

Travel and Adventure: Following in Charles Dickens' footsteps

by Sharon Whitley Larsen

ROCHESTER, England - Charles Dickens "became the most celebrated literary figure of his time," noted one of his biographers, Edgar Johnson. "(He) belongs to all the world."

LITERARY LEGEND - Noted as 'the most celebrated literary figure of his time,' Charles Dickens' classic works still inspire millions. His image can be seen everywhere along Rochester, such as this stained glass window. CNS Photo by Sharon Whitley Larsen. GAD'S HILL PLACE - Charles Dickens spent his final 12 years at Gad's Hill Place, the only home he ever owned. He died on June 9, 1870. CNS Photo by Sharon Whitley Larsen. ROCHESTER RUSH HOUR - High Street, Rochester, has many shops and restaurants named after Charles Dickens and his books' characters. CNS Photo by Sharon Whitley Larsen. HE'S EVERYWHERE - Images of Charles Dickens are displayed on fudge boxes at a candy shop on Rochester's High Street. CNS Photo by Sharon Whitley Larsen. And today, Dickens' classic works are still loved by millions - inspiring festivals and numerous film, television, theater and musical adaptations - and even a new indoor attraction called Dickens World.

"Charles Dickens has always been very important to us," reiterated Mary Sewell, Medway Council Senior Tourism Officer, as she pointed out sites on and near the town's High Street that pertain to the life of the world-renowned 19th century British author.

It was here in Kent where Dickens experienced an idyllic childhood, honeymooned, regularly vacationed and eventually returned to live out his final years. It was also here where he hoped to be buried, a wish denied him (he's at Poets' Corner, Westminster Abbey).

"He had more passion and love for the area because of his fond, happy memories," Sewell added, showing me local places and buildings mentioned in his books - as well as shops, pubs and restaurants named for him or his famed characters. Those happy memories derived from his childhood in nearby Chatham. Here, 35 miles southeast of London, Dickens lived from 1817-1822, ages 5-10, with his parents and siblings, mostly at 2 Ordnance Terrace (now re-numbered 11).

Today the exterior is much the same as when young Charles would take long walks with his father, John,

who was a clerk in the Naval payroll office at Chatham Dockyard. That's where Dickens World recently opened to honor the region's gifted author and beloved son.

Once, when Dickens was 9, he and his father stood in awe in front of a late-18th century red brick mansion a few miles from their cramped, modest row house. Mr. Dickens told him: "If you were to be very persevering, Charles, and were to work hard, you might some day come to live in it."

Dickens never forgot that. Years later, after leasing many houses with his wife Catherine and their 10 children and achieving remarkable literary success, he did just that, purchasing the home, Gad's Hill Place, in 1856. He resided there for the last 12 years of his life, having coldly dismissed Catherine after 22 years of marriage, shattering his family. He then discreetly spent time with his much younger mistress, actress Ellen (Nelly) Ternan, who was 18 - and he 45 - when they met. Dickens died at Gad's Hill on June 9, 1870, at age 58.

Life had come full circle for the energetic genius, renowned social activist, commentator and novelist, the author of such popular works as the rather autobiographical "David Copperfield," "Great Expectations," "A Tale of Two Cities" and "A Christmas Carol." His carefree, happy childhood had ended when the family was transferred to London, where he at times experienced insecurity, hunger and loneliness.

Precocious young Dickens, a small, sickly, unathletic - yet imaginative and observant - child who loved reading, was forced to leave school at age 12 to work 12-hour days in a blacking factory for several months to help support the family. His financially undisciplined father, who then supported five children, ended up in debtors' prison for a few months. Dickens, hurt and bitter toward his parents for these demoralizing turn of events, never got over the shame and suffering of that traumatic period. That - as well as a need to impress his first, although unrequited, love - made him even more determined to be a success.

He eventually returned to school for a couple of years, and did stints as a court stenographer, law clerk and political reporter. He focused on his love of theater, newspaper and magazine work, and became a freelance writer. In 1833, at 21, his first story, "A Dinner at Poplar Walk," was published in Monthly Magazine under the pen name Boz, for no pay.

"With the publication of 'The Pickwick Papers' (first serialized in 1836, when he was 24), he achieved instant fame," noted Lee Ault, curator of the Dickens House Museum in Broadstairs. He was a regular visitor to the seaside resort since 1837, dubbing it "Our English Watering Place," where the annual Broadstairs Dickens Festival is held every June.

