***The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* (**\_*The* ***Pickwick Papers*\_)**

Published in monthly instalments, March 1836-November 1837. Published in one volume, 1837.

**Places:** Rochester, Stroud, Chatham, Brompton, ‘Dingley Dell’.

‘“Ah! fine place,” said the stranger, “glorious pile—frowning walls—tottering arches—dark nooks—crumbling staircases—Old cathedral too—earthy smell—pilgrims feet wore away the old steps—little Saxon doors—confessionals like money-takers’ boxes at theatres—queer customers those monks—Popes, and Lord Treasurers, and all sorts of old fellows, with great red faces, and broken noses, turning up every day—buff jerkins too—matchlocks—Sarcophagus—fine place—old legends too—strange stories: capital;”

Alfred Jingle describing Rochester Bridge, and Rochester Cathedral.

**Charles Dickens**’s first serial novel, \_*The* ***Pickwick Papers*\_** is preoccupied with Kentish geographies almost as much as it is with scenes of London life. From Mr Wardle’s idyllic ‘Manor Farm’ in Dingley Dell to hastily scribbled notes on **Stroud**, **Rochester**, [**Chatham](** **dickens-chatham)**, and **Brompton** recovered from Mr Pickwick’s notebook, Kentish scenes have a place at the very heart of the serial.

Whilst [Dickens’s](dickens-biography) attachment to [**Gad’s Hill Place](dickens-gads-hill)** would result in many unequivocally fond representations of Kent in his later career, in \_*Pickwick\_* his engagement with Kentish geographies, inhabitants and stereotypes is more variable. Both Dickens and his characters alternate between a genuine if snobbish admiration of Kent’s picturesque history and a savage satire of its inhabitants.

The first mention of Kent appears in Chapter 2, as the Pickwickians approach **Rochester Bridge**. Alfred Jingle, the narrative’s profligate wanderer, delivers a potted history of the bridge and other nearby landmarks (quoted above) in fragmented adjective phrases which rain upon the reader like cannon fire. Jingle’s description conjures an image of Kentish architecture as a palimpsest, with its feudal echoes continuing to shape and resonate in the nineteenth-century landscape. This depiction is later supplemented with flatteringly vivid description of **Rochester Castle**, and the cornfields, pastures and windmills situated on the banks of the **Medway**, with its ‘picturesque boats’.[[1]](#footnote-1) Snodgrass will briefly take refuge in [The Leather Bottle](pickwick-papers-leather-bottle) in Cobham after being jilted by Rachel Wardle.

Interspersing these scenic impressions are some more practical musings. With an emotional disengagement that contrasts sharply with his revelling in Kentish scenery, Mr Pickwick describes to his companions the ‘principle productions’, of the Kentish towns they visit, which ‘appear to be soldiers, sailors, Jews, chalk, shrimps, officers, and dockyard men’[[2]](#footnote-2). Through the superior eye of the metropolitan gentleman, Kent and its inhabitants are reduced to a list of commodities.

Perhaps most scathing of all is [Dickens’s](dickens-biography) representation of Kent’s military population and **Chatham Barracks**. At a field day and bivouac, the Pickwickians find themselves quite literally in the line of fire, charged down pell-mell by the prancing Colonel Bulder as well as ‘a long perspective of red coats and white trousers’.[[3]](#footnote-3) More sinister than this slapstick chapter—in which the military chases Mr Pickwick, and Mr Pickwick chases his hat—is the violence and intoxication of the military that is described as taking place in the surrounding residential areas. Naively interpreted by Mr Pickwick as ‘conviviality’, he tells us that ‘[n]othing…can exceed the… good-humour’ of these drunken military men, before relating an anecdote of a barmaid who was stabbed in the shoulder with a bayonet for refusing to serve a soldier more liquor. ‘And yet this fine fellow’, Mr Pickwick explains, ‘was the very first to go down to the house next morning and express his readiness to overlook the matter, and forget what had occurred!’[[4]](#footnote-4)

The scathing caricature of the military and residents of Kent contrasts sharply with [Dickens’s](dickens-biography) descriptions of its scenery, which is perhaps why some local newspapers focussed on the latter when reviewing or reprinting extracts from the serial. For example, in 1836, the \_**Kentish Gazette\_** delightedly writes that, ‘[t]o our general readers the Pickwick papers will be doubly acceptable, from the scenes being laid in Kent, where, intermingled with narrations of laughable adventures, are beautiful graphic descriptions of some of the magnificent remains of the feudal grandeur of the county’.

Bibliography:

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* ‘Mr Pickwick in Chase of his Hat’ by Robert Seymour: <http://www.victorianweb.org/art/illustration/seymour/6.html>

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1. \_Pickwick Papers\_ 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. \_Pickwick Papers\_ 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. \_Pickwick Papers\_ 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. \_Pickwick Papers\_ 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)