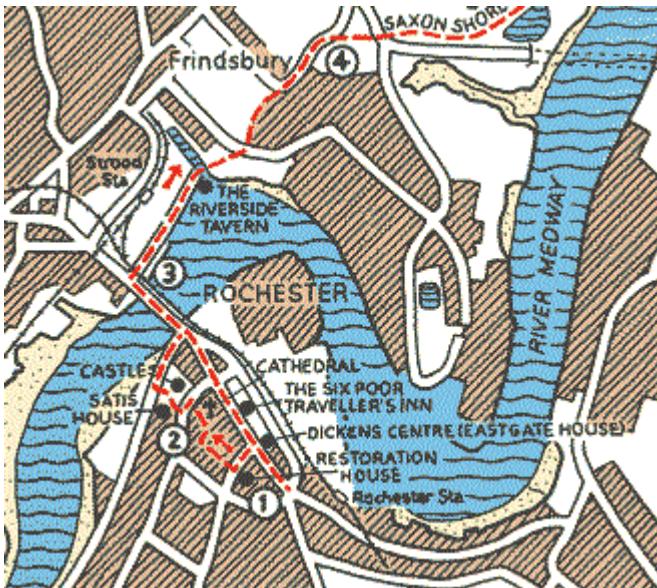


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Explore London Group 6

Rochester

A Charles Dickens Walk in Rochester



Rochester was Dickens's favourite city and Rochester hosts the Dickens festival, a colourful extravaganza during which the city takes on the character of the Victorian age, as people dress in period costume and many of Dickens's most colourful characters walk the streets

Leave Rochester Station. Go right along High Street, cross over the pedestrian crossing and bear right. At the next lights go over the busy roads into the continuation of High Street, heading towards the clearly visible spire of Rochester Cathedral. Keep to the left side, and pause outside the black and white timbered building, just before Eastgate Terrace.

A plaque reveals it to be the house of Mr Sapsea, auctioneer and Mayor of Cloisterham. The house was also featured in *Great Expectations*.

Go right through the gates on the opposite side of High Street, passing on the left the 16th-century Eastgate House. Go left through the iron gates to find the brown and lime Swiss Chalet, which formerly stood across the road from Dickens's house at Gad's Hill.

The chalet was a gift from his friend, Charles Fechter (1824–79) in 1864, and Dickens used it as a summer study for the rest of his life. Indeed, it was in the upper room of the chalet that he wrote his last words on the afternoon of 8th June, 1870.

Backtrack to the entrance of Eastgate House.

In Dickens's day this was a girls' school, and he featured the building in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* as The Nun's House, a Seminary for young ladies. The Charles Dickens Centre now occupies the property, wherein are exhibited many relics of his life and times. Imaginative recreations together with audio-visual displays, bring both Dickensian London and England vividly to life. Allow yourself a good 40 minutes to enjoy what is an essential part of the walk.

Return to High Street, go right then next left into Crow Lane and walk up the hill. Three quarters of the way along on the left is the dark redbrick Restoration House, so called because Charles II stayed here on his return to England in 1660.

In *Great Expectations* this was Satis House, On the afternoon of Monday 6th June, 1870, three days before he died, Dickens was seen leaning against the wooden railing across the street from Restoration House, studying it intently as if committing every brick to memory.

Go up the steps opposite, and keep going ahead along the asphalt path into The Vines, which was once the vineyard of the monks of St Andrew's Priory. Take the right path, and continue through the gap in the wall, to turn right and follow the road left into:-

Minor Canon Row, a shabby, almost neglected terrace, built in 1723 for the lesser clergy of Rochester Cathedral. A 'wonderfully quaint row of red-brick tenements...' was how Dickens described them in 'The Seven Poor Travellers'

Continue as the road swings right passing on the left the 15th-century Prior's Gate. Follow it left, and a little way along, go through the iron gate on the right, down the steps and into:-

Rochester Cathedral. The Cathedral today is a light and airy place, evidently much changed since Dickens wrote those words. However, the crypt – the steps to which are situated almost immediately on the right as you enter. – still Exit the crypt, turn left and ascend the steps. Pass straight ahead through the doorway and pause to the left of the ornate Chapter House doorway, where there is a brass memorial plaque to Charles Dickens.

Go left through the gates to cross in front of the high altar. Keep going ahead through the choir stalls, and pass beneath the organ. Go down the steps, bearing left at the lower altar and cross to the side alcove, where above the reclining figure with his hands clasped, is the wall memorial to:-

Richard Watts (1529–79), by whose charitable bequest the Poor Travellers' House on High Street was founded

Exit the cathedral through the door at the end of the right aisle, where straight away the castle looms ahead of you. Turn left, follow the cobbles as they swing right, and cross over the road. Pause by the wall on the other side, to look down upon the gravestones in the 'little graveyard under the castle wall', where Dickens expressed a wish to be buried.

Go down the slope to cross the moat diagonally left and pass through the arch at the top of the steps in the far-left corner. Keep ahead and continue through the gates surmounted by the stone lion heads then pause outside the cream building in the corner.

This is Satis House, formerly the residence of Richard Watts of Poor Travellers fame. In 1573, whilst Queen Elizabeth I was being entertained here

With your back to Satis House, go down the pathway, pass by the two gateposts, and cross the road. Bear left down the hill and a little way along, on the right, go through the gate to enter the grounds of Rochester Castle, the entrance to which is clearly visible on the right.

Built in 1128 Rochester Castle is a magnificent, ruined fortress, whose lofty heights afford stunning views of the town below. As a child, Dickens had often pottered about these ruins, and they feature in the pages of several of his novels.

Exit the castle, go down the wooden steps, bear right and keep going ahead on the broad path to pass the large cannon. Descend the steps, and turn right onto the Esplanade. The balustrade that borders the river came from the medieval Bridge taken down in 1857, and which Dickens mentioned in *Pickwick Papers*. Go right by the Crown Pub onto the High Street to reach, on the left, the light brown building, which is a wonderful museum furnished in the fashion of the mid 1870s. Next door is:-

Rochester's Guildhall, The museum that occupies this building contains a recreation of one the great Prison Hulks, the ships that were once moored in the Thames estuary. On the opposite side of High Street is the Royal Victoria and Bull Hotel, an 18th-century coaching inn, where Princess – later Queen – Victoria stayed in 1836. In those days it was known simply as the Bull Inn, and Dickens mentions it in several novels notably in *Pickwick Papers* and *Great Expectations*.

Continue along the High Street, passing beneath the huge clock that juts out from the wall of the Old Corn Exchange on the left. In *The Uncommercial Traveller*, Dickens wrote how he had once supposed this to be 'the finest clock in the world; whereas it now turned out to be as inexpressive, moon-faced, and weak a clock as ever I saw'.

Keep to the right side of High Street and, having crossed Boley Hill, pause alongside the 15th-century Chertseys, also known as College Gate.

Continue along High Street. A plaque on the next building on the right states that this was the home of Mr Tope, the chief verger at Cloisterham Cathedral in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. The last words that Dickens wrote were concerning a 'very neat, clean breakfast' that Mrs Tope laid out for their lodger.

Keep going along the High Street until, just after the Visitor Centre on the left, you arrive at:-The Poor Travellers' House. Its name derives from a bequest left by Richard Watts for 'Six Poor Travellers, who not being ROGUES or PROCTORS' were to be provided with 'one Night Lodging, Entertainment, and Fourpence'. Dickens visited the house in 1854.