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The Beginning of Dickens: Hampshire, England

This article was written by Elizabeth Whitmore

When I woke up, I whacked my head on the underside of a thatch roof. It was a deceptively hard surface. It was June, and I was in a little Hampshire cottage, having come to England for the first time to visit family. The mornings were bright, damp, and smelled of warm toast and clematis vines.

After a breakfast of Twinings tea, strawberries, and scones, I embarked on an afternoon of exploring the countryside. The mission was simple. As an American writer I was raised on a healthy diet of British literature, and this was my opportunity to find the England that I had known for years in *Jane Eyre*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and most importantly, the novels of Charles Dickens. *Great Expectations*, *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield*, and the other countless tales of gents, dandies, and self-made gentlemen beckoned me deep into England.



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Reading Dickens developed my earliest ideas of English life as a high school student in Texas. In my imagination, England was a tiny country (the whole thing about the size of Dallas) of misty marshes and ominous storms that rage while villagers huddle around their hearths and nibble on their rations of bread-and-butter.

I was expecting an uncanny replication of the bleak moors that appear in Dickens novels on this first visit to his native Hampshire. What I discovered was farther from my assumptions, despite the fact that Heathrow airport is a place of dreary sorts. Rather than festering black filth of Dickens' factories, I found southern England startlingly fresh, dewy and green. To the contemplative eye, everything is picturesque, from the fragrant woodlands down to the white china



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Charles Dickens was born on February 7, 1812 to the young Elizabeth and John Dickens. Though the couple already had one daughter, Fanny, they were still lively and energetic--so much so that Elizabeth gave birth to Charles only a few hours after she came home from a night of parties and dancing. While John and Elizabeth were loving parents, they were also financially irresponsible, which caused their family life to become a tumultuous series of frequent moves, new jobs, and varying incomes. In the early nineteenth century, the Dickens family would have been considered lower-middle-class, and they always walked a fine line between glitz and poverty. John and

Elizabeth worked hard to keep up appearances while also staying out of debt (which they were unable to do).

Little Charles' first few years were spent in Portsmouth, Hampshire. He was born at 393 Old Commercial Road, where the Dickens Birthplace Museum resides today. The house is a beautiful timepiece, fully restored to the era of the Napoleonic Wars. It is easy to imagine the frivolous parties of John and Elizabeth, the sweet nursery of Fanny and Charles as toddlers, and the endless household chores necessary for the upkeep of a home in 1809.

To visit the Dickens birthplace is to fall into a time of pleasures and happiness, when John and Elizabeth were still somewhat carefree, and their children only concerned with playthings and nursery rhymes. As one can imagine, little Charles was actually so good at his rhymes that when he was a mere toddler John would take him down to the local pub, where he would stand Charles up on the bar and let his son entertain guests with comical songs. Little could anyone guess that the tiny boy making up songs would grow up to be a literary rockstar of the Victorian era, famous in both Europe and America.

Leaving 393 Old Commercial Road and stepping back onto High Street is a jarring step across two centuries, so I softened the blow by walking to a tea shop, whereupon I dined on a clotted cream tea--a scrumptious little meal of tea, fresh scones, butter, jam, and Devonshire clotted cream. I find British scones alone to be worth the cost of transatlantic airfare.

As a novelist and journalist Dickens grew to epitomize London, much in the way that Joyce dominates Dublin and J.K. Rowling reigns over Edinburgh. Of course I had to spend a few days in London during my English vacation, so from Hampshire I hopped aboard the South West Train Service and was briskly delivered to Waterloo Station on the South Bank. The commute from rural Hampshire to the heart of London is an exciting transition, an effortless switch between country and metropolis. After stepping out of Waterloo, the magnificence of London chimes from every square, every bridge and every steeple. The crowds are a modern, but just as colorful as those described by Dickens. All at once, one is surrounded by businessmen, art students, street performers, tourists, policemen, trendy teenagers, pub-crawling scoundrels, delivery boys, hawkers, and vendors. London is still as vibrant as it was over a hundred years ago in Dickens' time, but the city has also changed significantly.

In the nineteenth century, London was one of the largest cities in the world with a population that boomed from one million in 1800 to over six million by the turn of the century. The city was foul with a milieu of life and death; it was not beautiful as it is today. Buildings were blackened by soot and the streets were covered with a thick layer of manure, household waste, rotten food, and garbage. The profusion of Victorian perfumes, nosegays and potpourris were not merely a lady's luxury, but a necessity. The city was rank with scum, yet this

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

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chaotic cesspool of humanity is what spawned the timeless tales of Dickens, who would wander the streets of London for hours while developing plots and characters in his mind.

