

# The Charles Dickens Trail

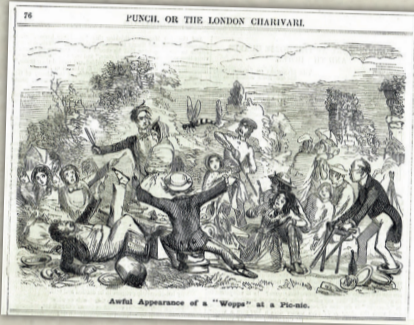
This walking trail was created in 2024 as a tribute to Charles Dickens. The year marked the 175th anniversary of his last visit to the Isle of Wight, when he and his family spent three months across the summer of 1849 on the Island.

The walk uncovers some of the hidden gems connected with his life and starts in Shanklin. He had taken lodgings there on his search for a holiday residence and it was from where he sent an urgent letter to his wife Catherine back in London, telling her he had found the perfect place to stay.



Words spoken by Gerald Dickens

At the top of Shanklin Down, one can see the whole Island from East to West. To the north is Portsmouth - the city of his birth in 1812. In 1838, Dickens and his wife stayed in Alum Bay for a few days before moving to Ventnor. And in 1849, he walked many of these Downs and explored much of the Island including visits to Blackgang, Ryde and Cowes.



Some walks involved family and friends and included great picnics.

One such event was captured by cartoonist John Leech, in which the party had an unwelcome visitor, as depicted in the 'Awful appearance of a 'wopps' at a picnic. The location is believed to be at Cooks Castle, close to the top of Shanklin Down with views to Appuldurcombe House.



Words spoken by Mark Dickens

to the top of St. Boniface Down. He'd then write in the morning before spending the afternoon with his family, either playing rounders on the beach (to which many from Bonchurch village came to spectate) or leading long walks to a favoured picnic spot.

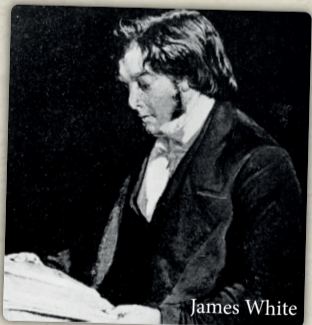


Words spoken by Marion Dickens

## Acquaintances

The Dickens family rented Winterbourne House from its owner The Reverend James White, who lived at nearby Woodlynch. Dickens's two daughters Mamie and Katie became great friends with the Reverend's daughters Lotty and Clara White and they returned to Bonchurch several times - including when they were bridesmaids to Clara at her wedding in the village.

The Dick family lived in Upper Mount - another fine house in the village. Two of the children - Charles Dick and Margaret Dick bringing with them intriguing stories. Charles Dick - the same age as Dickens - is potentially the inspiration for the David Copperfield character of Mr. Dick. The chapters where we meet the curious Mr. Dick were written in Bonchurch, where Dickens changed it from 'Mr. Roberts' - his originally intended name for the character.



James White



Miss Havisham illustration

11 years later, Margaret Dick was due to marry but was jilted at the altar on the day of her wedding. She fled to her nearby home and became a well known recluse. The Dickens daughters had recently been visiting the Island and news of the her plight would surely have been known to Charles. A few months later, he started work on Great Expectations in which Miss Havisham is jilted at her wedding and becomes a recluse.

## Bonchurch

Bonchurch is an old, charming village with a distinct character. It nestles beautifully in rugged terrain leading down to the sea. The 11th century church of St Boniface lies a few meters from

The walk follows the Downs along the top of St. Boniface then down towards the cemetery at Ventnor, where you can see the graves of Charles and Margaret Dick in the top left hand corner. Both are believed to have influenced characters in both David Copperfield and Great Expectations.



The walk passes the Royal Hotel in Ventnor, where Dickens and his wife stayed in 1838. Perhaps their stay here was because the year before, Queen Victoria's new Physician Sir James Clark had recognised the location as an excellent place to recuperate from chest complaints. Dickens had suffered from Asthma as a child and his health was often affected throughout his life.

At sea level, it's a pleasant walk along the coast to Bonchurch. The site of the shower bath mentioned in his letter can be seen on the foreshore - the waterfall was routed from the cliff through a channel to fall inside a contraption similar to a Victorian bathing machine.



Heading up the cliffs in to Bonchurch village, the footpath passes over the fast flowing

stream that still flows from the grounds of Winterbourne House. This was the home where the Dickens family resided for their summer and where chapters of David Copperfield were written.

On Bonchurch Shute, you'll pass Hillside Cottage - where John Leech and family were also holidaying. His iconic illustrations for A Christmas Carol are known the world over. He also produced an illustration for Punch magazine, showing Dickens in his shower bath. It appeared in an early 1849 September edition entitled "Domestic Bliss".



