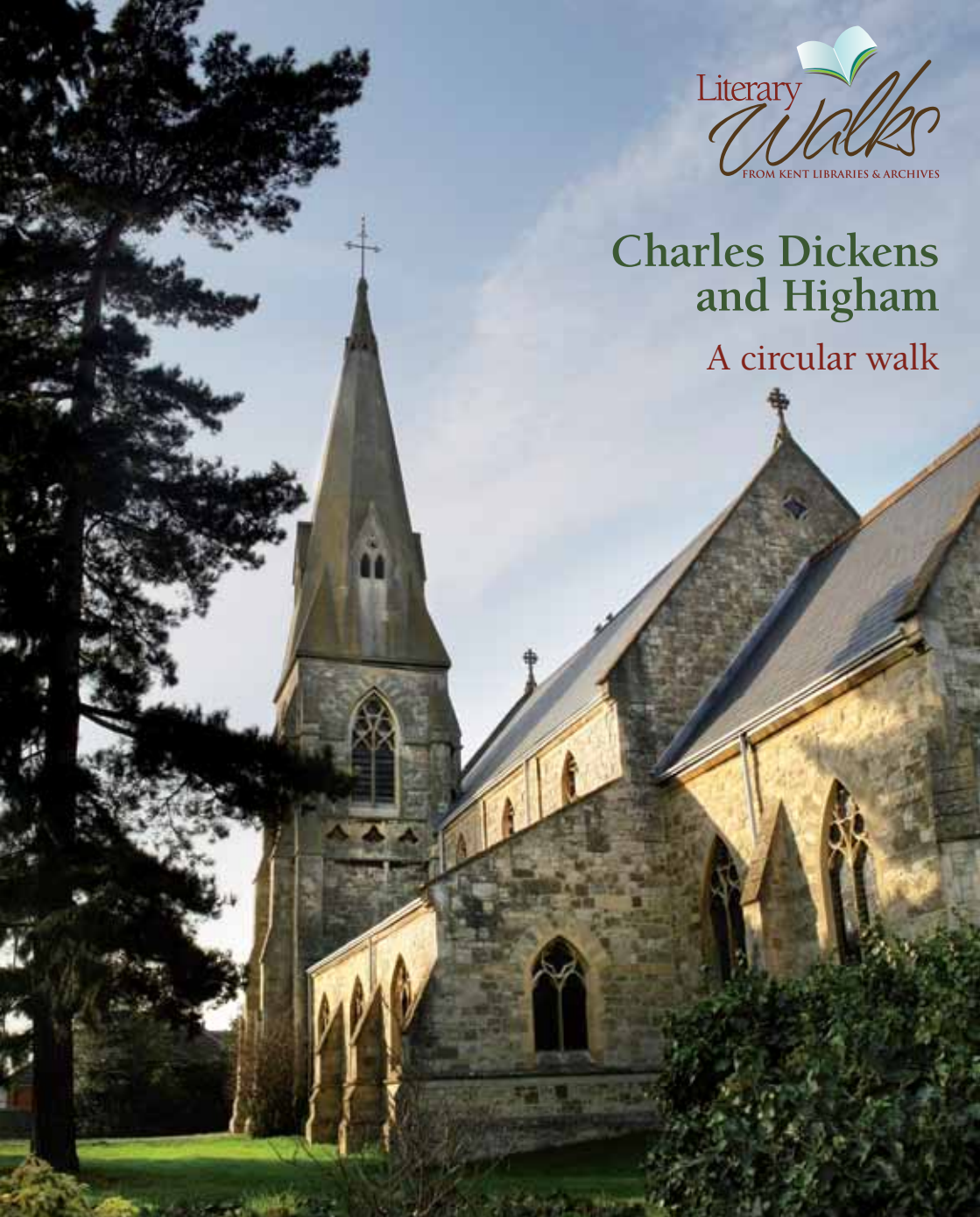
