Dickens in the Medway

‘“Mudbank, mist, swamp […] swamp, mist, and mudbank.”’ So says a convict in (*Great Expectations*)[/dickens/great-expectations-curated-walk], describing the ‘marsh country’ in which Pip and Estella have grown up. I grew up here too, so did generations of my family before me. (Charles Dickens)[/dickens/dickens-biography] lived here, in the dock town of Chatham, from the ages of 5 to 10, and perhaps longer. He honeymooned here, in Chalk, returning to live in the same cottage when his first child was born. He brought friends here, came on birthday trips. His mistress Ellen Ternan was born here, in Rochester, where her uncle and his family lived and visited several times during her childhood. (Dickens)[/dickens/dickens-biography] died, having spent the last 12 years of his life living, here, in a house at (Gads Hill)[/dickens/dickens-gads-hill]. They dug a grave for him in Rochester Cathedral, only to see his body spirited off to Westminster Abbey instead. Here, crouched under vast skies, lies a tongue of land, protruding between the Thames and Medway estuaries, the opposing banks drawing back to become coastline, low islands, smaller islets, eyots, aits, lapping water. Sandbars lie in wait for the unwary, there are wrecks, sometimes visible from the shore, tides shrink away to reveal great rubbery mounds of mud. Boundaries blur, elements mix.

This is a liminal place, London just over one horizon, the sea over the other. The peninsula itself is nearly empty, but to either side of it towns and villages spread together like ice crystals. Old fortifications are dotted around and about; nine centuries of them, proof of the area’s strategic importance, historically. It was a tough place, salty, coarse – dockyards and garrisons, soldiers and sailors and, withdrawn into its precincts, the cathedral at Rochester, the second oldest bishopric in England, increasingly oddly positioned here as the centuries passed. In the nineteenth century the Thames was thronged with steamers which docked at Gravesend and there was a popular pleasure garden nearby, called Rosherville, much frequented by visitors from London. The road across the peninsula, the Great Dover Road leading from the capital to the coast, was busy with traffic, an arterial route. No longer. The roads and rivers are quieter now, the dockyards decommissioned and subdivided; one part retained for commercial shipping, another regenerated, yet another spruced up for the heritage sector.

The area broods over its losses, seems lacking in confidence, uncertain, still, how best to build itself up again. Take the tourist information page for ‘Maritime Chatham’, which mentions the (‘historic dockyard’)[/dickens/dickens-chatham] almost in the same breath as the bus station and the local shopping centre (which even thirty years ago was nothing to write home about). It makes no effort at all to lay claim to (Charles (Dickens[/dickens/dickens-biography], probably its most famous inhabitant. In 2007 Dickens World opened in Chatham, an immersive experience featuring a boat ride with Dickensian convicts, a ‘haunted house’, the sounds and smells of a murky Victorian past peopled with animatronic models. Soon mired in financial problems, it closed its doors several years ago and the unit in which it was housed is now occupied by a gym and fast-food restaurants. [1] The tendency has been to dismiss the whole project as a white elephant, ill-conceived, doomed to failure. It’s true that the building was unattractive, oddly placed in a retail park, but the (‘Historic Dockyard’)[/dickens/dickens-chatham], a reasonably successful visitor attraction, is only about 200 yards away, if that. Dickens’ father John worked at the dockyard, in the pay office, for years, including when it was engulfed by scandal and suicide.[[1]](#footnote-1) One of the houses the family lived in still exists but it’s not on any tourist trail.

Nor is the house (Dickens)[/dickens/dickens-biography] lived at in (Gads Hill)[/dickens/dickens-gads-hill], when he had grown to be a rich and famous man with feet of clay. A sign with his face on welcomes you to the village, a new one, in fact, made for the 150th anniversary of his death, in June 2020. [2] There are a handful of Dickens-themed road names. There’s nothing else in the environment. Not an information board for interested visitors, no suggestions of nearby sites they could go and see, nothing, not even a reassurance that they’re in front of the right building. [3] Back in the 1880s you could, apparently, just turn up and look around.[[2]](#footnote-2) You can still arrange to visit, though spaces (and times) are very limited – understandably, since it’s been run since the 1920s as a private school. Nearby you can see steps leading up from a tunnel under the road. (Dickens’)[/dickens/dickens-biography] steps, his tunnel, made to give him private access to his luxurious writing shed, a miniature (chalet)[/dickens/dickens-swiss-chalet] given to him by a Swiss actor friend. [4] Unlabelled, and this year in particular, overgrown. The pub opposite (Dickens’)[/dickens/dickens-biography] house, the Sir John Falstaff, run in Dickens’ time by a family named Trood, doesn’t seem very interested in (Dickens)[/dickens/dickens-biography] either. They make little effort to monetise or even publicise the connection. [5]

Dickens’ writing desk is in the care of the Dickens House Museum in London where it’s venerated like a shrine. But no one has ever seemed to know what to do with his writing shed. After being exhibited at the Crystal Palace the (chalet)[/dickens/dickens-swiss-chalet] was re-erected in the grounds of Cobham Hall, the big estate near (Gads Hill)[/dickens/dickens-gads-hill], and left there for decades. By 1960 it had been almost entirely reclaimed by nature. It’s not in a good state at all nowadays, with a fundraising drive ongoing to pay for the necessary repairs. Yet rather than being kept under cover, it’s out the back of (Eastgate House)[/dickens/edwin-drood-eastgate-house] on Rochester High Street, quietly rotting away.