"Dickens wrote about poverty, hardship, crime, about the people he knew," emphasized Sewell. "He found names for his novels from his walks through the graveyards."

And colorful people he met through his walk of life were portrayed as characters in his novels.

The citizens of Rochester, proud of their former resident, continue to honor Dickens today with two annual festivals held in May and December, drawing thousands.

"The summer Dickens Festival is three days and involves parades, costumed characters - Fagin, Miss Havisham, Mr. Pickwick - children's competition, a tea party, quizzes, shows," explained Sewell. "There are also Dickens readings in public venues."

And the Dickensian Christmas Festival is just as popular. Held for two days in December, "We have a midday parade, costumed characters, marching bands, candle-lit processions, an appearance by Father Christmas and we sing Christmas carols," said Sewell.

And, if needed to set the winter scene, "We bring in snow-making machines."

Of course there are performances of Dickens' "A Christmas Carol" and shops sell items from that period, such as handmade soaps, candles and candy.

Also in tribute to the popular author and his work, the much-awaited Dickens World - a \$125 million production - opened in May 2007 in nearby Chatham. As Victorian-themed costumed characters stroll the cobblestone streets in the indoor, 70,000-square-foot attraction, guests are transported back in time. In the School Room, signs proclaim, "Speak When Spoken To," "Be Seen And Not Heard," "Respect Thy Elders" and "Thou Shall Not Stea" (the last letter is missing). A teacher in Victorian garb reprimands those who get out of line, telling them to sit quietly at the desks. An interactive touch-screen system and high-definition show educate visitors on the world of Dickens.

A nine-minute, narrated "Great Expectations" boat ride takes visitors through the sewers, streets, markets and over the rooftops of Victorian London, creating the sights, sounds and even the smells of that period. Other attractions include The Haunted House of Ebenezer Scrooge, replicas of Newgate Prison, the Victorian Music Hall and Warren's Blacking Manufactory (where Dickens worked as a child).

"He had quite an exciting life," pointed out Sewell about the restless and vain author, whose formal education ended for good at age 15.

"Life was Dickens' school," commented Ault. "He knew he was going to be great and made sure he was. He was a control freak, he liked to have his way. He worked on several books at a time and sometimes wrote 12 letters a day. He was also a brilliant actor, an amazing businessman and was loved by Americans. It's like a pilgrimage for them to come here."

Dickens also enjoyed touring America and, according to Ault, particularly loved Philadelphia, which - contrary to his wishes - erected the only statue of him on public display.

"The last few years he didn't write that much, he was doing dramatic readings," she added. "He really lived his life to the full."

IF YOU GO

In Dickens' Footsteps, a self-guided tour in historic Rochester, includes Six Poor Travellers' House, the guildhall (featured in "Great Expectations" as the magistrate's court where Pip was brought) and Restoration House (portrayed as Satis House, the home of Miss Havisham, in "Great Expectations"). Contact the Medway Visitor Information Centre for maps, 95 High St. For more information, visit www.medway.gov.uk/tourism e-mail visitor.centre@medway.gov.uk.

30th Annual Dickens Festival: May 30-June 1, 2008.

20th Annual Dickensian Christmas Festival: Dec. 1 and 2, 2007. The 2008 dates are to be announced.

For more information: www.medway.gov.uk/events, or e-mail visitor.centre@medway.gov.uk.

For information on Rochester, visit www.city-of-rochester.co.uk.

For information on Dickens World, visit www.dickensworld.co.uk.

The Leather Bottle Inn, Cobham, was built in 1629. Dickens stayed in room six and spent much time here; it was featured in "The Pickwick Papers." Great place to have dinner and see all the Dickens memorabilia

covering the walls - newspaper clips, photos, even his black leather briefcase is on display. For more information, visit www.theleatherbottle.co.uk.

For more information on Dickens House Museum, visit www.dickenshouse.co.uk.

For more information on the Broadstairs Dickens Festival, June 19-22, 2008, visit www.broadstairsdickensfestival.co.uk.

Broadstairs and Rochester are easy day trips by train from London: www.britrail.com. For free maps, brochures, vacation planning advice and a wide selection of passes and transport tickets, contact VisitBritain at 800-462-2748, or visit www.visitbritain.com/usa.

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