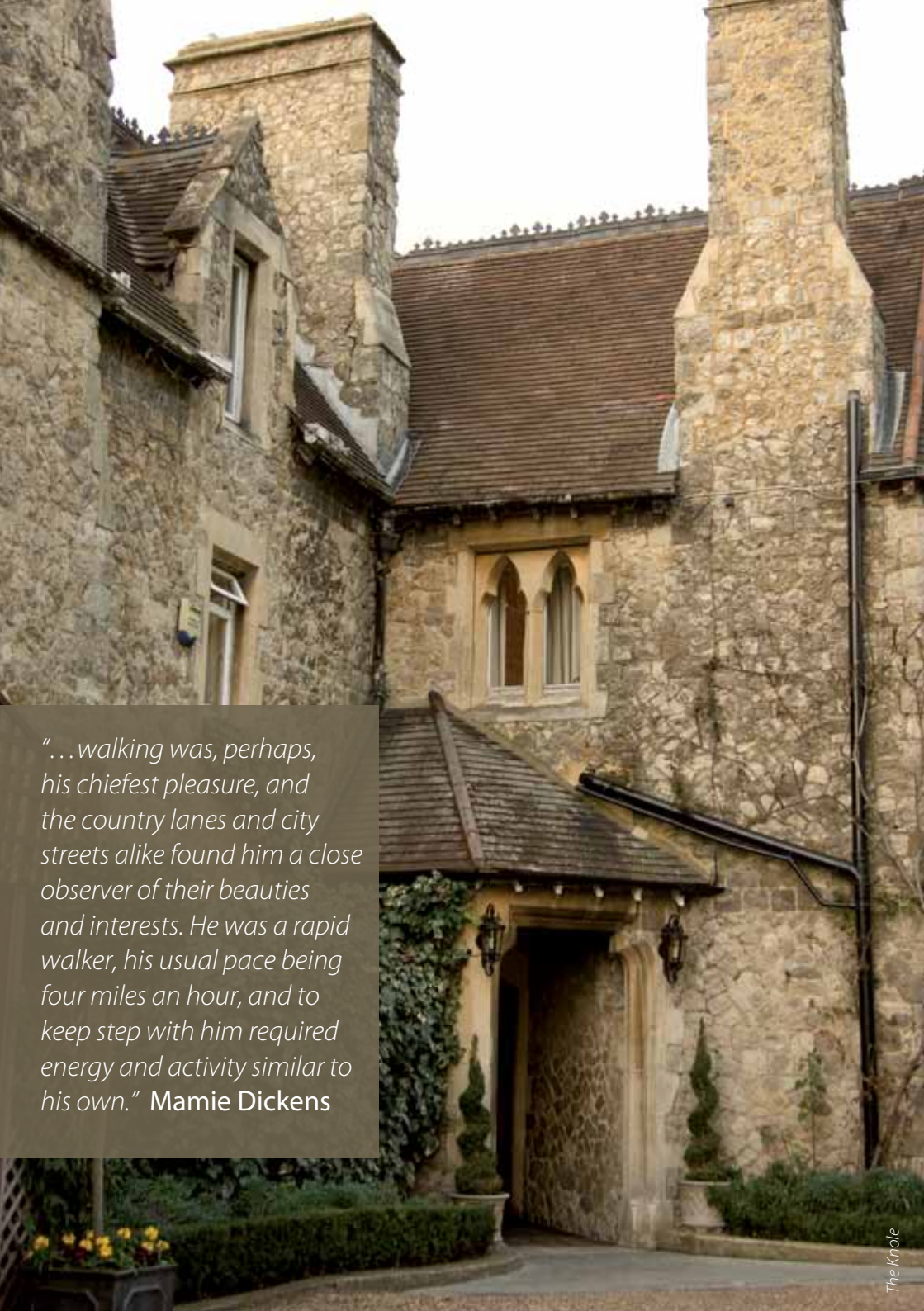


