Wilkie [Willliam] Collins (1824-1889)

Place: Broadstairs, Ramsgate, North Foreland, Sandwich

Images:

<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/b6/Wilkie_Collins%2C_1871.jpg> <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:North_Foreland_Lighthouse_about_1880.jpg>

<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/dc/1904-08-20_front_The_Barbican_Sandwich_Kent.jpg>

‘Shall I describe Sandwich? I think not. Let us own the truth; descriptions of places, however nicely they may be written, are always more or less dull. […]’

‘How I Married Him’

‘”We don’t think much of Ramsgate here,” I went on, “Not even two hundred years old! And hasn’t got a mayor and corporation!”’

‘How I Married Him’

Best-selling author, playwright and, according to some, the father of detective fiction, Wilkie Collins frequented the Kent coast regularly on excursions for his health and to visit his close friend, [Dickens]( /dickens/dickens-biography/). The sea air proved restorative not only for his gout, a condition which seriously afflicted his health in later years, but also for his creativity; he is said to have based the figure of the woman in white on the outline of the North Foreland lighthouse looming spectrally through the mist. Legend has it that Collins had great difficulty in finding a title for the novel and in desperation walked for hours on the cliffs between the Fort House and Kingsgate. Exhausted, he threw himself on the grass admonishing the lighthouse: ‘you are ugly and stiff and awkward; you know you are: as stiff and as weird as my white woman. White woman!-woman in white! The title, by Jove’.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Collins’s unorthodox domestic circumstances were also rather easier to manage amongst the crowd of holidaymakers. He stayed with his children and their mother, Martha Rudd, at Wellington Crescent using the alias ‘William Dawson’ and, under his own name, with his lifelong companion Caroline Graves at Nelson Crescent, just along the clifftop. His three children stayed with Graves and Collins in Ramsgate, though it is unlikely that the two women ever met.[[2]](#footnote-2) Holidays in Ramsgate allowed Collins to indulge his love of sailing and enjoy walks along the coast. Many of his writings feature Kent, including his play \_*The Frozen Deep* \_, in which the hero Wardour boasts,‘We men of Kent are made of tough material.’ Ramsgate appears as a setting in a number of his stories, including \_Poor Miss Finch\_ (1872), \_The Law and the Lady\_ (1875) and \_The Fallen Leaves\_ (1879). True to his witty style, in his 1882 short story ‘How I Married Him’ nearby Sandwich is referred to (somewhat tongue-in cheek) as ‘One of the Dead Cities of England.’

Article written by Alyson Hunt.

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Peters, Catherine. "Collins, (William) Wilkie (1824–1889), writer." Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.  May 19, 2011. Oxford University Press.

1. Gasson 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Peters. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)