**R. Austin Freeman (1862-1943)**

Visited or lived in Folkestone, Gravesend, Maidstone, Ramsgate, Rochester.

‘The Isle of Thanet has a certain peculiar charm which lingers even to this day, despite the too successful efforts of the speculative builder to annihilate it. A few years ago … before the unlovely suburban streets had arisen to disfigure it, the north eastern quarter of the island wore a pleasant air of remoteness that disguised its proximity to busy Margate and prosperous Broadstairs.’

[‘The Great Portrait Mystery’](<http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks05/0500471.txt>) (1918)

Doctor and pioneering crime writer R. Austin Freeman is widely credited with the invention of the ‘inverted’ crime story (later popularised by tv detective Lieutenant Columbo). Born in London, he lived at a series of Kent addresses with his wife Annie and their two children after being invalided out of the Colonial Service in 1891.

His first Kent address was in St Peter’s, just outside Broadstairs, from 1896. Around 1900 the family moved to 9 Vale Square, Ramsgate.

Freeman is rightly noted for his forensic attention to detail, but he occasionally indulges himself with lines of pure poetry, as in this account of a train journey from London to the Goodwins, from ‘The Echo of a Mutiny’ (1912):

The chimneys of Northfleet, the clustering roofs of Gravesend, the populous anchorage and the lurking batteries, were left behind, and, as we swung out of the Lower Hope, the wide expanse of sea spread out before us like a great sheet of blue-shot satin.[[1]](#footnote-1)

A number of his subsequent novels and stories, from the 1913*\_The Unwilling Adventurer\_*, set in 18th century Gravesend, to the later Thorndyke stories, are set in carefully detailed locations.

In 1915 Freeman joined the Royal Army Medical Corps in Maidstone, from which he was discharged in 1919. By 1921 the family was living in Darnley Road, Gravesend. It was here that Freeman wrote his story of a woman who disappears in Rochester, the suspiciously named \_*Mystery of Angelina Frood\_*(1924). He later admitted that ‘This book was written as a playful commentary on Dickens’s great story, [\_*The Mystery of Edwin Drood\_*](/dickens/edwin-drood-curated-walk); but, as few people are now familiar with Goldsmith’s \_*Edwin and Angelina\_*, the mild joke fell flat.’[[2]](#footnote-2)

Freeman’s last two addresses were both in Gravesend, at 1 Portland Villas, West Hill (from 1926 to 1930) and at Rosemount, 94 Windmill St, where he lived until his death in 1943.

Not being a resident himself, Freeman is surely allowed to place a boatman in 3 St Michael’s Lane (rather than Street), Folkestone in \_*The Mystery in the Channel\_* in 1931*,* in which case(the [Harbour Inn](( <http://www.dover-kent.com/Harbour-Inn-Folkestone.html>) has a reasonable claim to being ‘the Angel tavern in Folkestone harbour’.[[3]](#footnote-3) Enthusiasts who want to cover all bases may also want to stop off at [The Mariner]( <http://www.dover-kent.com/Mariner-Folkestone.html>) and [The Ship]( <http://www.dover-kent.com/Ship-Inn-Folkestone.html>)

Article by Carolyn Oulton

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1. ‘The Echo of a Mutiny’ 137-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Inscription copy cited in Donaldson 153. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *\_Mystery in the Channel\_* 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)