



Hidden Gems of Kent *Make more of your adventures*

Visitors to Kent come to enjoy its captivating castles and famous gardens, enchanting coast and countryside. But there's so much more to discover! Just around the corner from sights like Canterbury Cathedral or Dover Castle, lesser-known yet world-class attractions thrive. Break away from the well-worn trails and open your eyes to a few – quirky, unique, unusual, new, they will certainly enrich your trip.

The following insider highlights cluster around eight great bases for tours. Pick one, or several, or follow them all in a grand tour: from Canterbury to the coast, sweeping back round in a circuit of Kent. Whether you venture just a short distance from your favourite destinations or get right off the beaten track, stay longer and make more of your adventures.

1. Canterbury – beyond the cathedral, to countryside and coast

The most compelling spur to visit Canterbury is its world-famous cathedral, a superb architectural treasure that has drawn pilgrims for centuries. One of the oldest British cities with a continuous history, Canterbury is also a curiosity-stirring delight of cobbled lanes and medieval buildings – spiced up with cosmopolitan contemporary living. Wander just a few steps beyond the cathedral and you'll find lots more intriguing church heritage. And do leave time to explore the beautiful countryside, coast and diverse attractions on the city's doorstep.

Pick up **Hidden Gem Trails** from Canterbury Information Centre for an introduction to some best-kept secrets. Or check out the following favourites. The cathedral is just one third of **Canterbury's UNESCO World Heritage Site** – the other two thirds, Saxon **St Martin's Church** and **St Augustine's Abbey**, are well worth a visit, as well. In the 6th century St Martin's was the private chapel of Christian Queen Bertha of Kent and it is England's oldest parish church in continuous use: just imagine in whose footsteps you are treading. Meanwhile the Abbey, founded shortly after AD 597 by St Augustine, marks the rebirth of Christianity in southern England. The saint and early archbishops of Canterbury are buried here – find out more from the museum and a free audio tour.

Other fascinating religious sites to add to your itinerary include pre-Norman Conquest **St Mildred's Church** on Church Lane and **St Dunstan's Church** on St Dunstan's Street – take a good look at the head above Margaret Roper's tomb, believed to be that of her father, Thomas More, who was martyred by King Henry VIII. He became the patron saint of politicians.

For an altogether different perspective on this great city, how about a 30-40 minute trip with **Canterbury Historic River Tours**. Glide away from the centre along the River Stour while your chauffeur gives an entertaining commentary on the sights: 13th-century **Greyfriars**, which spans the river and is the oldest Franciscan building in Britain; black-and-white-timbered **The Old Weavers' House**; stunning views of the cathedral. Watch out for the infamous **ducking stool** when you return to dry land!

Then take your pick of excursions to coast and countryside, river valleys, woods and hills on the city's threshold. Perhaps follow in the footsteps of Jane Austen to **Goodnestone Park Gardens**, a short jaunt away to the southeast at **Wingham**. The writer was a frequent visitor to the house, which was the family home of her sister-in-law, and after one sojourn in 1796 she began writing the novel that became her much-loved *Pride and Prejudice*. Enjoy vistas of 18th-century parkland, relax in the renowned Walled Garden, savour the scents of old-fashioned roses – tranquillity that's a world away from Canterbury's lively bustle.

Or share literary inspiration of a rather more adventurous kind, to the south of Canterbury at **Pett Bottom**. Drop into **The Duck Inn**, one of Ian Fleming's favourite 'locals' – the James Bond author even had a preferred seat in the pretty gardens, now marked with a plaque. In *You Only Live Twice* it is revealed that Bond, the world's most famous special agent, spent his early years under the guardianship of an aunt in a small cottage beside 'the attractive Duck Inn' at the 'quaintly named hamlet of Pett Bottom.'

After your refreshments, motor to neighbouring **Bridge**, a village named after what is now an 18th-century bridge carrying the Roman Watling Street over the Little Stour, or Nailbourne. **Higham Park** (not open to visitors) on the edge of the settlement was once home to the flamboyant motor-racing driver Count Louis Zborowski: he called three of his super-fast cars *Chitty Bang Bang*, inspiring Fleming to write the children's tale *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* for his son Caspar.

Kent is full of beguiling, historic villages, and one among many to look up from Canterbury is **Chilham**. It's just along the **Pilgrims' Way** to the southwest of the city, the route taken by pilgrims journeying to the tomb of martyred St Thomas Becket in the cathedral. Have your camera ready: Chilham's 15th-century square and surrounding streets boast wonderful black-and-white, half-timbered buildings, a couple of ancient Wealden hall houses and a former royal hunting lodge. View also the 13th-century church with soaring 68ft tower – its size reflecting the influence of Chilham's royal squires at the time. The castle, whose keep dates back to the 1170s, welcomes private, pre-booked group tours, and the gardens are occasionally open, too. A couple of atmospheric inns complete the perfect village cameo.