I wandered through London, trying to be spontaneous without missing the crucial attractions: St. Paul's, the British Museum, Covent Garden, Trafalgar Square, the Tate Britain and the Tate Modern. I kept an eye out for what I would describe as Dickensian. There are the acres of chimney-pots and dark cobblestone streets, but it is the crowds and pedestrians that remind me most of Dickens' novels. London was Dickens' primary inspiration, to the point where all other locations in his novels pale in comparison. The countryside is always a generic place of meadows and hills, while London is the wellspring of the universe, the spigot from which all life and revelry spews.



On the train back to Hampshire from London, I watched the green hills roll by and could imagine Dickens vivid characters living in the lanes and gardens. While Dickens rarely left his London home to visit the country in both his personal life and his writing (he made one trip to Portsmouth to research *Nicholas Nickleby*), it is fair to speculate that Hampshire, like London, had a fair amount of influence over Dickens' characters and England's national identity in his novels.

Today, it is not London, but the English countryside that transports me into Dickens' world. Of all Dickens' novels, only a few--*The Life and Adventures of*

Nicholas Nickleby and *Hard Times*--take place in rural England. London today is a dynamic, multicultural urban center while Hampshire and other rural counties are closer to the time of Tiny Tim, *Oliver Twist*, and *Little Dorrit*.

London's streets are no longer full of horses and carriages (with the exception of an occasional mounted policeman), but Hampshire's New Forest, an ancient park established by William the Conqueror, is populated by herds of wild ponies that clip-clop into villages like Beaulieu, Burley, and Buckler's Hard. I took walks through the New Forest and paused to watch these serene herds. The ponies are shy, but they were not easily spooked. I often spotted them leaning on mailboxes or poking their heads over garden fences. They are all privately owned and managed, and run wild alongside herds of donkeys, Highland Cattle, and Shetland ponies. Walking through the New Forest and imagining the countless amounts of English writers that have enjoyed these woodlands before me was a lovely, and humbling, experience.

As a child, Dickens was fortunate enough to live in a home where creativity was encouraged, even nurtured. As an old man and established writer, he would write in his periodical, *All the Year Round*, of his astonishment at "the quantity of places and people--utterly impossible places and people, but none the less alarmingly real--that I found I had been introduced to by my nurse before I was six years old." These foundational first years spent in Hampshire, tended by nursemaids who spun entertaining tales, is as fine of a start as any writer could hope to have within the massive realm of English literature. The atmosphere of Dickens' quaint childhood is an Edenic shire that writers and travelers can still discover in the twenty-first century.

As an American, I was not brazen enough to try driving on the opposite side of the road, so I took the train down to Hampshire's coast to look for the exquisite scenery that everyone promised me I would find. The seaside towns of Hampshire still have the authenticity of Dickens' coastal scenes, such as Magwitch's escape attempt in *Great Expectations*. Larger towns such as Bournemouth and Portsmouth offer coastal boardwalks with ferris wheels, cafes, and cold, pristine beaches. The cliffs around Milton-on-Sea and Barton-on-Sea,

two small Hampshire villages, are some of the most impressive views in the whole county.



To experience Hampshire's best scenery, which was popularized by Queen Victoria herself, I took the ferry from Lymington to the Isle of Wight. Victoria's beautiful Osborne House, a summer holiday retreat, is located here and is open to the public. This small island mimics the austere rural beauty that Dickens emphasized: misty marshes, rolling fields, and thick, dark

fog from the sea. It is in this breathtaking British haven that I could think of no better way to spend an afternoon than by settling into a beach chair with a cup of Earl Grey and re-reading *Great Expectations*.

Of all the Hampshire villages that I visited, Lymington became a fast favorite. A small but sociable village, this little town sits near the Solent and has a miniature Dickensian vibe. While in Lymington, I suggest to visit the quay (pronounced "kee") and stop at the Angel Inn, a thirteenth century coaching inn that serves delicious contemporary cuisine in an ancient dining space. If you are looking for a heartier country meal, as I was, go up to the Hare and Hounds pub in Sway for a pint and some bangers 'n' mash.

As I continued on journeys across England, Wales, and Scotland, I was able to compare Hampshire to its neighboring regions. The more I saw of Britain, the more I thought of Hampshire as a starkly English region, the ideal destination for the discriminating traveler in search of charming villages and the raw, natural beauty of wooded hills and heaths. The enchantment of Hampshire's landscape is its preservation, and how the New Forest, the Winchester Cathedral, and the village streets echo the voice of Charles Dickens and all of the English authors that came before and after him.

Elizabeth Whitmore is a Los Angeles writer and graduate student at Loyola Marymount University. Her website is: www.elizabethwhitmore.com

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