

Part One

The Sins of the Fathers

1784–1822

Charles Dickens was born on Friday, 7 February 1812, just outside the old town of Portsmouth in the new suburb of Landport, built in the 1790s. The small terraced house is still standing in a landscape so altered by time, bombing and rebuilding that it is a wonder the inside is so well preserved. The address has changed too: in 1812 it was No. 13 Mile End Terrace, Landport; today it is No. 393 Old Commercial Road, Portsmouth.¹ There is a patch of front garden, a small flight of steps up to the entrance, two storeys, attic and basement, good plain Georgian windows, and in 1812 there was a view over Cherry Garden Field. The terrace had no running water then, and the privy was outside. It was a modest house, but big enough for a young family. The new Dickens baby was announced in the press, ‘On Friday, at Mile-end-Terrace, the lady of John Dickens, Esq., a son’, and christened three weeks later on 4 March at St Mary’s Church. The name decided upon was ‘Charles John Huffham’ – Charles for his maternal grandfather, John for his father and Huffham (misspelt by the parish clerk) for a London friend of his father, Christopher Huffam of Limehouse, oar-maker and rigger of ships to the Royal Navy.² His mother, Elizabeth, was twenty-two, his father twenty-seven, and they already had one child, a daughter, Fanny, aged two. John Dickens walked daily into the dockyard where he had a steady job in the Navy Pay Office, handling payroll accounts at an annual salary of £110, which was set to rise.

His father, John, is the most mysterious figure in Dickens’s background. Nothing is known of John’s education and nothing certain of his first twenty years. His mother, born Elizabeth Ball in Shropshire in 1745, was a servant, and at the age of thirty-six, when she was working as a maid to Lady Blandford in London, she married

William Dickens, a manservant in the household of John Crewe, a landowning gentleman with estates in Cheshire and a town house in Lower Grosvenor Street, Mayfair. This was in November 1781. Her husband was a good bit older than her, probably in his sixties. With her marriage she too came to work in the Crewe household. A son, also named William, was born to them in 1782. By 1785 William Dickens senior had been promoted to the position of butler, but in October of the same year he died, in London. A second son, John, was born to Elizabeth Dickens in the same year, not in London, and was said to have been a posthumous child, and this boy was to be the father of Charles Dickens. She remained in service with the Crewes, and moved with them between Crewe Hall and Mayfair. In 1798, for instance, when John Dickens was thirteen, she was in London – ‘Paid Mrs Dickens Servant in your town house 8.8.0’ reads the Crewe household accounts book.³

John did not follow his parents into service: he was going to do better. Many years later the Crewes’ granddaughter said she remembered ‘old Mrs Dickens’ grumbling about ‘that lazy fellow John . . . who used to come hanging about the house’ and how she had given him ‘many a sound cuff on the ear’.⁴ Someone came to the rescue, and his next appearance is in April 1805 when he is twenty, and appointed to the Navy Pay Office in London at five shillings a day. The Treasurer of the Navy at this point was George Canning, a friend of the Crewe family, and the job undoubtedly came to John Dickens through Canning’s patronage, on which all such appointments depended. The Navy needed staff to keep the war against France running effectively, and young Dickens proved bright enough to give satisfaction. Two years later, on 23 June 1807, he was promoted to 15th Assistant Clerk at £70 a year with two shillings extra for every day of actual attendance. This was a fortune compared with anything his father had ever earned.

Why was John Dickens favoured in this way? The assumption is that the Crewes put forward his name to Canning in gratitude to his mother for being a loyal servant. His elder brother, William, however, made his own way, running a coffee shop in Oxford Street. What made the difference between Mrs Dickens’s two sons? John saw

himself as a man of taste, with cultural interests. Another thing we know about him is that he acquired quite a large collection of books, essays, plays and novels of the eighteenth century: was he given them?⁵ Books were expensive. Living in a grand household, where he could observe and hear brilliant people, appears to have had an effect on him, and the Crewe household was where you might overhear some of the best conversation in the land. John Crewe's wife, Frances, was well read, well informed and witty, as well as a noted beauty, and around the Crewes a remarkable circle of politicians and writers gathered, the most eminent being Charles James Fox, Edmund Burke and Richard Brinsley Sheridan, the playwright, theatre-owner and politician who became the darling of society. During the election of 1784 Frances Crewe led a canvassing party, and when victory was celebrated at her house, the Prince of Wales made the toast 'True blue and Mrs Crewe' and she replied 'True blue and all of you', expressing her sense of the fellowship among the Whig group. She conducted a long love-affair with Sheridan, who had dedicated his play *The School for Scandal* to her in 1777. In 1785 the affair was still causing distress to Sheridan's wife, Elizabeth, who wrote to her friend Mrs Canning, 'S is in Town – and so is Mrs Crewe. I am in the country and so is Mr Crewe – a very convenient Arrangement, is it not?'⁶ Both Sheridans were nonetheless regular visitors to Crewe Hall, and in 1790 Mrs Sheridan had another story to tell, of how her husband was found locked in a bedroom in an unfrequented part of the house with the governess. He was notoriously promiscuous, but his behaviour was far from unusual in the circles in which he mixed. He also became Treasurer of the Navy in 1807, the year John Dickens got his promotion.

