



Enjoy a Dickens of a time Victorian magic, 21st-century fun

Mr Pickwick, Fagin, Magwitch; Oliver Twist asking for more, Marley's ghost confronting Scrooge – they're all unforgettable characters and scenes. If Charles Dickens were alive today, he would surely write the most popular TV soaps, and maybe that's why people of all ages still love his books. You can still visit the real-life settings that fired his imagination, too, from Portsmouth to London and Kent. Escape for a day or short break to relive Dickens' Victorian magic of cobbled streets and seaside haunts – with a few hi-tech surprises along the way that cast a vivid contemporary spell. Be inspired, enjoy a Dickens of a time!

A Tale of Two Cities

We begin our tour in the historic waterfront city of Portsmouth, where Charles Huffam Dickens was born in 1812 – you'll find his family's modest terraced house, now the Charles Dickens Birthplace Museum, on Old Commercial Road. View the parlour, dining room and bedroom, furnished to recreate middle-class tastes of the time. Then discover more about Dickens and Portsmouth in the exhibition room featuring intriguing personal memorabilia (even the couch on which he would die at his house in Kent in 1870) or book a specialist guided walk to really get a taste for the city's Victorian past. Dickens' father John, a clerk in the Royal Navy pay office, was recalled to London in 1815, but in later years Charles returned to Portsmouth to research for his novel *Nicholas Nickleby* and to give public readings of his work. On his last visit, in 1866, he hunted in vain for his birthplace: these days it's clearly signposted, so you'll easily find it!
www.charlesdickensbirthplace.co.uk

Next, then, we head for London. Poor Charles had an unsettled childhood in the capital, Kent, then London again, where his father spent time in Marshalsea debtors' prison. Little Charles was sent to work in a blacking factory, but later became a law-court reporter and journalist. Each episode of his life, his grim childhood, the twisting streets and lanes he explored, gave him the rich stuff of his fiction.

Enter his world at The Charles Dickens Museum on Doughty Street, the only one of his London homes to survive. He lived in the tall, narrow, Georgian building between April 1837 (a year after his marriage to Catherine Hogarth) and December 1839. At this time, with the serialisation of *The Pickwick Papers*, the writing of *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby*, he was on the way to becoming the most celebrated author of the 19th century. Browse four atmospheric floors filled with the most important collection of Dickens material anywhere: original furniture, paintings, photographs and manuscripts. Annotated books show the great pains he took when giving his famous readings of his works. Before you visit, check the museum's calendar for special exhibitions and events, including walks through Dickensian London. www.dickensmuseum.com

I have many happy memories connected with Kent

Now make the short journey from London to the maritime towns of the Medway estuary. It's just an hour to Chatham nowadays, but for Charles it was a world away. He had moved here with his family in 1817 when he was five years old and stayed until 1822: they were the happiest years of his childhood and sparked a life-long love of the area. Chatham became Dullborough in *The Uncommercial Traveller* and Mudfog in *The Mudfog Papers*: 'A pleasant town – a remarkably pleasant town – situated in a charming hollow by the side of a river.'

The Dickens family lived for a while at No. 2 (now No. 11) Ordnance Terrace. Privately owned, it's not open to the public but a plaque celebrates its literary connections. Then tour Chatham Historic Dockyard, where John Dickens clerked in the Royal Navy pay office. You can easily picture the bustle that enthralled Charles as he explored the dockyard and the Chatham Lines fortifications that protected it, watching the military manoeuvres that would feature in *The Pickwick Papers*. And why not share his excitement for river trips that grew from accompanying his father on the Naval pay yacht Chatham. 'Running water is favourable to day dreams, and a strong tidal river is the best of running water for mine' (*The Uncommercial Traveller*). Recreate the experience by hopping aboard the Paddle Steamer Kingswear Castle, which operates from the dockyard.

Or embark on a thrilling *Great Expectations* boat ride, at the fabulous new Dickens World, Chatham Maritime. The themed family attraction is perfectly tuned to our modern multi-media generation, with a Peggotty's Boathouse 4D cinema show and other exciting interpretations of Dickensian life.

