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TRAVEL

Literary Tourism: Exploring Charles Dickens' Rochester



Md. Mahmudul Hasan

When my niece Mubasshira and her husband Morsed told me that they had moved from East London to Kent, I had little idea of the area in which they relocated. Prior to my two-week trip to the UK this year, they gave me their address which contained the name of the Medway town of Rochester.

Rochester! The word carries literary-historical significance. The British writer that was churning in my mind was Charlotte Brontë (1816-55), as the character of Mr. Rochester in her most famous novel *Jane Eyre* (1847) has enthralled readers everywhere. I was sure that Rochester had far greater literary importance than that but I could not think of anything more specific. Something was eluding my grasp and escaping my memory. I left it there.

I went to Britain mainly to participate in a conference, themed “A Space of their Own: Women, Writing and Place, 1850-1950,” at University Centre Shrewsbury. Meanwhile, a

group of students (of South Asian descent) of Queen Mary University of London organised “In Conversation with Dr Md. Mahmudul Hasan” at Queen Mary Students’ Union where I spoke on “The Need to Represent.”

This time, from Heathrow I went straight to Rochester and stayed there from 21 to 25 June 2019. Since I was mentally occupied with two presentations, I continued preparing myself and did not have much time to explore the place. But once my presentations were over, I visited my alma mater, the University of Portsmouth, met my main PhD supervisor Dr Bronwen Price. When I mentioned Rochester, she immediately alluded to the great Victorian novelist Charles Dickens (1812-70). Her mention of Dickens raised my antenna at once, and his connections with the town finally clicked.

During my PhD years, I had visited Dickens’ birthplace at 393 Old Commercial Road and taught at Charles Dickens Primary School (renamed and changed to Ark Dickens Primary Academy in 2014) in Turner Road in Portsmouth. Dickens’ father John Dickens (1785-1851) worked as a clerk in the city’s Royal Navy pay office.

This time my exploration of Rochester as a Dickensian place enhanced my search for the biographical geography of the Novelist of the Poor. Before I left the UK, I spent two more days in Rochester and visited some landmark sites in the town that bear imprints of Dickens’ literary production, as he spent much of his working life in Kent.

In 1815, John Dickens was transferred from Portsmouth to London, and from London to Kent in 1817. He was posted at the Historic Dockyard in Chatham near Rochester. So the family moved there and Charles Dickens spent his impressionable childhood in what is now Medway Council that includes Chatham and Rochester.

The most Dickensian place in Rochester is the High Street where the Charles Dickens Centre at Eastgate House is located. On the sunny morning of 4 July 2019, I began my literary tourism with a visit to the Centre. An Elizabethan structure built in 1590 at the eastern end of High Street, Eastgate House is the model for Westgate House in Dickens’ first novel, *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-37), and for the Nuns’ House or “Miss Twinkleton’s seminary for young ladies” in his last, unfinished novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870). Eastgate House is also the shop of “a large hard-breathing middle-aged slow man” Uncle Pumblechook in *Great Expectations* (1843) and the house of the auctioneer Mr Thomas Sapsea in *Edwin Drood*. Because of these and other “strong Dickensian associations, in 1897 the Rochester City Council purchased the building, making it a museum of local Dickensiana.”

The most remarkable item of Dickensian memorabilia at Eastgate House is the Swiss Chalet in its grounds. It was originally at Gad's Hill Place in the Kent village of Higham and was given to Dickens as a gift by his good friend the Anglo-French actor Charles Fechter (1824-79). In an 1868 letter to the American writer Annie Fields (1834-1915), Dickens wrote: "I have put five mirrors in the Swiss chalet (where I write) and they reflect and refract in all kinds of ways the leaves that are quivering at the windows, and the great fields of waving corn, and the sail-dotted river. My room is up among the branches of the trees.... The scent of the flowers, and indeed of everything that is growing for miles and miles, is most delicious."

Dickens wrote much of *Great Expectations*, *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), *Our Mutual Friend* (1864), *The Uncommercial Traveller* (1875) and many other works in the chalet. He died of a stroke in the two-storey wooden structure while working on *Edwin Drood*. It was finally moved to the gardens of Eastgate House in 1960.

From Eastgate House I proceeded to a nearby road, Crow Lane, to see Restoration House – named so as King Charles II (1630-85) stayed here on the eve of the Restoration (1660-88) – that inspired Miss Havisham's Satis House in *Great Expectations*. Pip in the novel regards Estella, the girl in Miss Havisham's House, as a "Princess," and during one visit attests to his enduring love for her. However, as he begins to understand the machinations of Miss Havisham he says: "I have no hope that I shall ever call you mine, Estella. I am ignorant what may become of me very soon, how poor I may be, or where I may go.... I have loved you ever since I first saw you in this house." He exhorts her thus: "Estella, you must leave this house, it's a dead house! Estella – come with me out into the sunlight!"

From Crow Lane, I walked back to High Street to visit two other most important Dickensian places: The Rochester Guildhall (now Guildhall Museum) and Six Poor Travellers House. Guildhall Museum contains Dickens Discovery Room, displays various Dickensian objects and showcases Dickens' links with Rochester and the Medway area. The Museum began its journey in Eastgate House in 1897 on Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee, was transferred to the Guildhall in 1979 and formally opened in 1980. Built in 1687, the Guildhall is the "queer place with pews higher than a church" where Pip is indentured to his brother-in-law, the blacksmith Joe Gargery, in *Great Expectations*.

Six Poor Travellers House (also known as Watts' Charity) at 97 High Street was actually an almshouse. Rochester MP Richard Watts (1529-79) willed money to it for the construction of a two-storey building inside the compound next to the gardens. The structure is internally sub-divided into three small rooms on each floor and provided lodging "for one night only unlesse sicknesse be the cause ... for six poor travellers who not being rogues or proctors may receive gratis one night's lodging, food, entertainment and four pence each." This

charitable service continued from 1586 to 1940. Dickens' Christmas short story "The Seven Poor Travellers" (1854) – in which he himself is the seventh traveller – immortalises this Elizabethan charity house.

Finally, I visited the old cathedral and the castle on the bank of the river Medway and next to High Street, as both are featured in Dickens' *Pickwick Papers*. I stopped at Dickens' Gad's Hill Place on my way to Heathrow in the afternoon.

The young Charles Dickens used to take walks with his father who once noticing his son's fascination for the magnificent building, told him that if he "were to be very persevering and work very hard, [he] might someday come to live in it." The financially successful writer eventually bought it in 1856. Even though his family moved to London, Dickens returned to Gad's Hill Place to live there for the last 13 years of his life.

Among all the places that inspired Dickens' work, Rochester High Street is perhaps the most remarkable for the intensity of its association with the novelist. Fortunately, modernisation has not been able to encroach upon High Street to eliminate the pristine nature of Dickensian memorabilia, as buildings in the area largely remain as they were during Dickens' time. Walking on High Street gives the look and feel of Dickens' world.

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