John Dickens may have been the son of the elderly butler, but it is also possible that he had a different father – perhaps John Crewe, exercising his *droit de seigneur*, cheering himself up for his wife's infidelities, or another of the gentlemen who were regular guests at the Crewe residences. Or he may have believed that he was. His silence about his first twenty years, his habit of spending and borrowing and enjoying good things as though he were somehow entitled to do so, all suggest something of the kind, and harks back to the sort of behaviour he

would have observed with dazzled eyes at Crewe Hall and in Mayfair. This was the style of Sheridan, and also Fox, who gambled away several fortunes and borrowed from all his friends without a thought of ever repaying any of them. What is worth noting is that he can be presumed to have grown up with a group of men as models who were, as well as gamblers and drinkers, the most eloquent of their time. The housekeeper's boy developed his own elaborate turns of phrase, which his son found entertaining enough to record, and to turn to comic use in his writing; he described, for instance, a letter from his father in which he wrote that 'he has reason to believe that he will be in town with the pheasants, on or about the first of October', and went on to observe that his father has discovered on the Isle of Man 'troops of friends, and every sort of continental luxury at a cheap rate'. Another of his grand pronouncements, putting down a boastful friend, was 'The Supreme Being must be a very different individual from what I have every reason to believe him to be, if He would care in the least for the society of your relations.'⁷ John Dickens also developed his own habits of extravagance and debt, which nearly wrecked his son's life and drove him to rage and despair.⁸

John Dickens was a character – he was the model for his son's most famous character, Micawber. He was also lucky. In 1806 John Crewe was raised to the peerage by Fox, who died that year. George Canning, no Whig but a liberal Tory, and the cleverest of the younger generation of politicians, had become a friend of the Crewes, and since he was Treasurer of the Navy from 1804 to 1806, he was in a position to hand out a job to the son of their housekeeper.⁹ She was now an elderly woman and delighted the Crewe grandchildren with her storytelling. And when Sheridan followed Canning as Treasurer, he was also in a position to have John Dickens promoted. Two years later John's salary was up to £110 and he was able to marry, in June 1809, just before his transfer to the Portsmouth dockyard. Sheridan died in 1816, Lady Crewe in 1818 and her onetime housekeeper in 1824: old Mrs Dickens left enough money to help her son John out of the trouble he had got into, but she died too soon to see the achievements of her grandson Charles, or to tell him tales of life at Crewe Hall and Lower Grosvenor Street.

So much for the background of John Dickens, something he seems not to have spoken about to his son Charles, who in turn never said anything about it. The Navy Pay Office was a good employer and the interminable wars with the French, now almost in their twentieth year, meant there was plenty of work for him in Portsmouth. Elizabeth Dickens's brother Thomas Barrow worked alongside her husband – this was how the couple had met – and her father, Charles Barrow, was also employed at Somerset House in London under the impressive title of 'Chief Conductor of Monies in Town'. But little Charles never knew the grandfather for whom he was named because Mr Barrow had to leave England suddenly in 1810 when it was discovered that he had been defrauding the Navy Pay Office for seven years. Life was hard with ten children, he pleaded, and he had been driven to it by need, but criminal proceedings were started and he fled across the Channel. This was only a few months after witnessing the marriage of his daughter to John Dickens at the church of St Mary-le-Strand in June 1809. She was in Portsmouth when he was disgraced and made his secret escape abroad, and, while the subject would surely not have been mentioned at Mile End Terrace, it meant there was a secret hanging in the air, a story that could not be told. Both Charles Dickens's grandfathers were unknown and unmentioned figures.