Finally, during your visit to Canterbury you will have noticed the chatter of seagulls – a clue that Kent's north shore is only a few miles away. Get a flavour of the region's dramatic coastal past at **Reculver Towers**, the site of a Roman fort built to guard the Wantsum Channel that once divided the Isle of Thanet from the rest of Kent. Today the imposing twin towers of the ruined 12th-century church stand amid the remains of the Roman 'Saxon Shore' fort – one of a number of such defences built to repel raids by Saxon pirates.

Stretch your legs and breathe in the bracing seascape, and perhaps look forward to exploring more hidden gems of Kent's coast, around the Isle of Thanet.

2. Isle of Thanet – seaside secrets and heroes

Thanet, Kent's northeastern tip, unfolds along 26 miles of sandy beaches, the very picture of traditional English seaside. This was Victorian author Charles Dickens' inspirational coastal hideaway and JMW Turner was so enchanted that he declared the painterly skies the loveliest in Europe. The area is also sprinkled with eclectic interest ranging from the eccentric to the heroic. One easy way to uncover its secrets is to follow the circular, 27-mile Viking Coastal Trail via Margate, Broadstairs and Ramsgate, taking in picturesque villages where ancient and exotic surprises lie in store.

Begin at **Margate** where the Edwardian institutions of rock shops, ice-cream and seafood stalls still tempt. Just five minutes' saunter from the seafront you'll come across a unique marine mystery. The subterranean **Shell Grotto**, on Grotto Hill, was discovered in 1835 – but who built it? Is it a strange temple or Regency folly? Descend the chalk stairway to view the chamber and 2,000 sq ft of mosaic created from millions of shells. Gods, goddesses and trees of life spring from the swirling patterns. Explore the story behind the grotto in the Mystery Museum, and enjoy tea and cake in the Eighth Wonder Café.

Head a short distance eastwards and at **Cliftonville** a bygone era comes to life in the **Walpole Bay Hotel and Museum**. You can stay or dine just as in any hotel – what could be finer than Sunday luncheon while the resident pianist strikes up on the 1908 pianola? However the venue, lovingly restored by the Bishop family, is also packed with memorabilia and displays on local history. From the moment you climb the 1914 marble steps, peer into the 1920s ballroom or take the 1927 Otis trellis-gated lift you're immersed in a world once enjoyed by visitors who arrived in charabancs – you can see their photographs around the hotel.

Back on the Viking Coastal Trail the winding cobbled streets, flint houses and fishermen's cottages of **Broadstairs** beckon. You'll easily spot Charles Dickens' bolthole, Bleak House, peering over the postcard sweep of beachside buildings. The author frequently visited between 1837 and 1859, and on Victoria Parade you can step into the former home of Miss Mary Pearson Strong – inspiration for Betsey Trotwood in *David Copperfield*. Now the **Dickens House Museum**, it is full of displays relating to the writer. Picture his mirth as he watched Miss Strong chasing donkey-boys from in front of her cottage, a scene he recreated in his novel, though he transposed it to Dover to save her blushes. The secret is out!

Another great Victorian is recalled in Broadstairs, at **Crampton Tower Museum**: you may be unfamiliar with engineer Thomas Crampton, but we owe him a lot. A designer of locomotives and railways, he also laid the first effective telegraph cable under the English Channel. You'll soon be fascinated by this lesser known hero of progress and his many exploits, and by the museum's rich collection of drawings, interactive displays and working model railways.

Keep with the Victorian theme in **Ramsgate**, home of the country's only Royal Harbour and abuzz with waterfront cafés and bars. Architect Augustus Pugin, leader of the Gothic Revival in the 19th century, is noted for his designs for London's House of Lords; less well known are his associations with Ramsgate. He so loved the town that he designed and built a home here – **The Grange**. You can rent it for holidays and occasionally it's open to public viewing, and there's also a **Pugins town trail** around buildings designed or linked with the talented Pugin family.

Before you leave, recce Ramsgate's latest offbeat treasure. The Brits are renowned collectors and the **Pinball Parlour** certainly fills a nostalgic niche. Go on, have some fun on machines dating back to the 1950s in the first museum of its kind in the country.