Words spoken by Ian Dickens



## Prolific writer

Charles Dickens brought to life a view of humankind and the societal circumstances that surrounded it during the Victorian period. Indeed, the term Dickensian and Victorian are still used to describe aspects of society.

Dickens wrote 15 novels, five novellas and hundreds of short stories. He also wrote over 14,000 letters and many can be viewed online.



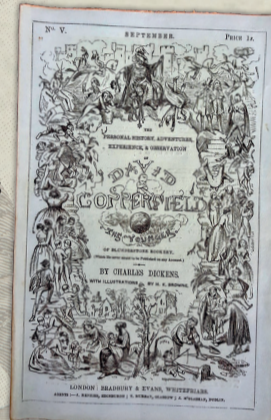
Courtesy of Charles Dickens Museum, London

All of his novels were written in instalments, published in a series of periodicals and were enjoyed like we might enjoy a soap opera now. Readers were often left on a 'cliff hanger' and couldn't wait to pick up the story in the next edition. Each edition contained around 32 pages covering three or four chapters and when the story was complete, the full novel was published in book form.

While on the Isle of Wight, Dickens wrote chapters 7 to 18 of David Copperfield. The novel is hugely autobiographical as it features many aspects of his own life, particularly from his childhood. Having been forced in to child labour after his parents were sent to debtors prison, Dickens worked in Warrens Blacking Factory, sticking labels on to bottles of liquid shoe polish.



He had kept this period of his life a secret and writing about it was very hard for him. So perhaps it was no surprise it was no surprise to read that he described it as his favourite novel. And others, including Leo Tolstoy, agreed.



Words spoken by Harry Whinney



Words spoken by Ollie Dickens

## Isle of Wight visits

Dickens was born across the Solent in Portsmouth on February 7th, 1812. His father John worked in the Pay Office at the Naval dockyard and many of his earliest memories would have been linked to the sea.

He married Catherine Hogarth in 1836 and they went on to have ten children in total. They first visited the Isle of Wight two years later, staying at The Grove Needles Hotel in Alum Bay from 3rd-8th September. They spent a further two days in Ventnor staying at the Ventnor Hotel - now known as the Royal Hotel. His first novel - The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club - was becoming a publishing phenomenon and he was already hard at work on the opening instalments of Oliver Twist and Nicholas Nickleby.

Queen Victoria was an early fan, writing enthusiastically as a teenager about this exciting new writer. When Oliver Twist was published, her Prime Minister warned her not to read it as he thought she would find the content too shocking. But the young Queen ignored him and declared she found the novel 'excessively interesting'. Dickens was highlighting the huge social injustices of the time and wrote so powerfully, those in power listened and were moved by what they read.

By 1849, Dickens had become something of a global superstar and he needed to find somewhere where he could balance the need for privacy, find inspiration and also entertain as the Dickens young enjoyed their summer holiday. With Queen Victoria and Prince Albert establishing Osborne House as a favoured residence, it was no surprise that the great and good of the age also flocked to the Isle of Wight.



Many contemporaries of Dickens came including Alfred Lord Tennyson (God father to Dickens' sixth child, also named Alfred), Thomas Carlyle, William Makepeace Thackeray, artists John Leech, Frank Stone, Augustus Egg and Hablot Knight Browne (who provided the illustrations for David Copperfield). Mark Lemon - editor of Punch magazine - and John Forster, perhaps Dickens' closest friend - were also here, making the Island a veritable 'Who's who' of household names from the period.

While on the Island, Dickens (without his familiar beard) would take a sea swim in the morning, then shower in his specially constructed perpetual shower bath, before walking (Cont.)

All the quotes accessible via the QR codes have been read by descendants of Charles and Catherine Dickens.

Winterbourne. Dickens would have walked down the hill from his holiday home to hear the Rev White deliver sermons at the church.

The Dickens family arrived in the village via a ferry crossing from Portsmouth to Ryde on July 23rd, 1849. They would have taken a horse drawn coach from Ryde Pier, passing through the newly developing towns of Sandown and Shanklin towards Ventnor - all fuelled by the burgeoning popularity of the Island. By then they had eight children, the youngest being Henry Fielding Dickens just six months old.

Dickens approved of the numerous vistas that the Island delivered, the quality of the air, the sea bathing and also the numerous walks on offer.

And if he were to return today, Charles John Huffam Dickens would find that the self same delights are still on offer to families, young and old! We hope you enjoy your walk and will add your own stories to the Island's rich narrative.



Words spoken by Lucinda Dickens Hawksley

## Victorian Ventnor

Sir John Hambrough was a local developer and built many of the properties still seen today. He bought the grounds of Steeple Hill one mile west of Ventnor and constructed Steeple Hill Castle in 1833, a country house with turrets and crenellations. The Royal Hotel was built as a coaching inn in 1832, then known as Fishers Hotel. The Inn also included an Annexe for guests of Sir John Hambrough who were invited to stay.



