

Its most striking feature would have been the presence of large numbers of armed forces personnel. Both the Royal Artillery and the Royal Engineers had barracks in nearby Brompton at this time; the close proximity of the dockyard attracted a transient naval population too.

Most of the buildings for which the dockyard is now so famous had recently been erected.

Dickens would have known neighbouring Rochester as a much more secluded place with its ancient high street, castle and cathedral surrounded by rolling countryside. He refers to it as 'Dullborough Town' in *The Uncommercial Traveller* and 'Cloisterham' in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*.

Industry was increasingly concentrated around the river as it offered a transport link to the bustling metropolis of London and other markets.

The rich natural resources of clay and lime around the Hoo peninsula were used to make the highest quality bricks, while flat bottomed



Rochester Castle engraved by H. Adlard after G.F. Sargent circa 1836.

barges became the 'lorries' of the river, carrying these bulky materials which would help to build Victorian London.

Boat, barge and ship building took place on the river to meet the needs of fishing, commerce and the navy. The brewing industry expanded alongside using local supplies of malt and hops to



supply the needs of the navy, army garrisons and passing shipping trade. There were numerous working windmills around the hills of Rochester, Chatham and Frindsbury.

> The lighting of buildings and streets by gas began early in the 19th century, although few homes were lit at this time. The Rochester and Chatham Gaslight Company was formed in 1818 and gas was first supplied in Medway the following year. The company occupied 95 High Street Rochester in the late 1800s, a building now used as the **Visitor Information Centre**.

> View of the River Medway at Rochester from Temple marshes, showing; barges on the river and Frindsbury chalk quarry, circa 1830.

The beginning of the 19th century announced the age of popular theatre, as workers moving into newly industrialised towns and cities created a huge demand for live entertainment.

Serious drama was reserved for two playhouses in London due to strict licensing laws, so local people would have made do with sketches, melodramas, recitals and musical interludes. It was a rough and ready night out with audiences coming and going as they pleased.

These were the kind of shows that Dickens first encountered at the Rochester Theatre on Star Hill, and his passion for the stage remained with



The Mitre Inn and Clarence Hotel, High Street Chatham, circa 1855



The Rochester Theatre on Star Hill.

him for the rest of his life. The theatre building still stands where Dickens knew it, although it has been substantially rebuilt. He also sat transfixed at performances given during the travelling fairs in Rochester.

John Dickens encouraged his son's gift for performing. He would often take Charles and his elder sister Fanny to the Mitre Inn in Chatham High Street to entertain the company there with songs and ballads of the day. But it was during trips to Rochester that Dickens formed his earliest impressions of the theatrical life that was to mean so much to him.

Trips to a London theatre would have been made by stagecoach, running along the turnpike roads and through the tollgates up to the city.

These were the last days of coaching in England before the staggering growth of the railway in the 1840s. All the sights and sensations associated with this form of travel - horses, inns, discomfort, tedium,



exposure to the elements, danger and alcohol are embedded in many of Dickens' novels, from *The Pickwick Papers* to *Great Expectations*.

Mail Coaches on the road: the Louth-London Royal Mail progressing at speed Charles Cooper Henderson, 1803 - 1877.



Watercolour painting by a prisoner of war, of the prison hulk HMS Brunswick on the river at Gillingham, circa 1800.

A feature which dominated the landscape during Dickens' childhood were the hulks on the River Medway. These ships had been used to house prisoners of war and would later be used to hold convicts bound for Australia. Prison gangs would regularly be seen working around the dockyards in the early 19th century.

As a child, Dickens would definitely have seen the hulks anchored in the river. These sightings would one day provide the inspiration for the escaped convict Magwitch in *Great Expectations*.

Industrialisation brought new markets, a consumer boom and greater prosperity for most of the middle classes. The increase in their numbers created a huge demand for goods and services.

Keen to display their affluence, and with the leisure time to enjoy it, the newly rich required a never ending supply of novelties from the country's factories and workshops. What in the 18th century would have been

available only to aristocrats was now on show in every smart middle class home, crowded with furniture, ornaments, and knick knacks. Servants

These changes also brought rapid and sometimes chaotic developments as towns and cities quickly expanded. Desperately poor housing conditions, long working hours, the ravages of infectious disease and premature death were the inevitable consequence.





An Interior by Mary Ellen Best 1809 ~ 1891

were required too, representing the largest class of workers in the country, most of them women.

Housing for the poor was mostly dreadful. People often lived in 'back to backs' (left), houses of only two or three rooms, with the back of one house joined onto the back of another and windows only on one side.

Several houses would share a small yard where there would be an outside 'privy'. You might have had to queue up to use the loo, waiting for your neighbour to finish! People cooked over an open fire, with most of the heat going up the chimney and most of the working classes lived on plain food such as bread, butter, potatoes and bacon. Butcher's meat was a luxury and oysters from the River Medway were a hugely important staple food at the time, consumed in large quantities, especially by the poor. Towns and cities were dirty, unsanitary and overcrowded. The streets were often unpaved and not cleaned. Rubbish was not collected and it was allowed to accumulate in piles in the streets. Life expectancy was low in the towns and infant mortality was high. Polluted water and damp housing were common causes of illness. Poverty was regarded as inevitable for the 'working poor' - those who worked with their hands.

For those with no income at all, there were numerous workhouses operating in the Medway area at this time, including St Margaret's Parish Workhouse in St Margaret's Street, Rochester (right) a building which still stands today.

The Medway Poor Law Union was later created in 1835, and took over the existing parish

workhouse buildings in Rochester and Chatham. Churches provided schools for poor children, and 'dame schools' were run by women who taught a little reading, writing, and arithmetic. Dickens attended a dame school in Rome Lane, Chatham with his sister Fanny. In 1821, the children were educated more formally at a new school nearby in Clover Lane - now Clover Street.