Our route now arcs inland to **Manston** and the **Spitfire & Hurricane Memorial Museum**, dedicated to the pilots and aircrew of WW2. 'Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few,' Sir Winston Churchill said of the men who fought in the skies overhead in the Battle of Britain 1940. Discover how RAF Manston bore the brunt of early action and see two magnificently restored spitfire and Hawker Hurricane aircraft.

Nearby **Minster** village takes us centuries into the past, though there's also a curious link with the airfield. The **Abbey** was founded in AD 670 by Princess Ermenburga, yet in WW2 part of the site was requisitioned as an officer's mess for RAF Manston. Today peace is restored and the Benedictine nuns who live here welcome visitors on guided tours of the ancient buildings and beautiful gardens.

Perhaps stop at **Sarre Windmill**, built in 1820, and find out about traditional milling. Or head straight on to **Quex House and Gardens and the Powell-Cotton Museum, Birchington**. This wonderful Regency mansion is the family home of the Powell-Cottons, who have taken the British passion of collecting to world-class level. Major Percy Horace Gordon Powell-Cotton established the internationally acclaimed museum in 1896, to house natural history specimens and cultural objects he gathered on expeditions to Asia and Africa. The 15 acres of gardens are also a must-see, including a Victorian walled garden featuring teak-framed glasshouses, a Cucumber House and Orchid House.

3. White Cliffs Country – inspirational scenes and blue-sky experiences

White Cliffs Country, the closest crossing-point from mainland Britain to Europe, has always been on the frontline of history. And you can still experience the awesome majesty of coastal castles at Dover, Deal and Walmer. Nature, too, is at its spectacular best here and the invigorating sea air along this stretch of coast seems to encourage creative and inventive spirits – as our selection of attractions shows on this exhilarating route south.

Start in style in Sandwich with a wander around its delightful maze of streets and medieval buildings. Right in the heart of town are the aptly named **Secret Gardens of Sandwich**: 3.5 acres of ornamental and formal gardens by Sir Edwin Lutyens and Gertrude Jekyll – maybe you'll recognise their characteristic combination of strong architectural lines with artistic, inventive planting. Previously unseen for nearly 25 years, the gardens and lake have been restored to provide all-year colour. Come in and explore.

Another garden, another surprise: the **Rare Species Conservation Centre & Zoo** is set in two acres of exotic gardens on the Dover Road from Sandwich. RSCC cares for some of the world's more unusual and endangered animal species, and sets a lead by running captive breeding facilities. Fancy coming face to face with sun bears, snow leopards or a Bali starling in Kent!

On southwards, to **Deal** where local ingenuity has traditionally been employed in more devious ways – smuggling! The whole of the coast was once prime territory for 'free trading', and preventive officers were constantly pitched in a battle of wits against the contrabandists. Step into the **Timeball Tower Museum** on the town's historic seafront for an insight into the cat-and-mouse games they played, including a special semaphore system that sent covert messages about suspicious movements. Video, static and interactive displays cover three centuries of signalling, smuggling and navigation.

A parallel story is told on the cliff top at **St Margaret's Bay**, where white-painted **South Foreland Lighthouse** stands as a striking sentinel. It was built in 1843 to aid ships navigating the dangerous Goodwin Sands, but is most famous for the work of two pioneers. English chemist and physicist Michael Faraday instigated the use of electricity in lighthouses here in the mid-19th century – South Foreland was the first ever lighthouse to display an electrically powered signal. Italian inventor GM Marconi also found it the perfect spot for his wireless experiments in 1898, and made the first ship-to-shore and international radio transmissions. Climb the tower with a guide and hear more tales, and be inspired by the breathtaking views.

St Margaret's Bay provides another horticultural interlude. **The Pines Garden** is guaranteed to catch your eye with its imaginative grass labyrinth, lake, waterfall and art installations. While **The Calyx**, an innovative, award-winning events space points the way in sustainable, energy-efficient building.

Of course, the dazzling **White Cliffs of Dover** that dominate this stretch of shoreline are a natural icon of England, having been slowly created over 80 million years from the crushed remains of billions of sea-dwelling plants and animals. Browse the displays in the **Visitor Centre** for an overview of five miles of fantastic coast and countryside, flora and fauna.

You can set off on numerous exhilarating walks hereabouts. Up coast at **St Margarets-at-Cliffe** the **Frontline Britain Trail** wheels around a circular route revealing colourful local history and wildlife. Or trace a network of restored footpaths through **Western Heights Local Nature Reserve**, **South Military Road, Dover**: to fortifications from the 18th and 19th centuries, as well as vistas of chalkland wildflowers and wildlife. **Samphire Hoe**, between Dover and Folkestone, is made from material dug to create the Channel Tunnel and provides all sorts of leisure activities, gentle walks, great picnic spots, birdwatching and sea angling.

