**Thomas Frost. 1821-1908.**

‘Feversham Creek, the marshes between Reculver and Westgate, the gaps between [Margate](/19c/19c-margate) and Kingsgate, and the “guts” of Romney Marsh were the landing-places most in use by the smugglers on the coast of Kent. The numerous green lanes and bridle-paths through the extensive woods stretching from Feversham to [Canterbury](/19c/19c-canterbury), and thence to the coast, the marshes bordering the Swale, and the broader tracts extending west and south from Shorncliff to the borders of Sussex, afforded ample facilities for unobserved inland conveyance.’ 18

*\_Reminiscences of a country journalist\_.* 1886.

The chartist and journalist Thomas Frost was born in Croydon on 16 December 1821. His father (a tailor by profession) was involved with the Reform Bill agitation, meaning that while Thomas himself left his Norwood school at the age of 11, ‘the tools of literacy and the imagination were part of the fabric of his everyday life.’[[1]](#footnote-1) Ancestors on his mother’s side, many of whom were buried in Beckhenam Churchyard, had ‘engaged in the forwarding branch of the contraband trade in Surrey and Kent’.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The essentially bohemian tendencies of the family are captured perfectly in Frost’s recollection that one night a cousin of his went missing, and at the end of six months had been given up for lost. While spending a few days at [Gravesend[(/19c/19c-gravesend) a precocious young Frost[[3]](#footnote-3) decided on a visit to Northfleet. He walked round the churchyard, saw the chalk-pit (later the site of the [Rosherville Gardens](/19c/19c-gravesend)) – and ‘As the day was warm, the chalk-dust of the roads in that part of Kent is provocative of thirst’ and the sign of the [Leather Bottle](/dickens/pickwick-papers-leather-bottle) swinging before a low-roofed, old-fashioned village inn, was suggestive of a cool mug of ale’,[[4]](#footnote-4) he went in. On the way out he was amazed to encounter the missing man, who was working there as an ostler. The two went back in for another drink, and the cousin implored Frost not to say anything to his family – while he duly resurfaced a month later, it is not clear how he explained matters to his wife.

Following an unsuccessful venture into newspaper editing in 1843, Frost himself became a freelance writer. His love of the Kent coast and its woodland comes across in much of his writing, and forms a setting for the now lost novel \_*Edith Gray\_*. He had married in 1841 and probably for the next decade he spent a week in the county every summer.[[5]](#footnote-5) On the death of his wife Lucy in 1851 after only ten years of marriage, he was left with a 6 year old son and soon remarried. While he went on to have two daughters with his second wife Julia, by 1867 he was living with Elizabeth (at 22 or 23 she was roughly half his age), with whom he had at least two further sons.[[6]](#footnote-6)

But when Frost and two friends decided that what they needed was a week’s holiday without their wives, there was ‘no difficulty in determining that our destination should be the coast of Kent.’[[7]](#footnote-7) It seems inevitable that he should have written [\_*In Kent With Charles Dickens\_*](https://archive.org/details/cu31924028036212)*,* although the writing seems to have lagged somewhat, taking at least three years and finally appearing in print only in 1880. Frost’s love of the author is indisputable, as he and his companions continue their ‘pilgrimage’ from [Gad’s](/dickens/dickens-gads-hill) to the Rochester of [Pickwick](/dickens/pickwick-papers) and [Drood](/dickens/edwin-drood-curated-walk), and so on to [Canterbury](/19c/19c-canterbury) (Frost notes that one inspired dramatist has relocated Mr Peggotty’s encounter with a repentant Martha to the cathedral). Here the party breaks up, and Frost goes on alone to [Deal](/seascape/deal), [Dover](/19c/19c-dover) and [Margate](/19c/19c-margate). The book itself still makes engaging reading, and may have inspired the considerably more famous \_Three Men in a Boat\_ by [Jerome K. Jerome]( /19c/19c-jerome-biography) in 1889.[[8]](#footnote-8)

It was probably during the Christmas of 1879 that Frost decided on a stay in Southcombe, near Tunbridge Wells. He was sufficiently impressed by ‘this pleasant and healthful place, which many visitors prefer to the larger and gayer town in its vicinity’ to call its surroundings ‘more picturesque than those of any other in which I have resided.’[[9]](#footnote-9) He went on – of course - to write a guide book focused on Tunbridge Wells in 1881.

In later years he was short of money, applying to the Royal Literary Fund no fewer than thirteen times after 1887.[[10]](#footnote-10) Frost died at his home in Derbyshire on 16 July 1908.

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1. Gurney. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. \_*Reminiscences of a country journalist\_.* 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See reference to the chalk pit below. The Rosherville Gardens were laid in 1837, making Frost no more than 16 at the time of this story. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. \_*Reminiscences of a country journalist\_.* 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. \_*Reminiscences of a country journalist\_.* 150-151. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Gurney. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. \_*In Kent With Charles Dickens\_.* 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The evidence for this supposition is admittedly circumstantial, but it is unlikely that Jerome was unaware of Frost. Both writers had an interest in the circus and provincial theatre, greatly admired Dickens, and knew the editor F. W. Robinson (Frost wrote for him in 1883, and Jerome from 1886-1889). Jerome enjoyed searching for ‘original’ locations from Dickens’s novels and applied for a British Museum reader’s ticket in November 1880, rendering it probable that he would have accessed a book on Dickens pilgrimage published in this year (and only the second to appear since the author’s death). Crucially, Frost’s idiosyncratic use of ‘headline’ chapter headings such as: ‘Chapter 1: Meeting of three friends in Symon’s Inn – Dickens pilgrimage resolved upon – Down the river’, as well as his digressive (and sporadically humorous) mode of narration, is characteristic of \_Three Men in a Boat\_. In 1881 Frost had also published \_Kingston-on-Thames, with rambles in the district, etc\_, precisely the type of guide on which Jerome later claimed to have based his initially ‘serious’ \_Story of the Thames\_. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Reminiscences of a country journalist.* 247. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Gurney. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)