Charles Dickens and Higham

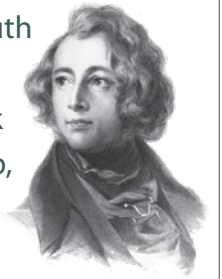
A circular walk





“... walking was, perhaps, his chiefest pleasure, and the country lanes and city streets alike found him a close observer of their beauties and interests. He was a rapid walker, his usual pace being four miles an hour, and to keep step with him required energy and activity similar to his own.” **Mamie Dickens**

Charles John Huffam Dickens was born in Portsmouth on the 7th of February 1812 to John and Elizabeth Dickens, the 2nd of 8 children. John was a pay clerk in the Royal Navy and the family moved with his job, coming to Chatham when Charles was 5 years old.



Dickens was so inspired by what he found in Kent that he returned here for the last years of his life. Many people and places in his novels have Kentish roots. The marshland around this area lent itself to the vivid opening of *Great Expectations*.

Dickens was a dedicated walker. 12 miles was an average daily walk. He would walk in all weathers, turning ideas over in his mind.

This walk covers 6.6 miles and includes places & landmarks that Dickens would have known well.

1 Arrivals

It is unlikely that Dickens would have chosen to live at Gad's Hill Place had Higham lacked a railway station. Regular railway travel was vital to Dickens. Even his traumatic experience of the Staplehurst railway crash on the 9th of June 1865 did not curtail this.

Dickens would often walk or ride down to Higham Railway Station to greet visitors to Gad's Hill Place on their arrival in Higham.

From the entrance road to Higham Railway Station, turn right and cross the railway bridge. Take the footpath on the right which leads over open fields. Follow the path until you reach a track, (The Landway.) Turn right and head uphill past White House Farm.

2 Building a new life

Dickens's early life was happy, but his father John was careless with money and fell into debt. In 1823 John was compelled to put his son Charles to work in Warren's blacking factory near the Strand, pasting labels onto bottles of boot polish for 6 shillings a week. Dickens felt the indignity keenly. Only a few days after Dickens began his factory life his father served 3 months in the Marshalsea Prison for unpaid debts.

Dickens's intense drive for personal success was in reaction to these childhood experiences. He bought Gad's Hill Place, not only as a home but also to mark his achievements.

My father, seeing me so fond of it, has often said to me, 'If you were to be very persevering and were to work hard, you might some day come to live in it.'



Clerks Cottage



Gads Hill Place c1900

Gads Hill Place was leased to Joseph Hindle (the vicar of Higham from 1829 to 1874.) Dickens allowed him to remain there until Hindle's newly built house, 'The Knowle' was ready.

Shortly after the farm, take the path bearing right across the field with St John's Church in front of you. Upon reaching the field edge, turn left alongside allotments and then right along Hermitage Road.

3 Shrinking the Sunday walk

Joseph Hindle was conscious that his church was almost 2 miles away from the growing communities of Mid & Upper Higham. He paid for the building of St John's Church on Hermitage Road. The church was consecrated in January 1862.

As residents of Upper Higham, The Dickens family began to attend St John's Church in preference to St Mary's. The family had a pew in the chancel.

Christopher Cay, the curate of St John's Church, benefited from Dickens' "practice and experience" as a famous public reader. Dickens advised him that "reading more from the chest and less from the throat"

would ensure "audibility in reading to a congregation."

After passing the church, turn left on to Forge Lane.

You will find Higham Library on your right, next door to the Gardeners Arms.

4 Reading Dickens

200 years since his birth, Charles Dickens remains the most popular novelist in the English language. His books are read around the world and the characters he described – Ebenezer Scrooge, Miss Havesham, Mr Pickwick – full of the life and energy of their creator, are immortal.

To find out more about Charles Dickens & his written works visit Higham Library.

As you enter the library you will see a framed large scale map of Higham to the left of the door. The map is dated 1864 so the streets, buildings and landmarks of Dickens' day are recorded.

Leaving the Library, continue down Forge Lane to the end of the road and turn left.