Round off your White Cliffs Country tour at Europe's finest working watermill, **Crabble Corn Mill** in the pretty village of **River**. Built in 1812, the mill demonstrates Georgian and Victorian engineering excellence, powered by nature's great force – water. After you've investigated six floors of exhibits and milling

machinery, enjoy a meal in the café and maybe buy some of the mill's organic wholemeal flour from the farm shop.

4. Folkestone, Hythe & Romney Marsh – epic adventures, authentic escapes

Along Kent's Heritage Coast from Dover: Folkestone, Hythe and Romney Marsh highlight the kaleidoscopic contrasts of Kent's scenic southeast. Roads less travelled lead to Hellfire Corner, smugglers' haunts and animal magic, as well as quaint churches and inns with stories to tell. Relive the genuine Edwardian elegance of a seaside resort or get away from it all in a strange shingle corner voted one of the world's 'most authentic' places. Children and adults alike will be captivated.

A sense of epic adventure sweeps through our journey, beginning at the **Battle of Britain Museum, Hawkinge**, just north of Folkestone. The site of the closest RAF station to enemy-occupied France, Hawkinge and the Folkestone area stood up to barrages of cross-Channel shelling in WW2 – not for nothing was this called **Hellfire Corner**. In original 1940 buildings you'll find the country's most important collection of artefacts from the airborne struggle that marked a turning point in the war. Be enthralled by full-size replicas of hurricane and spitfire fighters, vehicles, weapons, flying equipment and the thought-provoking relics of more than 600 crashed aircraft.

Head on south now to **Folkestone** for a change of scene and mood on a pleasant town stroll. Edwardian seaside elegance is invigorated by the transforming modern vibe of the Creative Quarter where artists and creatives have begun to gather. Take the 19th-century water-balance lift from the harbour up to **The Leas**, a mile-long cliff-top walk which is one of Europe's finest marine promenades. You'll probably have your eyes fixed on the great views to the French coast, but look out for the unexpected memorial to William Harvey, discoverer of the circulation of blood. Then amble the zig-zag path to the award-winning **Coastal Park**, a superb undercliff featuring pine avenues, flower gardens, picnic areas and an Amphitheatre that stages summer entertainment.

Inland a few miles, adventure drives our compass again. **Port Lympne Wild Animal Park and Gardens** at **Lympne** opens up 600 acres of wildlife magic. Join the intrepid African Experience Safari or explore in your own time: see the largest breeding herd of black rhinos outside of Africa, Siberian and Indian tigers, and Barbary lions. And do be at the 'Palace of the Apes' in time for feeding. Port Lympne undertakes important conservation and breeding programmes with rare and endangered species, and animals live in habitats matching those of their native lands. While you're here, don't miss the **magnificent mansion** either, featuring fabulous mural rooms, wildlife art and even paintings by Sir Winston Churchill.

Neighbouring **Hythe** is a small town that charms, split between the older half of mainly 18th-century houses and the newer Victorian resort. Learn about its strategic importance to maritime safety and power as a member of the Cinque Port Confederation, hunt for antiques and collectibles along the **High Street**, and enjoy lunch or a snack in an old inn.

There are two unusual routes out of town: one is the **Royal Military Canal**, originally built to enable the swift movement of men and stores to counter threats of Napoleonic invasion in the early 19th century. These days it's a lovely place to ramble, go boating or fishing. Try out the intriguing 'acoustic mirror' that picks up voices on the opposite bank – it's a modern interpretation of the huge concrete 'listening ears' constructed around Hythe and Dungeness in the 1920s-1930s, to detect the sound of incoming aircraft before radar was invented. You can still see some originals in the area, left scattered like weird giant sculptures.

Alternatively, hop aboard the **Romney, Hythe and Dymchurch** miniature steam railway – affectionately known as the world's smallest public railway – for a memorable 13.5-mile expedition to **Dungeness**. Built in the 1920s, the set-up was the culmination of the dreams of two maverick millionaires, Count Zborowski of *Chitty Bang Bang* fame and Captain J E P Howey. Boys and their toys!

There are several alluring stops en route where you will be tempted to get out and explore. At seaside **Dymchurch** there's a fully restored **Martello Tower**, one of a chain of such artillery forts built along the coast from 1805 to fend off possible attack by Napoleon. End-of-the-line **Dungeness** is like reaching the end of the world, so individual that it has been hailed one of the most 'authentic' destinations anywhere. Scrum along Europe's largest shingle beach, home to a third of all known plant species, and survey the scene. **The RSPB Nature Reserve** is populated by all sorts of breeding seabirds and wintering wildfowl. Clapboard dwellings strike a characterful note and the unique 'nuclear garden' of late avant-garde painter and filmmaker Derek Jarman is a must-see amid the shingle.

