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The Rochester Tales

Isa Hemphrey was born and raised in the region of Medway in Kent, which includes the towns of Strood, Rochester, Chatham, Gillingham and Rainham.

But until recently, she never knew Rochester's rich history

Whenever a friend visits me in Medway for the first time, I always tell them to get off at Rochester station. I do not live in Rochester and it is not the closest station to me, I just want it to be their first experience of Medway. Medway, a conurbation within the county of Kent in England, is where I was born, raised, educated and, minus university, where I have lived my entire life. When this is the case, when it has all become too familiar, places can become

boring and lose their colour. That is partly why we travel, to explore new places but also to cultivate a yearning to return home. We leave long enough to miss and appreciate it. But even the most exciting places can become dull to a local. Consider a New Yorker being bored of New York City, or a Parisian finding Paris dreary.

Yet Rochester, with its Dickensian aesthetic, is the last part of Medway that still makes my native heart swell. But while my personal history is so intertwined with this city, its actual history is unknown to me. From my

perspective, it is merely a place Charles Dickens liked to visit. To prevent this city becoming reduced to bus routes and the nearest Costa coffee, I explored its extensive history to safeguard my fondness for it and find a newfound pride in being a local of Medway.

THE RIVER

When coming home on the train from London, I always glance over the River Medway as we pass over Rochester Bridge to see the 'Black Widow'. No, not a spider. It is a privately owned 1,950-tonne Cold War Soviet Union submarine, now moored on the riverbank, which once carried 22 nuclear warheads. Medway has an extensive maritime heritage, but it is still an odd place to find a Russian war machine. Yet there are a few historical surprises to be found here. For instance, in the Royal Engineers Museum in Gillingham, you will find a piece of the Berlin Wall. On the other side of Rochester Bridge in Strood, hidden in an industrial estate, is the 13th-century Temple Manor once owned by the Knights Templar. It functioned as a

rest stop on the Dover to London road and its farmland provided funds for the Crusades.

Rochester Bridge connects Strood to Rochester over the River Medway. The Victorian cast-iron bridge with its three arches is recognisable to every Medway resident. A Roman Bridge with stone pillars wedged deep into the riverbed once stood here before breaking apart after a particularly icy winter. By the end of the 14th century, a replacement Medieval bridge was built and stood for nearly 500 years. Part of the current bridge is the Esplanade along the riverbank, where there is a commemorative plaque to remember a man called Percy Henry Gordon. On Good Friday in 1912, Gordon spotted a little girl struggling in the river and bravely jumped in to save her. The girl was brought back to shore safely, but Gordon tragically drowned.

This is one of a handful of stories about the River Medway at the Guildhall Museum on Rochester High Street. Built in 1687, its Main Chamber was a fictional setting in Dickens' *Great Expectations*. Many Medway

Above: Panorama of the River Medway with Archbishop's Palace and All Saint's Church on the opposite bank



Left, top: A view of Rochester Castle and Cathedral from the castle grounds

Left: Rochester Bridge

Above: Miss Havisham leads the parade during the Dickens Festival on Rochester High Street

schoolchildren will have visited 'The Hulks', a partial actual-size reconstruction of a ship that transported prisoners. You can explore the deck of the ship that would have sailed along the River Medway and explore its cramped and dirty bowels. Slightly creepy, but highly effective, are the waxwork prisoners sleeping side by side in hammocks. I am now certain that this was the origin of my fear of waxwork figures. Dotted around this museum are odd mementoes from Medway's past, such as a mammoth tusk, Victorian doll houses, and a whipping post from 1596. My favourite item is a tiny and delicate 'automaton' figure of a girl using a spinning wheel, made of bone by a prisoner on a hulk ship.

