

Dickens Town Trail

To mark the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Dickens House Museum, we invite you to follow in the footsteps of Charles Dickens. The world-famous author spent almost two years in Broadstairs – writing, reading, rambling and relaxing in his favourite English watering place.



“It is the brightest day you ever saw. The sun is sparkling on the sea so I can hardly bear to look at it . . . Upon the green-topped cliffs the corn is cut and piled in shocks and thousands of butterflies are fluttering about . . .”

Dickens writing from Broadstairs to a friend in 1841

Author's 25-year love affair with Broadstairs



1838 print of Broadstairs as Charles Dickens, his family and friends would have known it.

Broadstairs is a very different place from when Dickens first stayed here in 1837. Then it was a fishing village with a population fewer than 1,500, and cows grazed on the clifftops above the bay.

Dickens was 25 and already famous when he rented the cottage at 12 High Street. Here, under the pseudonym Boz, he wrote chapters of his first novel *The Pickwick Papers*. Over the next 25 years he visited Broadstairs a further 19 times, with his last visit in 1862, and wrote parts of 9 of his 15 novels here.

But it wasn't just a place of work – it was a place for family fun too. All but one of his nine surviving children played on Broadstairs' sands, paddling in the sea and collecting shells, just as youngsters can still do today.

Dickens stayed in at least five other premises, as well as at 12 High Street. These include Fort House (now Bleak House), Lawn House (now Archway House) and the Albion Hotel (now Royal Albion Hotel).

Did you know?

Six pubs in the heart of Broadstairs which were known to Charles Dickens are still serving beer today. They are the Prince Albert and The Crown in the High Street; the George Inn and the Dolphin Inn in Albion Street; and Neptune's Hall and the Tartar Frigate in Harbour Street.

Dickens, Aunt Betsey & the Dickens House Museum

It was at Broadstairs that Dickens found the inspiration for one of his most popular characters, Betsey Trotwood.

What is now the Dickens House Museum was once the cliff-top home of Mary Pearson Strong, an elderly spinster who Dickens knew well from his many visits to the village.

Whilst writing his eighth novel, *David Copperfield*, in Broadstairs in 1849, he based much of the character of David's great aunt Betsey on the eccentric Miss Strong. (See No 1 of trail on next page).

The house, virtually unaltered since Dickens enjoyed tea in the parlour with Miss Strong, was left to the local council on the condition it became a museum celebrating the novelist's important links with Broadstairs.

Two years later, on Saturday 16 June 1973, Dickens House was officially opened as a museum by the novelist's great-grandson, Peter Dickens.



A postcard of Dickens House



1

Our trail starts and ends at the **Dickens House Museum**. This was once the home of Mary Pearson Strong, an eccentric spinster who waged a personal vendetta against the local donkey boys. The cheeky lads, who offered penny rides, would cut across Miss Strong's garden, causing her to rush out of the house, wielding an umbrella or broomstick, to chase both the animals and their startled riders from her flower beds.

The Dickenses had come to know Miss Strong well and were invited to afternoon tea where they would witness the comic donkey dust-ups.

In 1849, whilst in Broadstairs writing his novel *David Copperfield*, Dickens transformed Miss Strong into one of his best loved characters, David's donkey-hating Aunt Betsey Trotwood. Today the parlour of the house looks very much as it did in Dickens' day and as he described it in his favourite book.

2

Three doors down from the museum is the **Charles Dickens Bar & Restaurant**. From the late 1700s, these buildings housed the **Broadstairs Assembly Rooms and Royal Kent Library**.

When Dickens first stayed in Broadstairs in 1837 he and his wife spent six shillings (£25 today) for a fortnight's subscription to the library.

On a later holiday in 1859, Dickens went with a friend to a mesmerism show at the Assembly Rooms. The act, performed by a teenage girl called the ‘Infant Magnet’, was such a disaster that the two men, seated in the near empty salon, *pictured right*, struggled to contain their laughter.

3

Across the road from the pub, on the corner, is **7 Victoria Parade (formerly 1 Chandos Place)**. The Dickens family stayed here for two months in 1848 whilst the author planned his fifth and final Christmas book, *The Haunted Man*. The building is now apartments.



4

Head for the High Street and seek out **No 29** (opposite the Prince Albert pub). In 1837 it was **No 12 High Street** and was Dickens’ first lodgings in Broadstairs. The original cottage, *pictured left*, was demolished in 1957 and replaced by a row of shops which today bears a plaque marking the original location. This holiday was cut short after 12 days following a burglary at the Dickensens’ London home.

5

The Royal Albion Hotel (formerly the original Albion Hotel, and Nos 38, 39 and 40 Albion Street).