But our final adventure takes in the mysterious coastal hinterland of **Romney Marsh**, 100 square miles of low-lying land reclaimed from the sea over the last 6,000 years. Walk or cycle some or all the 24-mile trail around medieval marsh churches and inns where smugglers plotted and hid their booty. One start-point is **New Romney**, on the Romney, Hythe and Dymchurch line. It's a hauntingly beautiful escape quite unlike any other.

5. Heart of Kent – ravishing castles, gardens and treasure houses

Continue west from Romney Marsh and you ease inland into more genteel landscapes, of rolling hills and wooded valleys, orchards and vineyards. Kent has more castles and historic houses than any other county, and now you're on the threshold of many of the most famous: Leeds Castle rising from its two islands, Hever Castle, childhood home of Anne Boleyn, and Knole. Some of Kent's most glorious 180-plus gardens flourish here, too, from Sissinghurst to Penshurst Place. Simply turn down a few different roads and you'll also come across a rich variety of lesser-known houses and gardens that offer spellbinding rewards. Here's a chain of them looping ever westwards.

Hole Park Gardens can be found nestled in the Weald between the attractive village of **Rolvenden** and **Cranbrook**. Four generations of the Barham family have created a 15-acre garden for all seasons, including formal spaces enclosed by yew hedges offset by topiary, specimen trees, statuary and dazzling wisteria. Come in spring for the magical bluebell wood, revel in the rose gardens in summer, enjoy a shady amble beneath bright autumn leaves. Tea and homemade cakes complete the treat!

Now forget what you normally associate with museums: our next destination is a one-off treasure trove in a beautiful Georgian manor. **Finchcocks Musical Museum** near **Goudhurst** is home to Richard Burnett's extraordinary collection of more than 100 period keyboard instruments, including pianos, organs and harpsichords. Over 40 are in full working order, so pin back your ears for some wonderful, informal demonstrations. There are special events throughout the year and you certainly don't need to be a musician to be thoroughly entertained in this remarkable venue.

Nearby, privately owned ten-acre **Marle Place Gardens and Gallery, Brenchley**, appeals to all the senses – particularly curiosity. Both a plantsman's and artist's garden, it's a mercurial mix of hedged rooms and tree-lined avenues with orchards and woodland, where scented and unusual plants blend with art. The current owners delight in surprises at every turn, including a striking mosaic terrace – no more clues, you'll have to visit to enjoy the other eye-catchers! The gardens were first created in 1890 and still retain a Victorian gazebo, Edwardian rockery and Italianate walled garden of 1900. There's a contemporary art gallery, too. And if you're thirsty, go ahead and make your own tea in the teashop, leaving money in the honesty box. You're most welcome.

Next up is **Chiddingstone Castle**, which counts as a new attraction, having re-opened its doors just last year. The Gothic revival pile sits in 35 acres where there's a lovely rose garden, magnificent woodland and a lake open to fishermen. But the real draw is the superb collections of Denys Bower spanning Japanese, Egyptian, Jacobean and Buddhist art and antiquities. Younger visitors can have fun discovering Samurai warriors, Egyptian tombs and castle ghosts with Alex the Explorer. Then browse the exhibition on the eclectic history of the castle, which dates back to the early 1500s.

Tonbridge Castle fires the imagination, too. 'Storm' the massive 13th-century gatehouse that dominates this market town on the River Medway and get to grips with 700 years of eventful castle life through interactive displays, special effects and a personal audio tour. Northwards, medieval moated **Ightham Mote** hides in a sunken valley: once owned by a favourite courtier of King Henry VIII, it is resplendent with Great Hall, Crypt and a Tudor Chapel. Rather more whimsical is the Grade I-listed dog kennel in the recently re-cobbled courtyard! Neighbouring **Riverhill House Gardens** on its hillside near **Sevenoaks** is renowned for its bluebell wood, rhododendrons, azaleas and extensive views.

Segue west again to the village of **Westerham** and choose between **Squerryes Court** and **Quebec House** – or tour both. The former is a handsome 17th-century manor house lived in by the Warde family since 1731. Stand back and admire Old Master paintings, furniture, tapestries and porcelain, then unwind in the gardens featuring parterres, herbaceous borders and a lake. There's a special spring opening for snowdrops and daffodils. **Quebec House**, by contrast, is notable as the childhood home of General James Wolfe and contains family and military memorabilia. An exhibition in the Tudor stable block tells of the Battle of Quebec, Wolfe's 1759 victory over the French that ensured British control of Canada.