ROCHESTER TALES

One of Rochester's main events is the Dickens Festival. Twice a year, including at Christmas, locals flood the city to celebrate it being a favourite location of Charles Dickens and a feature in his novels. His ignored dying wish was to be buried here. Therefore, expect to see Dickens cosplayers wandering the high street. On one occasion, I saw a rather brilliant Miss Havisham wearing a dusty old wedding dress

dripping with pearls and lace. There are various shops named after Dickens' characters, such as Tiny Tim's Tea Rooms, Pip's of Rochester (a grocery shop), and Copperfields (an antique shop). One place I believe Dickens would have loved is Baggins Book Bazaar, England's largest rare and second-hand bookshop. As I scooted around customers between the never-ending cramped aisles of shelves and paper, I found all sorts of unusual books such as Wisden Cricketers' almanacks going back to 1864 and a knitting book of ugly '80s jumpers.

But a prominent feature in Dickens' fictional universe is not all Rochester can be known for; it has its own real stories to tell. In 1215, Rochester Castle's south-eastern tower was brought down in a most graphic way. King John ordered a mine to be built deep into the corner of the tower and replaced the masonry underneath with wooden posts. Then 40 of the fattest pigs were slaughtered and burned, tearing down the posts and destroying the tower.

Today it is the centre of less climactic conflicts, as a 'gym' for youngsters to battle at with the *Pokemon Go* app. Although even serious visitors will have to use their imagination, as inside you will find a stone shell



with all the floors missing. Built around 1127, there are few castles older than Rochester's in the UK. Climbing the many stairs to the top, it is easy to see its strategic significance with the River Medway flowing in parallel.

THE CATHEDRAL

My school usually held our important ceremonies at Rochester Cathedral. These services were tedious, we were not even allowed to clap. The end would be signalled by the deafening blare of the organ with its 3,808 pipes, as if someone had mashed their hand on the keyboard. The significance of it all was obviously lost on me. On reflection, the magnificence of England's second-oldest cathedral might have consequently been lost on me too. Visiting it now, I found the golden eagle pulpit with its outstretched wings that the clergy would rest their Bible on to give a sermon to my school. Over ten years ago this fancy bird seemed gaudy for such a tranquil setting. But now, in the soft lighting of the prayer candles, the eagle seemed to glimmer on its perch in meditation and majesty. Perhaps now, I was ready to appreciate it.

The cathedral is exceedingly old, founded in 604 CE. It even has one of the oldest doors in England: Gundulf's door. History has left its various marks on the building. On the wall of the Quire is a pattern of intertwined royal leopards of England and the fleur-de-lis of France, which would have been political propaganda during the Hundred Years' War. Within an arch is a patterned fresco, which I am told survived King Henry VIII's whitewashing of churches during the Reformation because it was likely hidden from view. Less obvious are the 3,000 examples of graffiti, some dating back to the 12th century, scratched into the stone all over the building.

The cathedral was once the resting place of the Scottish baker William of Perth, who was murdered in the 13th century. The story goes that an insane woman discovered his corpse in Rochester and, after placing a garland of flowers on his head, her madness was cured. This apparent phenomenon caused monks to move his body to the cathedral and proclaim him a saint. Nothing of his body remains, but further miracles were reported at his shrine. Another miracle happened when I sat in the pews and absorbed the atmosphere of this grand place: I realised I was quite lucky to have come here in my school years. Even the organ I once detested now sounded a little sweeter.



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THE FIRST REFUGEES

Pilgrims have sought religious inspiration in Rochester for many centuries, walking up the cathedral's now worn-down stone staircase year after year. But for others, Rochester's Huguenot Museum represents the religious refuge of their ancestors. Further down the high street and visited by descendants all over the world, the museum is the first and only in Britain to document the Huguenots. By 1685 many of these French Protestants, persecuted for their faith by Catholics, chose to escape to more accepting societies. One of the standout exhibits is a singed Bible that was baked in a loaf of bread by a Huguenot family to hide it from soldiers searching their home.

King James II allowed them to worship freely in England and they came in their thousands,

bringing skills in finance, fashion and the arts.