As daughters often do, Elizabeth had chosen a husband who shared some of her father's traits, and in particular the taste for living above his income. John Dickens was expansive by nature, with a tendency to speak in loose, grand terms, and an easy way with money. When required to describe himself he wrote 'gentleman' on documents and announced himself as 'Esquire' in the newspaper announcement of his first son's birth.¹⁰ He liked to dress well, as young Regency bucks did, he bought expensive books and enjoyed entertaining friends, from whom he might later ask for a loan. His voice had a slight thickness, as though his tongue was a little too large for his mouth, but he was likeable, plump and full of fun, and he and Elizabeth made a cheerful couple.

She was a slim, energetic young woman, and she allegedly spent the evening before the birth of her son out dancing.¹¹ She also appreciated music and books, and knew some Latin. Her father, before he

went to work for the Navy Pay Office, had been an instrument-maker and music teacher, and also ran a circulating library in London. The Barrows were better educated than the Dickenses, and she had talented brothers. Thomas, her husband's colleague, overcame the matter of his father's fraud by his own trustworthiness and diligence, and rose high in the Navy Pay Office. John Barrow published poetry and a historical novel, and started his own newspaper, and Edward Barrow was a good amateur musician with artistic tastes – he married a painter of miniatures from a family of artists – and he worked as a parliamentary reporter. They were all helpful to their sister and brother-in-law, and became significant figures in Charles's young life.

When he was only five months old the family was obliged to move to a smaller house on a poor street, with no front garden.¹² They were already short of money, and the house would have matched the one described by Jane Austen in *Mansfield Park* at exactly this time, where Fanny Price visited her parents in Portsmouth, and found the passage and stairs so narrow and the walls so thin that you could hear all the noises from room to room.¹³ Here a third child, Alfred, was born, and died at six months in September 1814. The family moved again, to a better house in Portsea, at No. 39 Wish Street, and a nurse cared for Fanny and Charles; he claimed to remember her carrying him out to see the soldiers exercising. That winter their father was summoned to work at Somerset House, and the family went with him to London. They left Portsmouth under snow, according to Dickens's own recollection, and did not return.¹⁴

They found lodgings in Norfolk Street (Cleveland Street today), only recently paved over and transformed from one of the old 'Green Lanes' out to the country into a residential road that took you to the new suburbs of Somers Town and Camden Town. This was the north edge of London, where big town houses were under construction in Fitzroy Square, while to the east of Tottenham Court Road there were still farms and fields. John Dickens's brother, William, was still running his coffee shop in Oxford Street, and in 1815 he married; but John, in spite of his steady employment with the Navy Pay Office, where he was now earning £200 a year, found it as hard to manage as ever and took to asking their mother for money, as she

noted when she came to write her will. Whether old Mrs Dickens ever sat with Fanny and Charles while their mother was busy, or told them stories, is not recorded. In April 1816 a fourth Dickens child was born – Letitia, who was to outlive all the others.¹⁵

While the younger Dickenses were in London the war against Napoleon and the French finally came to an end in 1815. Now that the Navy needed fewer officers, the work of the Pay Office was changing, and in December 1816 John Dickens was sent out of town again. This time it was only thirty miles away, to Kent. He went first for a few weeks to Sheerness dockyard, where the River Medway runs into the Thames estuary through the salt marshes, and then on to Chatham, where Rochester Castle stands above the bridge over the Medway, and Chatham and Rochester are effectively one town folded around the spectacular double curve of the river, with the Kentish hills rising sharply above. The Romans settled there, and it had a great castle and a cathedral, a medieval bridge, ancient streets, inns and houses, fine dwellings for the naval officers and great industrial buildings in the dockyards. The newest construction was Fort Clarence, a gigantic brick-built defence meant to deter Napoleon, put up in 1812 and named for the Lord High Admiral of the Navy, Prince William, Duke of Clarence, destined to become King in 1830. Landscape and buildings are dramatic, and they imprinted themselves strongly on the imagination of the small boy. Here Dickens became fully aware of the world around him and began to store up impressions.

He arrived round about his fifth birthday, with his two sisters, seven-year-old Fanny and baby Letitia. Their father was busily engaged, in and out of the vast Chatham dockyard, often aboard the old Navy yacht *Chatham*, sailing up the Medway to Sheerness and back. He installed his family in another small, neat, Georgian terraced house at the top of the steep hill rising above Chatham and Rochester, with views down to the river. No. 2 Ordnance Terrace is still there, battered by time and neglect, and you can see it was one of a group of modest terraces built near the large houses in the New Road laid out along the hilltop in the 1790s. The town was prosperous, rough and lively, crammed with working people serving the needs of the Navy, and the Army too, since Chatham was also a recruiting

centre for soldiers. There were many blacksmiths and rope-makers there, and their apprentices had their own songs and celebrations when they paraded with bands, wearing masks and collecting money.