Round off your journey at **Lullingstone Castle and World Garden, Eynsford**. The Hart Dyke family has lived here since the 15th century, and Henry VIII and Queen Anne were regular visitors. But this is not simply an historic home with staterooms and family portraits. Outside, modern-day plant hunter and adventurer Tom Hart Dyke has fashioned an innovative garden in the shape of a world map, with exotic plants from across the globe laid out in their countries of origin. Botanical wonders include the Dinosaur Tree (Wollemi Pine), a species that grew when dinosaurs roamed the earth, and the rare Eucalyptus Silver Princess – Lullingstone is home to The National Collection of Eucalyptus. Bring a picnic to enjoy – after you've walked all around the world, you might want to sit and relax.

6. Gravesham – along the undiscovered Thames to hidden Dickensian haunts

Set course now for England's most famous river and navigate its lesser-known stretches. Gravesend grew up on the Thames because it was the first safe landing place in Kent for boats travelling up river, a fact recorded in Domesday 1086. In Victorian times the town was a popular destination for day-trippers from London and it's still an easy jaunt. Uncover a waterside full of historic surprises, whether on the trail of a 19th-century general or a Red Indian princess. The surrounding countryscapes of Gravesham conceal haunts that Charles Dickens kept close to his heart, as well as lovely villages in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Days out don't start more teasingly than this: how *did* a Red Indian princess come to be buried at **St George's Church in Gravesend**? It's a tragic-romantic tale. Pocahontas (1595-1617), daughter of the powerful chief of the Algonquin Indians, became one of the most honoured women in American history, having saved the life of Captain John Smith, leader of the British colony of Virginia. She married colonist John Rolfe and later came to England, only to die on the return journey aboard a ship off Gravesend. See the stained-glass memorial window given by the Colonial Dames of Virginia in the church, and her youthful statue in the grounds, where a board tells more of her story.

Book a **guided walk** from **Gravesend Visitor Centre** or pick up a themed trail leaflet to stroll through more of the town's history and sights. A riverside exploration takes in the **oldest remaining cast-iron pier** in the world, as well as **Bawley Bay** where scores of hopeful emigrants departed for new lives in Australia or New Zealand – Mr Micawber and the Peggottys left from here, too, in Dickens' *David Copperfield*. The **Royal Terrace Pier** became 'royal' after Princess Alexandra arrived from Denmark in 1863 to marry the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII).

Or maybe follow in the steps of **General Gordon** – 'Gordon of Khartoum' – who lived in Gravesend 1865-71. As Commandant of the Thames Forts, he updated coastal defences including **New Tavern Fort** whose

remains and bristling guns can be viewed in **Fort Gardens**. However he was not just a military hero; he was also a great benefactor to the local poor, work that included using the 19th-century **Mission House** as a reading room for children. The colourful **Gordon Gardens** and **Khartoum Walk** are further memorials to this great man.

Take refreshment in an historic pub – **The Three Daws** beside the town pier is over 500 years old and boasts smugglers' tunnels. Then return to the 21st century at the magnificent new **Gurdwara**, one of the largest Sikh temples in the country. Or cruise the river that has always been the lifeblood of the town: the **MV Princess Pocahontas** is operated by freemen of the River Thames whose keen knowledge of the historic waterway makes for an informative and entertaining trip.

Equally enticing is to take a leaf out of Charles Dickens' books. Keep your feet on dry land and follow the author on his favourite personal walks. He lived his final years 1857-70 at **Gad's Hill Place, Higham**, a few miles southeast of Gravesend – today his home is a school, though you can visit on occasional open days. Across the road Dickens' local, the **Sir John Falstaff Inn**, offers friendly hospitality.

Less visited and more compelling are the places the writer frequented on his rambles **between Higham and Gravesend** – he loved walking and often covered 22 miles in a day. Stride out for example to **Chalk**, where Dickens stayed with his new bride Catherine (*née* Hogarth) in 1836. Three properties claim to be their **honeymoon home** and you'll also come across the weatherboarded model for **Joe Gargery's forge** and cottage in *Great Expectations*. Pause at the 11th-century **Church of the Virgin Mary**, on its hilltop overlooking the north Kent marshes. Dickens was entranced by the strange carvings over the doorway of the porch and always stopped to "greet" the comical stone monk.