It is supposed that one in six English people could be of Huguenot descent. The museum tells the story of Britain's first refugees, in fact the word 'refugee' was first coined in this period. It highlights every generation of refugees who have made Britain their home, like the World War I Belgians and the Kosovan refugees of the '90s. As it is pointed out to me, while the Guildhall Museum tells the story of objects, the Huguenot Museum tells the story of people.

MEDWAY'S MARITIME

Like my copy of *Oliver Twist* that has sat unread on my bookshelf for years, I have passed Eastgate House in Rochester many times without going inside. It has many links to



Left, top: View of Rochester Cathedral

Left, middle: Interior of the cathedral

Left, bottom: The organ in the cathedral

Below: The Huguenot Museum in Rochester



Image: © James Britain



Dickens, not only as a setting in both *The Pickwick Papers* and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, but also where his Swiss chalet was moved to from his final home Gad's Hill Place in Kent. A present to the author, it arrived at Higham Station packed into 58 boxes. Eastgate House has served many purposes: a private family home, a Victorian boarding school, and the Charles Dickens centre. Its first owner, naval official Sir Peter Buck, was responsible for the ornate plaster ceilings displaying his family's coat of arms, an expression of wealth and status in the 16th century. It is possible that Sir Buck was once the richest man in Rochester.

From the top floor of this preserved house, I am told that Sir Buck would have been able to see Chatham Dockyard. The view is now hidden by a block of flats, but the dockyard's significance in Medway is certainly not obscure. It was a major support to the Royal Navy for over 400 years and played a crucial role in Britain's maritime history. This is where Admiral Nelson's flagship, the *HMS Victory*, was built for the Battle of Trafalgar. By the 18th century, Chatham Dockyard was Britain's principal shipbuilding and repair yard. Yet revolutions in naval design meant new ships became too large to build in Chatham. Therefore, the dockyard constructed submarines during the Cold War. Now it is a relic and a museum, the most complete and best-preserved dockyard of the age of sail in the

world, and home to many businesses. Victorian Pump House No.5, for example, is used by the gin distillery Copper Rivet.

PRESERVING THE PAST

On a stroll through the Vines, a small park in Rochester, I notice the tree trunk carved into a figure of a monk has disappeared. The carving referred to the monks who used the land to grow a vineyard. I am told that the old trunk became too unstable and was moved to a corner of the park to become a habitat for stag beetles. The park is where Dickens was last seen in Rochester, three days before his death. I walked along the path and found Restoration House, supposedly the setting of Miss Havisham's home in *Great Expectations*. Havisham was a tragic character who, after being left heartbroken at the altar, kept everything in her home exactly the same from her wedding day until she died a lonely old woman. In a way, Rochester is like Havisham's house. A place frozen in time, from its cobble-stoned streets to the multiple timber-framed façades. There are few buildings here that are not listed.

But Havisham's attempts were in vain. As the demise of the wooden monk I used to sit by as a teenager proves, things change. I certainly have, and so has my perception of Rochester after delving into its history. Originally knowing only of Dickens' residence here was not a limited view, it is what Rochester is celebrated

Above, left: Eastgate House, Rochester, the setting of some of Dickens' books

Above, right: Chatham Dockyard

Right, top left: The Maze in the garden at Restoration House

Right, top right: Plaque at Restoration House

Right: Interior of Restoration House

(All images: Medway Council)



for biannually. It a source of great pride, enough to preserve the city as close to how the author viewed it during his life. Indeed, on some street corners you almost expect a man with a scraggly beard, top hat and cane to stroll by on a daily walk. But Rochester has far more stories to tell than Pip's road to fortune, Edwin Drood's disappearance or Pickwick's travels. There are many true stories, far more than I have recounted, to be found in the depths of the river, on the walls of the Cathedral, at the top of Rochester Castle and beyond to the rest of Medway. Listening to the tales this city can tell, I am proud to say that my own history, my own story, as a local can become part of it. TT



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