Up the hill at Ordnance Terrace things were quieter. There was plenty of open space, with farmland at the back and the grassy expanse of a hay field in front, where the children could play safely, picnic under the hawthorn trees and make friends with their neighbours. George and Lucy, children of Mr Stroughill, the plumber next door, became their playmates, and Charles fell in love with Lucy, whom he claimed to remember afterwards as 'peach-coloured, with a blue sash'. The grass on which they sat eating sweets together has long since gone, sliced off by a Victorian railway cutting, and large trees along its edge obscure the view, but you can still get a sense of how agreeable it must have been. Each house has a few steps up to its narrow front door, with a small fanlight above; below, a basement; one front window on the ground floor, two each on the first and second floors. Into this simple box went Mr and Mrs Dickens, her sister Mary Allen, known as 'Aunt Fanny', widow of a naval officer, the three children, their nurse Mary Weller and the maid Jane Bonny.

By now the boy could just about read, although not yet the splendid and expensive volume his father brought home, *The History and Antiquities of Rochester and Its Environs*, newly published with a folding map and five plates. It was his mother who gave him daily lessons in reading over a period of time, and taught him 'thoroughly well', he told his friend John Forster. Forster says Dickens used almost exactly the words he gave to David Copperfield, 'I faintly remember her teaching me the alphabet; and when I look upon the fat black letters in the primer, the puzzling novelty of their shapes and the easy good nature of O and S, always seem to present themselves before me as they used to do.'¹⁶ This makes Elizabeth Dickens sound like a mother who cherished her son through careful teaching which sparked his imagination, and from then on words were associated with pleasure and he was set on his path. Without her he might not have embarked on his own crash course of literary studies through the library of books left by his father in the little room next to his bedroom at the top of the stairs. They were hefty eighteenth-century travel books

and novels: Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Fielding's *Tom Jones*, Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield*, Smollett's *Roderick Random*, *Peregrine Pickle* and *Humphry Clinker*; also Mrs Inchbald's collection of farces, some volumes of the *Tatler* and the *Spectator*, and fairy stories, the *Arabian Nights* and *The Tales of the Genii*. Catching the light of the long summer evenings as he sat alone at the top of the house, he travelled, suffered and triumphed with the heroes of the small print, his imagination free of constraint.

According to one account, his nurse Mary Weller described him as 'a terrible boy to read'. She also remembered him coming downstairs and asking for the kitchen to be cleared for a game. Then George from next door would bring his magic lantern and Charles and Fanny would sing, recite and perform, a favourite piece for him being Dr Watts's 'The Voice of the Sluggard', with gestures and actions. She found him 'a lively boy, of a good, genial, open disposition', and Mrs Dickens was 'a dear, good mother'.¹⁷ He himself kept a vivid memory of his mother taking him out to see a royal carriage passing through town. Years later he told the son of a friend, as they walked together up a street in Chatham where there was a low wall with an iron railing on the top, 'I remember my poor mother, God forgive her, put me up on the ledge of that wall, so that I might wave my hat and cheer George IV – the Prince Regent – who was driving by.' The 'poor mother, God forgive her' was from the adult Dickens, who had a low opinion of George IV, but as a boy small enough to be lifted up on to the wall he would without doubt have taken innocent pleasure in waving his hat at the Prince, richly dressed and bloated, as he went past in his magnificent carriage.

Looking back on those years, he remembered himself as a delicate and sometimes lonely child, unable to join in the games of the local boys, neighbours and sons of naval officers, who spent the summer playing cricket and Prisoner's Base. He had begun to suffer from spasms in his side, so painful they kept him from running about, and he would lie in the grass to see the other boys playing their games, or sit near them with a book in his hand, his left wrist clasped in his right hand, swaying slightly as he read.¹⁸ So he grew used to watching, and being set apart from those he watched. At night he was in

thrall to his nurse's bedtime stories of a Captain Murderer who cooked and ate his brides in pies, and a shipwright Chips haunted by rats: they terrified and delighted him in equal measure. On other nights his aunt Fanny 'hummed the evening hymn to me, and I cried on my pillow'.¹⁹

The pains in his side came and went, and he was not always passive. His singing of comic songs was encouraged by his family, who hoisted him up on to chairs and tables to perform. His father made a friend of the landlord of the Mitre Tavern in Chatham High Street, John Tribe, and Fanny and Charles were both taken there to show off their singing skills in comic solos and duets.²⁰ Once you have enjoyed performance and applause, you want to try again, and Dickens's life-long passion for both began here. He was the junior partner for the moment, since Fanny's musical skills were so advanced, and she was two years ahead of him in everything. Both were sent to a dame school above a shop to be put through the standard lessons, where the discipline consisted of a rap or a blow and not much was learnt.