Toddle on to **St Peter and St Paul Church**, a mile or so to the south in **Shorne**. Dickens described it in *Pickwick Papers* as, 'One of the most peaceful and secluded churchyards in Kent, where wild flowers mingle with the grass, and the soft landscape around forms the fairest spot in the garden of England.' He loved **Cobham**, too, where the 13th-century church contains one of the finest collections of medieval brasses in England. Dickens was a regular at the half-timbered **Leather Bottle inn**, where he also sent the Pickwickians to look for love-struck Mr Tupman. Tuck into Oliver Twist's Rabbit Pie, Fagin's Wild Boar Sausages and other Dickensian-styled dishes on the menu.

Then, energy restored, amble off to **Cobham Hall and Park** in the footsteps of Dickens and Mr Pickwick. The Elizabethan hall (with later additions) belonged to the Earls of Darnley; in 1883 the 8th Earl captained the victorious England cricket team against Australia and first brought home the iconic Ashes trophy. Cobham Hall is now a girls' school but opens to the public on certain days during Easter and summer holidays.

You could return to Gravesend, perhaps to sup at **The Ship and Lobster** pub – inspiration for The Ship, one of the 'lone public houses' where Pip and Herbert rest during their attempt to get Magwitch out of the country in *Great Expectations*. Or maybe you've caught Dickens' walking mania. Villages like **Meopham** and **Luddesdown** are well-served by footpaths, and the long-distance **Wealdway** and **North Downs Way** also thread through Gravesham's refreshing countryside. **Trosley Park** gives panoramic views of the Weald and **Camer Park** is ideal for picnics. Rest your feet and relax!

7. Maritime Medway – up close and personal with the past

Base yourself beside another great river, the Medway, for a maritime city and town break. The area is famed for its Historic Dockyard at Chatham, for Dickens World and the author's associations with Rochester. But there's far more to Medway than this and even familiar sights like Rochester Cathedral are unveiling innovative features that you won't have experienced before. Look again at Rochester, then sweep a circuit around neighbouring attractions that really bring the past to life in an up-close-and-personal way.

Get your bearings through 200,000 years of local history at Rochester's 17th-century **Guildhall Museum**: time travel at its most rich and varied, in one of Kent's finest civic buildings. For sure, there's a Dickens Discovery Room where you can pursue the Victorian author's life, work and times. But then immerse yourself in every imaginable interest: from agriculture to coins, glassware to maritime paraphernalia, scientific instruments to life on the home front. Touch a 200,000-year-old axe or pore over the world's most complete set of 18th-century cabinetmaker's tools – you begin to feel really close to the owners. See the terrible conditions endured by Napoleonic captives in the reconstruction of a Medway prison hulk and be astonished by the high-quality ship models and ornamental boxes the men crafted from bone and straw.

Along the High Street, **Rochester Cathedral** is sometimes called Kent and Medway's best-kept secret, overshadowed by its Canterbury counterpart. Yet this is the second-oldest cathedral in the land, founded in AD 604. The present soaring edifice dates back to 1080 and features a glorious Norman nave plus one of the finest Romanesque facades in England. If you haven't been for a while, now's the time to return because **Ancient Stones, Untold Stories**, an innovative project launched in spring 2009, is bringing hidden tales to life. Interactive materials and audio-tours put you more closely in touch than ever with the past, while audio-visual magic is recreating 'lost' elements of the cathedral's heritage – including faded medieval wall frescoes.

And don't miss the **cathedral gardens**, an unexpected oasis of tranquility in the city's heart. Take time out to enjoy the majestic *magnolia grandiflora* and views across what was originally the monastic herb garden.

Cross the River Medway from Rochester for an architectural prize on a more jewel-like scale. Thirteenth-century **Temple Manor** at **Strood** opens the door on the dashing world of medieval Knights Templar, who used it as a lodging house on their way to the crusades in the Holy Land. Stand in the main hall where visitors awaited an audience with the adventurers, then follow the clues provided by 17th-century architectural extensions to unlock the later life of the manor.

Carry on downriver and you can delve into the dramatic past of **Upnor Castle**. The turreted fort on the Medway, standing against a picturesque village backdrop, seems perfectly peaceful today, but of course that is far removed from its original purpose. Queen Elizabeth I ordered the construction of the gun fort in 1559, to protect her warships when they lay at anchor in the Medway and Chatham Dockyard. Great plan, terrible outcome: when a Dutch fleet raided in 1667 it destroyed or captured a large number of Royal Navy vessels moored like sitting targets at Chatham. Get a graphic experience of what went wrong and how events unwound through an exciting audio-visual interpretation.