In 1839 Dickens rented No 40, *pictured right*, which would later be swallowed up by the adjoining hotel. It was here, on 20 September 1839, that he completed his third novel, *Nicholas Nickleby*.

As he sat in the first-floor window of what is now the hotel’s bedroom 15, he wrote in his diary: “*Finished Nickleby this day at 2 o’clock . . . thank God. I have got through it happily.*”

During his stay, a local cook he’d hired (until his own arrived from London) became drunk and abusive, lay down on the front doorstep and refused to budge. A policeman was called to remove her!



6

Dickens lodged at **14 Albion Street (then No 37)** in 1840 and again in 1847. Today it is the **Posillipo Italian Restaurant**, pictured right. Here he wrote chapters of *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840) and *Dombey & Son* (1847).



One evening at the end of August 1847, Hans Christian Andersen, the famous Danish writer of fairy tales, including *The Ugly Duckling*, and *The Emperor's New Clothes*, dined with the Dickenses here.

During the evening, an Italian organ grinder played in the street outside the house. Andersen recalled how Dickens, (having learnt some Italian during a four-month holiday to Italy in 1844), spoke to the street performer in his own language. The man's face "*beamed with joy at hearing his own mother tongue.*"

7

Continue down Albion Street passing the Balmoral Gardens and Dickens Walk, and turn right into Harbour Street. Approximately half-way down on the left you will find a charming square. Here you will find **Archway House (formerly Lawn House,) 19 Harbour Street**, pictured left.

The Dickens family stayed here in 1840 when the author was writing *The Old Curiosity Shop*. A plaque on the wall claims he also wrote part of *Barnaby Rudge* here the following year. This is a bit of a mystery because recent research shows he actually penned *Barnaby Rudge* whilst staying in Albion Street in 1841.

8

Pass under the archway and follow the path, keeping to the left, until you reach **Bleak House, Fort Road (formerly Fort House)**.

Dickens rented it for a total of 31 weeks in 1850 and 1851. Here he wrote the concluding chapters of *David Copperfield* and his affectionate essay on Broadstairs, *Our English Watering Place*. The house is much larger than in Dickens' time; in 1901 it was extended and became a gentlemen's club.



But the older part of the building, including the first-floor bay window where Dickens set up his writing desk, still remains, pictured above.

9

From Bleak House, retrace your steps slightly and turn left to follow the path down to the ancient **harbour and pier**, which Dickens knew intimately.

He preferred to travel to Broadstairs by the London-Ramsgate steam boat. As the paddle steamer passed Broadstairs, and if the sea was calm, local boatmen would row out to fetch the Dickenses and their luggage and land them on the pier.

One stormy night in September 1839, Dickens and his brother lay beneath an upturned boat at the end of the pier whilst waves crashed over them. He told a friend: *“Fred (who is here) and I, staggered down to the pier and creeping under the lee of a large boat which was high and dry, watched [the waves] breaking for nearly an hour . . . we came back wet through, but it was most superb.”*

10

Walk back along the pier and turn left into Harbour Street, then left again, along Eldon Place, and onto the clifftop promenade. Along here you will find **Chiappini’s ice-cream parlour and coffee shop, 1 The Parade (formerly Crampton’s Baths)**. When the weather was bad, or Dickens felt unwell, he would take a cold-water shower at the baths instead of swimming in the sea. Writing from Broadstairs in 1859, he said: *“My cold is so bad . . . I can’t bathe in the sea . . . but I get a heavy shower-bath at Mrs. Crampton’s every morning.”* The Cramptons were the parents of eminent Victorian engineer Thomas Crampton who installed the first piped water and gas supplies in Broadstairs.

11

Continue along the clifftops until you spot a digital discovery plaque on the railings with the wording ‘What the Dickens!’. Simply follow the link to discover more about Dickens and how Broadstairs inspired him.



Did you know?

In 1901 Dickens’ son Henry visited Fort House (now Bleak House), the family’s old holiday home in Broadstairs. The Coventry Evening Telegraph reported he was overcome when he saw a weather-beaten pole propped in a tree. *“There is the old swing where my father used to swing us when we were boys!”* he exclaimed.

Why not return to the Dickens House Museum and Gift Shop for a guided tour?



Opening times

Spring: Friday 7 April to Sunday 16 July - Wednesdays to Sundays

Summer: Wednesday 19 July to Sunday 3 September - Open daily

Autumn: Wednesday 6 September to Sunday 29 October - Wednesdays to Sundays
1pm to 4.30pm (last admission 4pm)

Admission prices

Adult: £4

Child: £2

Family: (2 adults, 2 children), £10

Concession: (student or those unable to access upstairs), £3

Dickens House Museum

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