5 A Writer's refuge

In 1864, the actor Charles Fechter gave Dickens a Swiss chalet as a Christmas present. The chalet was delivered to Gad's Hill, via Higham Railway station, in 58 boxes. It was assembled across the road from Gad's Hill Place in the area that Dickens referred to as 'the shrubbery'. In May 1868 he wrote: "The place is lovely, and in perfect order. I have put five mirrors in the Swiss chalet (where I write) and they reflect and refract in all kinds of ways the leaves that are quivering at the windows, and the great fields of waving corn, and the sail-dotted river.

My room is up among the branches of the trees; and the birds and the butterflies fly in and out, and the green branches shoot in, at the open windows, and the lights and shadows of the clouds come and go with the rest of the company. The scent of the flowers, and indeed of everything that is growing for miles and miles, is most delicious."

Here Dickens worked on Great Expectations, A Tale of Two Cities, Our Mutual Friend, The Uncommercial Traveller and The Mystery of Edwin Drood.

In 1859, a tunnel was built under the road so Dickens could cross to his chalet unimpeded by traffic. In the 1960s, the chalet was moved to the garden of Eastgate House in Rochester, which was fictionalised as the Westgate House Establishment for Young Ladies in The Pickwick Papers and the Nun's House in The Mystery of Edwin Drood.

Please note that The Wilderness is private property.

6 Dickens's dream house

"A mansion of dull red brick, with a little weathercock-surmounted cupola on the roof, and a bell hanging in it."
A Christmas Carol

As a boy, Charles would walk with his father to Gad's Hill, famous as the location of Falstaff's failed attempt at highway robbery in Shakespeare's Henry IV Part I. Dickens recalled his early fascination with Gad's Hill Place in The Uncommercial Traveller:

*"You admire that house?" said I.
"Bless you, sir," said the very queer small boy, "when I was not more than half as old as nine, it used to be a treat for me to be brought to look at it. And now, I am nine, I come by myself to look at it. And ever since I can recollect,*



my father, seeing me so fond of it, has often said to me, 'If you were to be very persevering and were to work hard, you might some day come to live in it.'

Dickens paid for the house on the 14th of March 1856. His son Charley recalled the purchase: *"We inspected the premises as well as we could from the outside – my father, full of pride at his new position as a Kentish freeholder. . . and we lunched at the Falstaff Inn opposite, and walked to Gravesend to dinner, full of delightful anticipation of the country life to come."*

Please note that Gad's Hill School is private property.

7 A merry man

Dickens's guests often stayed at the Falstaff Inn when Gad's Hill ran out of room. The landlord was called Trood, which may have given Dickens the name of Edwin Drood for his last novel.

Dickens loved organising elaborate entertainments and wrote to his friend William Macready in 1866: *"You will be interested in knowing that, encouraged by the success of summer cricket-matches, I got up a quantity of*

foot-races and rustic sports in my field here. . . As I have never yet had a case of drunkenness, the landlord of The Falstaff had a drinking-booth on the ground. . . We had two thousand people here.



St Johns Falstaff

Among the crowd were soldiers, navvies, and labourers of all kinds. . . There was not a dispute all day, and they went away at sunset rending the air with cheers. . ."

Immediately after The Sir John Falstaff Inn, take Telegraph Hill, and follow up and down hill to the end of the road. Turn right along Hermitage Road.

To visit the Larkin monument turn right into The Larches, taking the gate at the end of the road.

We ascend to the monument. Stop at the gate. Moon is rising. Heavy shadows. . . Suddenly, as we enter the field, a most extraordinary noise responds...

8 Dickens the man of the world (& ghost hunter!)

Dickens paid attention to current affairs and as a young man worked as a parliamentary reporter. He would have been familiar with the reforms introduced in 1832 by Rochester auctioneer Charles Larkin giving the vote to every householder owning property worth more than 10 pounds. The monument on Telegraph Hill was erected to commemorate Larkin after his death in 1833 and has since been renovated twice.