They were also taken to the theatre, the Rochester Theatre Royal built by the great Mrs Baker, once a puppeteer and married to a clown, who became a formidable businesswoman and ran the Kent circuit with a mixture of Shakespeare, pantomime and variety. Mrs Baker died in 1816, but the theatre continued with the mixture as before and there the children enjoyed *Richard III* and *Macbeth* – alarming yet also instructive in the way of the theatre, as it let them see that the witches and King Duncan all reappeared as other characters. And twice, in 1819 and 1820, when he was seven and eight, there were expeditions to London during the pantomime season, to see the great Grimaldi clowning his way through song and dance and comic impersonations.²¹ More theatre enthusiasts were introduced into the family circle by aunt Fanny, who was courted by a Dr Lamert working at the Ordnance Hospital, with a teenage son, James, both lovers of the drama. As well as taking the children to the theatre in town, the doctor and his son got up their own productions and put them on in an empty room in the hospital. It was easy to see that it could be even more fun building sets and putting on greasepaint and costumes than watching other people doing it. Soon Charles was writing his

own tragedy, *Misnar, the Sultan of India*. The manuscript did not survive, but he remembered his pride in writing it. 'I was a great writer at eight years old or so,' he joked later, and 'an actor and a speaker from a baby.'²²

Another treat for Fanny and Charles was to be taken by their father aboard the *Chatham*, the small naval yacht in which he sailed on Pay Office business to Sheerness and back. They had to be punctually at the dockyard to catch the tide, there was the bustle of the sailors handling ropes and sails as they moved through a mass of shipping, Upnor Castle on the far side of the river with its grey towers, the slop and splash of brown water as the Medway widened between its mud banks, a few churches in sight, low islands and ancient forts, Hoo Ness and Darnet Ness, rebuilt to guard against Napoleon. After hours of sailing, as they approached Sheerness and the Thames estuary, the far Essex bank came into view five miles away across a world of water. This landscape and the sludge-coloured tidal rivers haunted him all his life and became part of the fabric of his late novels. His father also pointed out, when they were walking together, the house set on the top of Gad's Hill, on the Rochester to Gravesend road, where Sir John Falstaff held up the travellers and was commemorated by an inn named for him. Gad's Hill Place was a plain, solid brick house with wide views over the countryside stretching away below, and it immediately appealed to the child. He decided he would like to live in it, his father told him that if he worked very hard he might one day do so, and a version of this exchange was repeated whenever they passed it, as they did many times during the years in Kent. Years later he summed up what he liked about its situation to a friend: 'Cobham Woods and Park are behind the house; the distant Thames in front; the Medway, with Rochester, and its old castle and cathedral on one side. The whole stupendous property is on the old Dover Road.'²³

Their parents' closest friends among the neighbours were the Newnhams, a retired tailor and his genteel and kindly wife, with a comfortable income. Newnham lent John Dickens money and, unlike most of his creditors, who were disappointed by his failure to repay loans, kept in friendly touch with the family even after they left Chatham. The youngest Dickens was given the name 'Augustus

Newnham' in their honour, but the Newnhams were more interested in the daughters, and in due course left small legacies to Letitia and Fanny. Although John Dickens was now earning a substantial salary of more than £350 a year, he was getting into difficulties again. In the summer of 1819 he borrowed £200 from a man he knew in London, at Kennington Green, which he agreed to pay back at £26 a year; it should have taken a little more than eight years, but his financial incompetence was such that he was still paying it off thirty years later. Worse, he asked his brother-in-law Thomas Barrow to guarantee a deal that brought him £200 in cash, and then failed to make the required payments to the third party involved. Barrow was obliged to pay back the £200 and more, and he was so angry that he told Dickens he would not have him under his roof again.