The Dickens family were not poor, but John lived well beyond his means and had a naturally

generous disposition - all of which would eventually plunge the family into financial difficulties. When a huge fire swept through Chatham in 1820 and many were made homeless, John Dickens joined a committee of concerned citizens and donated to the relief fund. His account of the fire was published in *The Times* that year.

The family left the Medway area reluctantly in 1822. Heavily in debt, John Dickens was moved to London and the young Charles was forcibly uprooted from the place of his happy childhood. In



John Dickens by W. Huntly, circa 1820

no railroads in the land, I left it in a stage coach... There was no other inside passenger, and I consumed

> my sandwiches in solitude and dreariness, and it rained hard all the way, and I thought life sloppier than I had expected to find it.'

> In 1824 John Dickens was committed to the Marshalsea Prison in Southwark for debt and Mrs Dickens and the youngest children went too. Charles, then just 12 years old, was put to work in a blacking factory and lived alone in lodgings three miles away. These were the darkest times of his life, and this first hand experience of poverty became a driving force for his ambition. It also helped

this account from Dullborough Town, he describes leaving for London in a melancholy condition: *'As I left Dullborough in the days when there were* make him the most vigorous and influential voice of the working classes in his age.



Dickens returned to the Medway area in 1856, when he purchased Gad's Hill Place (above) near Rochester, the house he had dreamed of owning when he glimpsed it as a child. Now 44 years old, he had brought himself up from destitution to become the world's most famous author, a self-made celebrity and a very wealthy man.

Dickens built a tunnel beneath the main road to give access to an extra garden. Here he erected his Swiss Chalet which was a gift from an actor friend. The chalet now stands in Eastgate Gardens in Rochester.

He lived at Gad's Hill for the rest of his days, frequently walking for many miles around the surrounding countryside and towns. During his later years many places and buildings of the Medway area were immortalised in some of his greatest works, including *Great Expectations* and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*.



Much had changed in the Medway area by this time, but perhaps the greatest impact of all was made by the vast expansion of the railways across Britain. This was the era of 'railway mania'!

Suddenly it was possible for manufacturers to transport goods all over Britain. Farmers could deliver perishable foods to towns many miles away.

The railway network also increased the circulation of newspapers and by using the

The Railway Station by William Powell Frith 1862

railways instead of mail coaches, the post office was able to dramatically reduce the cost of sending a letter.

It soon became clear that large numbers of people wanted to travel by train, which was far quicker and cheaper than the stagecoach. It was not long before railway companies were receiving more revenue from passengers than from carrying freight. The great changes brought about by the railway are also reflected in both Dickens' writings and his life. It was critical in the development of his public profile, enabling him to travel out to meet his audiences and give readings which made his work more accessible.

Privately, rail travel also made it possible for Dickens to carry on a love affair whilst carefully upholding his public reputation as a family man. While he was at Gad's Hill, his mistress, Ellen (Nelly) Ternan was living in France and Dickens regularly visited her in secret.

In 1865, while returning from one of these visits, Dickens, Nelly and her mother were involved in a near fatal accident when the boat train from Folkestone was derailed at Staplehurst. The photograph below shows the aftermath of the crash, and the carriage in which Dickens was travelling is highlighted.



By the mid 19th century, living conditions in the Medway area had greatly improved for most ordinary people. In the wake of the industrial revolution more people were able to enjoy affordable items such as furniture and fine clothing.

People were flooding into the towns and cities to seek work, and the slums were replaced by alternative accommodation. Housing improved for the more prosperous working classes. New terraced homes were increasingly connected to clean water, drains and even gas. The majority of Medway's terraced houses were built in the Victorian era, based on the standard design of a posh front sitting room, a back room where the family lived day to day, and a scullery off that.

Education came to be regarded as a universal need. Built in 1858, the Chatham ragged school was one of hundreds built to enable poor children to receive free education. These were gradually absorbed into the school system created by the 1870 Education Act. The Chatham ragged school building still stands in King Street today.

A series of factory acts from the 1830s onwards progressively limited the number of hours that women and children could be expected to work.



Byelaw terraced houses in Strood. These types of dwelling were built to comply with the Public Health Act 1875

By the end of the century most people had more leisure time, and some clerks and skilled workers were given one week's annual holiday. Family life, epitomised by the young Queen Victoria, Prince Albert and their nine children, was enthusiastically idealised.

The Victorian era saw considerable expenditure on monuments to civic pride, not just for the property owning elite but for the working classes as a means to improve themselves. Town councils laid out public parks for recreation. In 1836 The Medway Bathing Establishment was opened at the foot of Baker's Walk in Rochester, complete with warm salt water rooms and extensive river views. A new bridge over the river replaced the 14th century version in 1856.

In the 1870s Rochester Castle and its grounds



Rochester Castle and Cathedral, 1858. In front of the castle by the waterside is Rochester Bathing Establishment with salt water bathing area to the left.

were opened to the public as a park. As the century drew to a close, Eastgate House in the High Street was purchased by the Rochester Corporation, in order to transform it into a museum and municipal building in honour of Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee.

Dickens lived through a period of extreme inequality, and no other writer has dramatised the gulf between the 'haves' and the 'have nots' as starkly as he did.

However, by the time of his death in 1870, the Medway area, like the rest of the country, was a much changed place. Industrialisation, political reform and social change had begun to improve the lives of ordinary people forever.

I have many happy memories connected with Kent and am scarcely less interested in it than if I had been a Kentish man bred and born.

Charles Dickens, 1840.



With thanks to The Guildhall Museum, Medway Archives Centre, and Wikimedia Commons for the images used in this document.









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