In 1860 rumour spread that the hill was haunted. Dickens took his young sons ghost-hunting as he wrote to his friend the author Wilkie Collins:

"We ascend to the monument. Stop at the gate. Moon is rising. Heavy shadows. . . Suddenly, as we enter the field, a most extraordinary noise responds terrific noise human noise and yet superhuman noise. . . "Did you hear that, Pa?" says Frank. "I did," says I. Noise repeated portentous, derisive, dull, dismal, damnable. We advance towards the sound. Something white comes lumbering through the darkness. - An asthmatic sheep!"

From The Larches continue along Hermitage Road. Enjoy the great views to either side.

Take the footpath on your left just before Mill Barn. You can see the base of the old windmill. Follow the well defined path straight and cross the road to take the restricted byway. Follow the track straight ahead to another road. Turn right towards Lillechurch and take the footpath opposite the farm entrance. Head across the field passing through kissing gates, when you reach the road, take the track opposite through Oakleigh Nursery & Farm.

When the track splits, take the left-hand fork with St Mary's church spire directly in front of you.

9 Dickens & daughter

At St Mary's church in Higham on 17th July 1860, Katey Dickens married Charles Collins, the brother of Wilkie Collins. The Reverend Joseph Hindle conducted the ceremony. Katey's mother Catherine did not attend the wedding. Dickens had separated from his wife in 1858. (He had begun a secret relationship with the actress Ellen Ternan the previous year.)

The strain of this personal upheaval was felt by the whole of the Dickens family.

In later life Katey Dickens hinted that her first marriage was motivated by a need to escape from an "unhappy home."

St Mary's Church



Dickens arranged for a special train from London to Higham to bring in the wedding guests. Local villagers made floral tributes and crowded round the church yard to cheer the married couple.

Yet Gladys Storey, the author of 'Dickens & Daughter' recorded this anecdote: *"After the last of the guests had departed, Mamie went up to her sister's bedroom. Opening the door, she beheld her father upon his knees with his head buried in Katie's wedding-gown, sobbing. She stood for some moments before he became aware of her presence; when at last he got up and saw her, he said in a broken voice:*

'But for me, Katey would not have left home,' and walked out of the room."

After leaving St Mary's Church, head down Church Street. Shortly after the Black Cottages, take the footpath on the left. Turn right into Bull Lane and left on to Church Street/Chequers Street.

10 "Curious little public-houses - and smithies"

When writing *Great Expectations*, Dickens may well have used Lower Higham as part of the model for Pip's home village. It has a "lonely church, right out on the marshes" and, in Dickens's day, it was a working class village with smithies and pubs. The former Chequers Inn was the hub of Lower Higham, as the Three Jolly Bargemen seems to be in Pip's village.

Continue on Chequers Street, over the railway bridge, and back to Higham Railway Station.

1 Departures

On Tuesday morning 14th June 1870 a special train left Higham railway station for Charing Cross...

Dickens had always enjoyed reading his work to an appreciative public and from the end of 1868 until 15th March 1870, gave a series of "Farewell Readings" Dickens poured all his energy into the performances and put terrible strain on his health. On the 8th June 1870 in the dining room at Gad's Hill Place, Charles Dickens suffered a stroke. He died the next day leaving his final book 'The Mystery of Edwin Drood' unfinished. Although he wished to be buried at Shorne near Gad's Hill, he was laid to rest in Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey.



St Mary's Church



Lower Higham



Gad's Hill



Kent Libraries, Registration & Archives HQ
The Kent History & Library Centre
James Whatman Way
Maidstone ME14 1LQ

Tel: 08458 247200
Email: libraries@kent.gov.uk

The Library is situated in Villa Road, and offers a wide range of services, including books, CDs, DVDs and free internet use. It is easy to join the library, and it is free. See the Kent Libraries & Archives website for further details: www.kent.gov.uk/libraries

There is access to Higham Library through a courtyard from both the Forge Lane and from Villa Road.



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