Chatham Historic Dockyard www.thedockyard.co.uk
Dickens World www.dickensworld.co.uk
Paddle Steamer Kingswear Castle www.pskc.freearrive.co.uk

Surpassingly beautiful Rochester

"Magnificent ruin!" said Mr Snodgrass. "Glorious Pile!" echoed Mr Jingle, as members of the Pickwick Club glimpsed ancient Rochester Castle. Rochester, the briefest of jaunts from Chatham, entranced Dickens, and from his first novel, *The Pickwick Papers*, to his final, unfinished *Mystery of Edwin Drood*, he used it as a setting: 'Its antiquities and ruins are surpassingly beautiful, with the lusty ivy gleaming in the sun, and the rich trees waving in the balmy air' (*Edwin Drood*).

As a boy Charles often walked here with his father – pick up a map from Medway Visitor Information Centre on the High Street and you can follow In Dickens' Footsteps. So much from the author's time remains that every vista is a game of I-spy. There's The Guildhall where Pip was indentured as an apprentice in *Great Expectations*: it's now a museum of Rochester's history, with a Dickens Discovery Room featuring memorabilia (his pocket bible, walking stick, family portraits) and touch-screen technology highlighting Dickensian sites around Medway. Wander the historic High Street 'full of gables, with old beams' to Eastgate House, aka Westgate House in *The Pickwick Papers*. In the garden you'll find Dickens' beloved Swiss Chalet, brought here from Gad's Hill Place. Climb Norman Rochester Castle for bird's eye views of Cloisterham (*Edwin Drood*) and Pip's hometown spread out below. It's said Dickens' ghost haunts the grassy castle moat – a church graveyard in his time – because he wanted to be buried here but was honoured at Westminster Abbey instead.

And is that Edwin Drood strolling in the garden by the cathedral? If you visit during the Dickens Festival (29-31 May 2009), it could well be, as costumed characters take to the streets. Come to Rochester again for its Dickensian Christmas (5-6 December), culminating with a Victorian parade through the town and carols – even snowfall is guaranteed. Maybe take a leaf out of Dickens' book and stay as he did at The Royal Victoria and Bull Hotel. Or dine at award-winning restaurant Mr Topes: the property was Dickens' model for the house of 'Mr Tope, Chief Verger and Showman' of Cloisterham, and lodging for Mr Datchery in The Mystery of Edwin Drood (call 01634 845270 for reservations).

Rochester www.medway.gov.uk/tourism

The Royal Victoria and Bull Hotel www.rvandb.co.uk

Tour through Dickensland

Pick up a Tour through Dickensland itinerary from Rochester's Visitor Information Centre and explore further the Medway villages, countryside and marshes where Charles loved to wander. At Higham, three miles outside Rochester, look for Gad's Hill Place, the Georgian home Dickens coveted on childhood walks with his father. He fulfilled his dream when he returned as a wealthy writer and bought it in 1856, living here until his death in 1870. Maybe you recognise Scrooge's boyhood 'mansion of dull red brick' from A Christmas Carol. Today it's a school, but there are occasional public open days, and just across the road you can drop into the Sir John Falstaff Inn that Dickens patronised.

From Gad's Hill, follow Dickens on a favourite walk to Cobham Hall and Park, also the venue for Mr Pickwick's delightful June excursion. "If this were the place to which all who are troubled... came, I fancy their attachment to this world would very soon return," he rejoiced. The Hall, now a girls' boarding school, opens to the public on certain days during Easter and summer holidays (call 01474 823371). In Cobham village Dickens would test his storytelling skills by giving readings from his latest work at the half-timbered Leather Bottle inn. The Pickwickians also came here looking for love-struck Mr Tupman – little wonder the menu lists such dishes as Mr Pickwick sirloin steak.