Guests of the Hotel would often arrive by boat and horses were used to carry luggage up the steep hill. A bathing house was built near the beach at the bottom of Bath Road. (now The Spyglass Inn) Charles and Catherine Dickens were guests at the hotel in 1838 and were captivated by the charm of the Isle of Wight.

Over the years, this historic building became a favoured destination for many European royalty and earned a special place

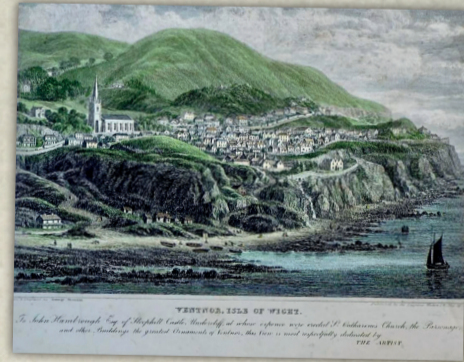


in Queen Victoria's heart during her visits to Ventnor.

Queen Victoria first visited in 1844 on her way to Steeple Hill Castle. During her visit, she enjoyed an afternoon tea in what would become the

Royal Gardens. She returned often, becoming the hotel's most distinguished guest.

In her honour, the hotel was renamed *The Royal Hotel*, marking the beginning of a long tradition of exceptional hospitality for royalty and distinguished visitors alike.



## Explore the Charles Dickens

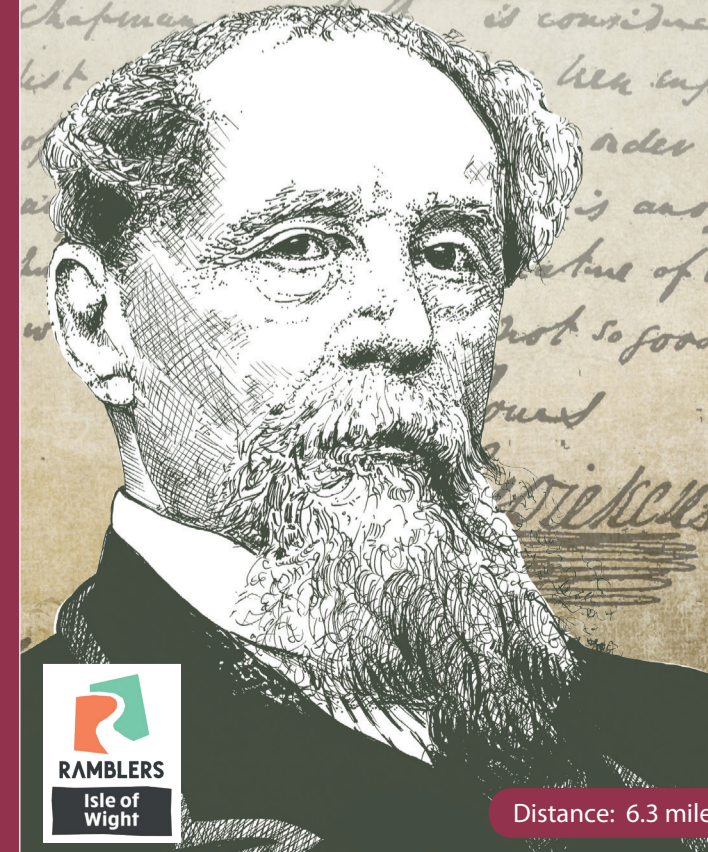
### Trail by bus

Hop on and hop off and uncover hidden gems connected with Dickens life

use the app to plan your journey and for the best value tickets



# The Charles Dickens Trail



Distance: 6.3 miles







# The Charles Dickens Trail



**Description:** A walk over the top of the downs between Shanklin and Ventnor, offering fine views and descending into Ventnor and Bonchurch.

**Distance:** 6.3 miles

**Start:** This walk can be undertaken in either direction but is described as starting in Shanklin and ending in Bonchurch. There is a No 3 bus stop at each end of the trail. It is possible to return from Bonchurch to Shanklin by foot but the area is prone to landslips and path diversions.

**Access information:** There are some steep inclines, steps, and some stiles. The open downland countryside has splendid views but is prone to misty and breezy conditions. You may encounter cattle – keep dogs on a short lead.

**Refreshments:** In Ventnor and Shanklin.

**Toilets:** Available in Ventnor and Shanklin.

**Route:** From the Big Mead bus stop, walk uphill on Church Road to St. Blasius Church (1). Go through the Lych-gate on SS10, The Worsley Trail, to the left of the church, leaving over some stone steps.