In 1821 they were obliged to leave Ordnance Terrace and move down the hill to a house in a less salubrious street: No. 18 St Mary's Place, next to a Baptist chapel and close to the dockyard. There were two more children in the family by now: Harriet born in the summer of 1819, and Frederick a year later. Money was tight, John Dickens was not popular with his relations in London, and there were no more trips to the metropolitan pantomime. A big fire in Chatham gave him a chance to earn something by his pen, and he wrote it up for *The Times*, which printed the story and paid him. He gave two guineas to the fund for the victims of the fire, probably more than his fee for writing the piece, but it showed the world that he was a gentleman.

That winter of 1821 their aunt married Dr Lamert and left with him for Cork in Ireland, where he had a new appointment. They took the Dickenses' maid Jane Bonny with them, and left James Lamert to lodge with them. He was fond of Charles, and kept up the visits to the theatre. And now Fanny and Charles were sent to a proper school, Mr Giles's 'classical, mathematical and commercial' establishment. William Giles was the son of a local minister, had himself been to Oxford, was a good teacher and ran his school well. He recognized that he had an unusual pupil and Charles responded to his encouragement and worked hard. He also had fun. When asked to recite, he gave a piece out of *The Humourist's Miscellany*, and the other

children applauded enough for two encores. He was liked by teachers and fellow pupils, and gaining confidence in his abilities. Mr Giles served him ill in one way, by teaching him to take snuff, a kind known as ‘Irish blackguard’, and although Charles gave up the habit after a few years and did not resume it, he had got the taste for tobacco, and he became a serious smoker at the age of fifteen.²⁴

Dickens looked back on the years in Chatham as the idyll of his life. He had the blessings of secure family love, ideal landscape, river and town, good teaching, and his small world was beginning to expand pleasurably around him. When he reached his tenth birthday in February 1822, he was happy at school, encouraged and favoured by his teacher and enjoying his studies. At home, his mother was about to give birth to another child, who arrived on 3 April and was given the name of the baby who had died in 1814, Alfred, and of her sister’s husband, Lamert. He thrived, and they could all look forward to summer and long days out on the river or in the open country. Then they heard that their father was being taken back to London and they would have to leave with him. The pantomime visits were all the elder children remembered of London, but their mother was a Londoner by birth and her brothers were there, so she may have been pleased to be returning to town.

They began to prepare. The children’s nurse, Mary Weller, wanted to stay in Chatham and to marry her sweetheart, who worked in the docks, and she put in an offer for the Dickens’ chairs, which was accepted. They would take with them only a little maid they had acquired from the Chatham Workhouse, an orphan of no known parentage and seemingly no name – or at least Dickens never gives her one.²⁵ Mr Giles offered to keep Charles until the end of the half and invited him to lodge with his family, and this was agreed to. He saw the house packed up and waved goodbye to his parents, sisters and brothers. The Giles family made a fuss of him, with Miss Giles admiring his long curly hair, and for a few weeks the routine of school continued to absorb him.

The ten-year-old boy made his memories of the years in Kent into a treasure trove in his mind. For the rest of his life he enjoyed bringing them out, and taking friends to walk over the territory he had

known and loved so well. In 1857 he described the seven miles between Maidstone and Rochester as 'one of the most beautiful walks in England'.²⁶ Kent was always a place of delight and pleasure, a paradise of woods and orchards, sea coast, marshes and rivers. Here he chose to spend his honeymoon, here he would go roaming alone or with chosen companions, here he took his children for long summer months, and here he bought his dream house, and died in it. Here he wished to be buried. The landscape and towns of Kent gave him settings for many of his books. His first novel, *The Pickwick Papers*, is partly set in Rochester and round about, and his last, the unfinished *Mystery of Edwin Drood*, centres on its streets and assigns real houses to its characters. David Copperfield tramps across its bridge on his way to find his aunt, who will save him from the cruelty of his stepfather, believe in him and cherish him. *Great Expectations* inhabits the streets and houses of Rochester and the Medway marshes and estuary. The pattern, structure and setting of human lives was the stuff of his novels, and he saw the structure and pattern of his own life as closely related to place. Journeys in and out of London make crucial turning points in his novels, for good or ill, and in July 1822 he made just such a crucial journey, aged ten, and alone. At the end of term Mr Giles gave him a copy of Goldsmith's *The Bee*²⁷ to remember him by, his few clothes were packed up, he was given sandwiches for the journey and put into the London coach. It happened to be empty, and he travelled with no one at his side through the Kentish countryside on a rainy summer's day, and into the heart of London. He remembered it as a damp and sorrowful journey.