Of all the marsh country places which can claim a connection with (Charles Dickens)[/dickens/dickens-biography], it’s Rochester that has embraced him most firmly and enthusiastically, and with the greatest degree of commercial success. Unlike Chatham, Rochester boasts about (Dickens)[/dickens/dickens-biography] on its tourist information page. It holds a Dickens festival in the summer and a Dickensian Christmas market. Even here, though, the enthusiasm doesn’t carry all before it. There was, for a time, a dedicated Charles Dickens Centre, but no longer. There are also rather fewer Dickensian street names than you might expect. For many years, the High Street had a greengrocer’s called Pip’s, but that’s closed now. A Taste of Two Cities is overdue a revamp. Some local business owners still venture on Dickensian names, though they are increasingly generic. Thus we have a new (Dickens)[/dickens/dickens-biography] House Wine Emporium, on-brand for a man who liked a tipple or two [5] while the restaurant Topes, named of course for the verger in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, located next to what is definitely John Jasper’s gatehouse, is now the Cheese Room [6].

Across the river in Strood, on the road to (Gads Hill)[/dickens/dickens-gads-hill]which (Dickens)[/dickens/dickens-biography] must have trodden hundreds of times, there’s a pub called the Crispin and Crispianus, where he supposedly liked to pop in for a pint. This rebranded itself for a time as The Dickens Inn but has now reverted to its original name [7]. Though it is a very old building it’s in a terrible position, under the train line, flanked by a Papa Johns and a barber-shop, with a petrol station opposite, and a used-tyre place nestling in one of the nearby railway arches. It was always going to struggle to attract custom but the name changes illustrate, in a nutshell, what appears to be a wider trend in the area: businesses convincing themselves that a Dickens-related name will tempt people in, only to find that it doesn’t work quite like that.

But why? (Charles Dickens)[/dickens/dickens-biography] remains world-famous, famous enough for there to be museums dedicated to him not just in London, but in his occasional holiday home in (Broadstairs)[/dickens/broadstairs] and in Portsmouth, where he was born and spent his first couple of years. He lived in this area for great swathes of his life, emotionally significant ones, was drawn to return repeatedly, both in reality, and in his writing. It’s the first place visited in *The Pickwick Papers*. It’s the main setting in both (Gads Hill)[/dickens/dickens-gads-hill] and what we have of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. The towns also make briefer appearances in (*David Copperfield*)[ /dickens/david-copperfield-curated-walk] and *The Seven Poor Travellers* and have a cameo in the first trial scene of *A Tale of Two Cities*.

At least, sort of. The ‘garrison-and-dockyard town’ on the route of the (Dover mail)[ https://kent-maps.online/dickens/19c-dover] coach must be Chatham, yet it remains inexplicably anonymous. Save for Gravesend, local place names are notably absent from (Gads Hill)[/dickens/dickens-gads-hill]. Cloisterham, in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, both is and is not Rochester – the cathedral and its immediate surroundings are correct almost to the inch, most of the locations still identifiable, the details of the journey to London accurate for the time the novel appears to be set, yet further afield (Charles Dickens)[/dickens/dickens-biography] moves some places and cuts others out. There is, taken as a whole, an odd, even pointless disingenuousness when he writes about this area. The alchemical process of writing, perhaps, but it doesn’t just happen when he’s writing fiction. In fact it’s worse, more egregious, when he’s writing what purports to be fact.

Chatham is scarcely ever mentioned in his letters, even those which refer to his childhood. It’s not mentioned once in *A Child’s History*, even when he describes the Dutch sailing up the Medway and burning the fleet at anchor there. In one apparently semi-autobiographical essay in his *Uncommercial Traveller* series he touches on his childhood ambition to own the house at (Gads Hill)[/dickens/dickens-gads-hill], but the tale turns out to be either a ghost story or a daydream. In another he presents his ‘boyhood’s home’ as Dullborough, ‘a country town’, with Chatham’s railway station and Rochester’s High Street, bearing vanishingly little resemblance to the diverse, highly militarized dock-town-cum-small-cathedral-city it was in reality.[[3]](#footnote-3)

And in reality, and in spite of his psychological ties to the marsh country, there are reasons that (Dickens)[/dickens/dickens-biography] might sometimes have been inclined to be vague when writing about it. The scandal which, in 1822, enveloped his father’s workplace still trails clouds of suspicion. We might wonder whether John Dickens was unaffected by the suicide of his boss, to whom he seems to have owed money; whether he can really have been unaware of the vast peculations taking place in the office where he worked with three other men, especially given that his own father-in-law had been convicted, *in absentia*, of the same crime.[[4]](#footnote-4) Ellen Ternan’s local family connections may have produced the same desire for concealment we see in some of his other dealings with her.

The Guildhall Museum in Rochester is apparently planning a new exhibition, ‘The Making of Mr. Dickens’. I wonder how permanent – and how exhaustive – it will prove, whether it will succeed in pinning (Dickens)[/dickens/dickens-biography] down here or whether, yet again, he will vanish into the marsh mists.

By Helena Kelly

1. See Michael Allen, ‘Suicide, Fraud and Debt: John Dickens’s Last Days at Chatham’, *Dickens Quarterly*, Vol. 33, 4 (December 2016): 269-290. See also my own, ‘The Fraud at the Navy Pay Office at Chatham: some additional information’, *The Dickensian*, forthcoming. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. As recorded, for example, in the *Newcastle Chronicle*, 29 September 1888, page 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. ‘Dullborough Town’ (Uncommercial Traveller), *All the Year Round*, June 1860. Chatham and Rochester had a fairly substantial and well-established Jewish population and a number of people of colour are also recorded as living in the area together with immigrants from various European countries. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Charles Barrow, Charles Dickens’ maternal grandfather, who also worked at the Navy Pay Office, was accused of embezzlement. Rather than contest the charge he absconded, spending the last years of his life in the Isle of Man. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)