Shortly after, there is a Ramblers gate at a field. Go straight ahead to a gate. The path now crosses another field and ends at another gate leading into woodland with some steps. Go straight ahead past a notice board for Holme Copse on the right. Up more steps and a fairly steep incline with a chicken wire-netting fence on the left. Continue ahead to a farm gate with a gate next to it. Carry on to another gate (Terry Cheshire) (2).

Make a left turn here onto SS11 (not signposted) and then walk through a gap in a fence with a hedge on the left and a large ash tree on the right. Follow a fairly steep winding path up the hill to the top. The path ahead now becomes SS11a and leads to a trig point. Here is a fine view of the Island's central chalk ridge with the white cliffs of Tennyson Down to the west and Culver Down to the east. Go straight across to a gap in the hedge with a stone bank before a gate and a stile. The stone bank marks part of the Anglo-Saxon boundary between Newchurch and Brading parishes. It may have prehistoric origins.

A wooden footpath sign SS11a points back to Cliff Copse and Shanklin. (3) Turn left on V40.

Continue south on V40, and before you reach the gate ahead, you will have another fine view of Tennyson Down (west) and Culver Down (east).

Continue through two bridleway gates to Luccombe Down, a National Trust omega sign. You are now in open-access land.

Continue along V43. Just before V43 joins the downs road there are three Bronze Age burial mounds (bowl barrows) to the left of the trail, topped with fern and gorse.

(4) Turn right on a rough road (V7a) with a chain-link fence on the left. Inside that fence is the highest point on the Island, 241 metres (791 ft). When the road becomes tarmac, you are at the entrance gates of the NATS civil aviation radar station, which was built as RAF Ventnor in 1937 and later used for civil purposes until the 1960s.

Continue along the tarmac road. To the right, there are several wartime shelters from RAF Ventnor, one with gun portals. On the left, through the fence, are the concrete bases of wartime radar transmitter masts.

Continue all the way along Downs Lane which emerges at a main road. Ventnor Cemetery is opposite, overlooking the coast and nestling in the downs. Here you may find the graves of Charles and Margaret Dick. Return to Newport Road and turn right, descending to the Ocean Fish and Chip shop.

(5) Descend a series of steps on path V114a, St Albans steps, which link Upper Ventnor with the main town. Note St Albans Church was visited by John Betjeman in 1950, who said it was his favourite Island church. Turn left onto Gills Cliff Road by traffic lights. Then, turn right down Castle Road to reach Park Avenue.

(6) Cross the road into Ventnor Park and follow the path left by a stream. Continue along the tree-lined pavement to Belgrave Road and The Royal Hotel, where Dickens stayed in 1838. Take the road opposite the hotel, Bath Road, which steeply descends to the Spyglass Pub on Ventnor Beach.

(7) Continue on the esplanade, passing the bandstand and follow the coast path all the way to Monks Bay at Bonchurch.

The cliffs are important habitats, and you may see lizards and, in May/June, the rare Glanville Fritillary butterfly.

Dickens built his own wooden shower and used the stream adjacent to The Waterfall cottage for his daily showers.

(8) Return to the Coast Path and ascend path V69 by the 11th-century Old Church of St Boniface. Then pass Winterbourne House where the Dickens family stayed in 1849. Pass East Dene and continue uphill on Bonchurch Shute to reach St Boniface

Parish Church. There are graves of the poet Swinburne, H. De Vere Stacpoole, author of The Blue Lagoon. The large pyramid-topped tomb belongs to Dr Leeson, who bottled the local water as a remedy. The Rev. James White has a family plot; White was an author, playwright, and builder of Bonchurch as we see it today and was a friend of Tennyson, Dickens, Thackeray, and Douglas Jerrold. At the right side of the church, there is a winding "rural path" which emerges back on Bonchurch Shute near The Pitts.

(9) Continue up Bonchurch Shute, passing the Bonchurch Inn, to Hillside Cottage, the holiday home of John Leech, the illustrator, joining his friends, the Dickens family in 1849. He drew the cartoon of the shower. Continue to the top of the road to reach A3055 Leeson Road, where you can find bus stops.



## KEY

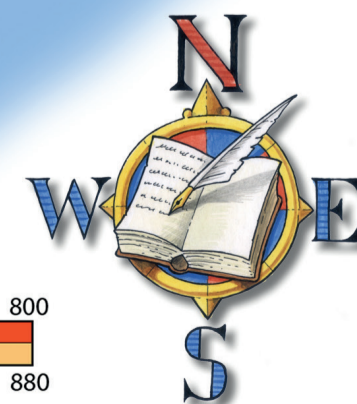
- Tea room
- Public house
- Public Toilet
- Car park
- Bus stop
- Public footpaths
- WALK ROUTE

## Acknowledgements:

The trail and leaflet were compiled by Ian Dickens, great-great grandson of Charles Dickens, David Howarth Isle of Wight Ramblers, and Sue Lowday, Island Historian.

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Thank you to members of the Dickens family for providing the voice files.



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