Or make a pilgrimage to Gravesend, popular departure point for emigrants – just like Mr Micawber and the Peggottys in David Copperfield. If you're still hungry or thirsty, check out The Ship and Lobster, thought to be the inspiration for The Ship, one of the 'lone public houses' where Pip and Herbert rested during their attempt to get the convict Magwitch out of the country (Great Expectations). Close by at Chalk you'll find three houses which all claim to have been Dickens' honeymoon home, and don't miss St James' churchyard at Cooling, where poignant lozenge-shaped tombs gave Dickens the idea for the graves of Pip's little brothers.

Cobham Hall and Park www.cobhamhall.com/public.shtml

Gad's Hill School www.gadshill.org

Gravesend www.towncentric.co.uk

The Leather Bottle www.theleatherbottle.co.uk

St James's Church www.visitchurches.org.uk/content.php?nID=11®ion=Kent&churchID=73

The Ship and Lobster www.shipandlobster.co.uk

Sir John Falstaff Inn www.sirjohnfalstaff.co.uk

The rooks were sailing about the cathedral towers

Set course, now, for Canterbury. Dickens loved to visit from Gad's Hill and on special occasions even drove in a carriage complete with red-jacketed postillions, which no doubt caused a stir! The city formed part of the proposed escape route from London for Sim Tappertit in *Barnaby Rudge* – its cobbled-street charm remains an escape for visitors today. Discover countless scenes from *David Copperfield*, popping up as though they had just been written: the cathedral and The King's School that suggested Dr Strong's establishment, 'a grave building in a courtyard, with a learned air about it'. (Modern alumni include chef Antony Worrall Thompson – how would David Copperfield have got on with him?) If you're peckish take a tip from Mr and Mrs Micawber, who entertained David to 'a beautiful little dinner' at the Sun: you've a choice between the Cathedral Gate Hotel and the Sun Hotel and Tea Rooms, as both claims to be the originals for Dickens' fictional establishment. For overnight stays, the House of Agnes on St Dunstons Street beckons – since Mr Wickfield reputedly lived here it has been lovingly refurbished as a hotel and has the largest walled garden in the city.

Canterbury Cathedral www.canterbury-cathedral.org

Cathedral Gate Hotel www.cathgate.co.uk

House of Agnes www.houseofagnes.co.uk

The King's School www.kings-school.co.uk

Sun Hotel and Tea Rooms www.sunhotelandtearooms.co.uk

Our English Watering Place

'You cannot think how delightful and fresh the place is and how good the walks,' Dickens declared of Broadstairs. During most summers from 1837 to 1859 he sojourned in Our English Watering Place, as he called it, to enjoy the sea air and to write. Make this quintessential seaside resort your next stop and picture Dickens scribbling away at *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby*, *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Barnaby Rudge*. See where he stayed at 12 High Street (now no. 21) and The Royal Albion Hotel with its lovely views over Viking Bay. And of course there's Bleak House on the cliffs, known as Fort House when the author resided here in 1850 and completed *David Copperfield*. He was so amused to observe Miss Mary Pearson Strong chasing donkey-boys from in front of her cottage on Victoria Parade – now the colourful Dickens House Museum – that he put the episode into the book.

Make a date for the Dickens Festival (20-24 June 2009) when you'll meet more of his characters. And be among the first to enjoy the new Turner and Dickens Walk: running between Broadstairs seafront and near-neighbour Margate's Harbour, it links attractions like Dickens House Museum, historic St Peter's village and Turner Contemporary – the artist loved the Kent coast, too, and thought Margate had 'the loveliest skies in Europe'. You can bet that Dickens, a passionate walker, would certainly have stepped out along the route.

Broadstairs www.visitbroadstairs.co.uk

The Royal Albion Hotel www.albionbroadstairs.co.uk

Great Expectations

Whenever you tour the scenes that inspired Dickens there's always so much to see and do. Plans are already afoot for the Dickens Bicentenary 2012, when an extensive programme of events and activities will celebrate the 200th anniversary of the great author's birth. It's not too early to mark it in your diary, it promises to be really special!