After you've looked around the castle, return over the river for more military exploits, at the **Royal Engineers Museum, Gillingham**. The museum's many galleries house a collection of international importance, telling the story of the Corps of Royal Engineers and its contributions to Britain's history and empire. But it's the personal nature of artefacts that makes visiting priceless. View the Waterloo Map used by the Duke of Wellington in 1815, still marked by blood, and a lock of hair from his great adversary, Napoleon. Take a good look at a *papier mâché* head used as a sniper's decoy in the First World War – convincing? – and models of a Mulberry Harbour used to brief Prime Minister Winston Churchill in World War Two. The museum's medals collection is outstanding – and poignant, while larger equipment and vehicles include a locomotive used on the D-Day beaches of Normandy 1944.

In Medway, whether you scratch beneath the surface of well-known attractions or go an extra mile to find a new gem, there's always something memorable to take away.

8. Swale – gunpowder, treasures and fruit

Ease along the north Kent coast for a final swag-bag of less-explored treasures. The wildlife-rich Isle of Sheppey curls around one side of the River Swale, while market towns and villages, orchards and farmlands

stretch to its south. It's a singular area rich in heritage and countryside, sometimes bypassed by whistle-stop travellers between Canterbury, Rochester and London. Pause for a break and make the most of diverse attractions that together give a characterful sense of place.

Faversham, known as The King's Port from when its tidal creek bustled with trade, is a delightful starting point. Follow the **town trail** to intriguing nooks like the location of the open-air theatre where **Shakespeare** acted, and a scene of murder on one of England's most quaint medieval streets that may have inspired his playwriting.

Also delve into Faversham's colourful past at the **Fleur de Lis Museum and Gallery** on Preston Street, a beautifully presented cornucopia of artefacts and local life. From early archaeological finds, through the grip of Faversham's medieval monasteries to Elizabethan prosperity, you can build a rich picture of this market town. Visit the Victorian schoolroom and kitchen, share the magic of lantern-slide entertainment, and find out just what the local sports of goal running and rink hockey entailed. You'll probably be surprised to learn that for 400 years Faversham was a centre of the country's explosives industry – perching on large gunpowder barrels to watch a video on the theme is one of the more offbeat ways to appreciate England's past!

Curiosity 'fired', cue a trip to nearby 18th-century **Chart Gunpowder Mills**. The oldest of their kind in the world, they made powder for Nelson at Trafalgar and Wellington at Waterloo. There were once six factories in town and, while they served military uses, their gunpowder also powered Britain's Industrial Revolution, blasting routes for canals and railways, plus stone quarried for building. Where would the country's heroes and pioneers have been without Faversham's now largely forgotten contribution?

If you've worked up a thirst, then you're in just the right place to quench it because Britain's oldest brewer, family-run **Shepherd Neame**, is based in Faversham. Beer has been made in the town for over 850 years and when you tour the Shepherd Neame Brewery on Court Street you get a genuine feel for the working processes actually going on around you. From barley to beer, hop to hand-pump, your guide will spill (although not literally) the secrets. Taste the natural mineral water from the brewery's well, sniff the aromas of local hops – and what's behind the names of handcrafted Kentish ales like Spitfire and Bishop's Finger? Crown your visit with a tutored tasting and tempting browse around the brewery shop.

Then how about a taste of country house living with a timely twist? Head a short way south from town, where the rolling North Downs begin to rise, to **Belmont House and Gardens**. Samuel Wyatt, one of the late 18th-century's most progressive architects, built the house in typical understated neo-classical style. However, it's noted even more for its collections by the Harris family, owners since 1801. Best of all is the clock collection, reputedly the finest in England. Time certainly flies on specialist horological tours! But do keep some moments spare to enjoy the gorgeous grounds, including the walled garden, pinetum with shell grotto, kitchen garden, and a cricket pitch that once was pre-eminent in the sport – visit to discover why!

With tastebuds still buzzing from earlier on your tour, it's a good excuse to indulge in another of Swale's unique and unusual offerings, rooted like its beer in the lush surrounding countryside. Heading back up towards Faversham you'll find **Brogdale Farm**, home of the **National Fruit Collection**. Over 2,000 apple varieties, 500 pear varieties, 350 plum varieties, 320 cherry varieties, plus bush fruits, nuts and vines are all here. Learn lots of juicy facts on a guided walk, come for fruity festivals, and sample seasonal fare – naturally, the Orchard tearoom sells delicious homemade goodies. Kent, the Garden of England, is always a tasty place to be. Which is just as well, to keep you fuelled for great adventures around the county's hidden gems.

For more information see www.visitkent.co.uk