

Charles John Huffam Dickens and Dover

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I am sure that every member of The Dover Society will be familiar with the novels by Charles Dickens, having read some of them or seen films or TV series based on them. Perhaps not so many will be aware of what Dickens had to say about Dover, either in his books or elsewhere. The Society commemorated, with one of our blue plaques, Dickens' three months stay in Dover in 1852 at 10 Camden Crescent when working on *Bleak House*. But he passed through the town many times to and from the continent.

With the completion of the railway line from London via Folkestone to Dover, Dickens took the train for the first time in 1851 and in the magazine *Household Words* compared it with his journeys from London by road on the mail coach. He was very pleased with the rail experience, marvelling at leaving London Bridge station and arriving in Paris in only 11 hours, compared with 22 long, weary hours by coach. In 1857, again in *Household Words*, he describes a trip from



Portrait of Dickens, by Jeremiah Gurney

London to Dover and back, standing on the footplate of the steam engine! He left London at 8.30pm, spent the night at the Lord Warden Hotel, returning at 8.30am. Dickens described the entrance to Shakespeare Tunnel as like 'a pair of upright letterbox slits, developing on nearer approach to a monastery doorway apparently'.

During his 1852 stay in Camden Crescent he liked to visit Pilot Field (by the present Adrian Street) and rest in the sunshine. Writing to Mary Boyle from Camden Crescent, Dickens commented, 'It is not quite a place to my taste, being too bandy (I mean musical, no reference to its legs) and infinitely too genteel! But the sea is fine, and the walks are quite remarkable'. It seems that Dickens was not so keen on noisy, band music, since he made the same comment about Broadstairs.

As for describing Dover as too genteel, a description of the Pier District in *A Tale of Two Cities* is less complimentary: 'The little, narrow, crooked town of Dover hid itself away from the beach and ran its head into the chalk cliffs, like a marine ostrich. The beach was a desert of heaps of sea and stones tumbling wildly about, and the sea did what it liked and what it liked was destruction. It thundered at the town and thundered at the cliffs and brought the coast down madly. The air among the houses was of so strong a piscatory flavour that one might have supposed sick fish went up to be dipped in it. A little fishing was done in the port and a quantity of strolling about by night, and looking seaward, particularly at those times when the tide made and was near flood. Small tradesmen who did no business whatever, sometimes unaccountably realised large fortunes, and it was remarkable that

nobody in the neighbourhood could endure a lamplighter.' Was Dickens suggesting that smuggling was going on in Dover of all places?

Dickens stayed at the Lord Warden Hotel again for a while in 1861 and wrote to Wilkie Collins stating, 'It is very beautiful here. I can work well and walked by the cliffs to Folkestone and back today, when it was so exquisitely beautiful that, although I was alone, I could not keep silence on the subject.'

Rough weather during his stays in Dover obviously made a big impression on Dickens. He described a storm he endured: 'The bad weather has not in the least touched us, and the storm was most magnificent at Dover. All the great side of the Lord Warden next the sea had to be emptied, the break of the waves was so prodigious, and the noise so utterly confounding. The sea came in like a great sky of immense clouds, forever breaking suddenly into furious rain; all kinds of wreck were washed in, among other things a very pretty brass-bound chest being thrown about like a feather. The unhappy Ostend packet, unable to get in or go back, beat about the Channel all Tuesday night, and until noon yesterday, when I saw her come in, with five men at the wheel, a picture of misery inconceivable.'

In *The Uncommercial Traveller* he has more to say about rough weather at Dover: 'The sea makes noises against the pier, as if several hippopotami were lapping at it, and were prevented by circumstances over which they had no control from drinking peaceably.'

And again in one very long sentence: 'There the sea was rumbling in, with deep sounds after dark and the revolving French light on Cap Gris Nez was seen regularly bursting out and becoming obscured, as if the head of a

giant light-keeper in an anxious state of mind were interposed every half minute, to look how it was burning.'

On one occasion Dickens seems to be in a bad mood waiting on the packet boat for the mail train to arrive and wrote: 'Dover always goes to bed when I am going to Calais with a more brilliant display of lamp and candle than any other town. Mr. and Mrs. Birmingham, host and hostess of the Lord Warden Hotel, are my much-esteemed friends, but they are too conceited about the comforts of that establishment when the Night Mail is starting. I know it is a good house to stay at, and I don't want the fact insisted upon in all its warm bright windows at such an hour as I wait here on board the night packet for the South Eastern train to come with the Mail. Dover appears to me to be illuminated for some intensely aggravating festivities in my personal dishonour. All its noises smack of taunting praises of the land, and dispraises of the gloomy sea, and of me for going on it. The drums upon the heights have gone to bed, or I know they would rattle against me for having my unsteady footing upon this slippery deck. The many gas eyes of the Marine Parade twinkle in an offensive manner, as if with derision.'

Finally, in *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens describes conditions on the Dover Road, travelling by Mail Coach when even the turnpiked roads' conditions were pretty bad. Consequently, it was a great relief to be warmly welcomed at The Royal George Hotel in Dover.

As Leslie Smith, author of *Stories of Dover and the Grand Tour*, wrote: 'These glimpses of old Dover from the pen of Dickens are probably the best we have from anybody.'

Source:

Stories of Dover and the Grand Tour by Leslie Smith, published in 1981.