The Trail

The trail starts at Westminster Abbey and takes you on a circular walk of the surrounding area. Along the way you will see sights which will help to describe the life and times of Charles Dickens.

The trail should take approximately one hour to complete.

Charles Dickens was one of the greatest novelists of the 19th Century. He was born in 1812 and died in 1870. Although famous for the humour in his novels, Dickens used his fiction to highlight many of the social problems which existed in Victorian London. His books were published in many languages and are still very popular all around the world.

How many books can you name?


Westminster Abbey appears in some of Dickens’ best known novels, including *Bleak House*, *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*. Dickens set his novels in recognisable places to make his descriptions sound more realistic. In *Great Expectations* for example, Pip describes how ‘we went out for a walk in the streets and went half price to the Theatre; and next day we went to church at Westminster Abbey’ (Chapter 22).

*Walk around the Abbey towards the Houses of Parliament and find a place to stand on Westminster Bridge.*

The river Thames had always been the main source of drinking water for Londoners but at the same time, this was where London’s sewage was disposed! **What problems do you think this caused?**

In the 1830’s the river became so polluted that fish stocks disappeared and the dirty river was blamed for an outbreak of cholera. By the 1850’s there were sixty sewer outlets into the Thames which deposited black mud on the riverbed. In 1858, during the hot summer months the ‘Great Stink’ caused by the polluted river drove the MPs from their river-facing rooms at Parliament! Dickens wrote to his friend that ‘The Thames at London is most horrible’ and that the smell was of ‘a most head-and-stomach distracting nature’.

*How clean does the river look today?* 😊 Very clean 😞 Very dirty

**Did you know?**
The quality of the water around Parliament is judged to be ‘excellent’.
(Thames Water Quality Report 2010)

Westminster Bridge was built in 1862 on the site of an older bridge. The bridge is the oldest in central London and it was designed to fit in with the ‘Gothic’ style of the Houses of Parliament.
Dickens knew Westminster Bridge well and mentioned it in several of his novels.

‘The driver was punctual, the road good -save for the dust, the weather being very hot and dry-and at seven in the forenoon on Friday the second of June...they alighted at the foot of Westminster Bridge, bade their conductor farewell, and stood alone, together, on the scorching pavement.’ *Barnaby Rudge*

In Dickens’ novel *David Copperfield*, David crosses Westminster Bridge with Mr. Peggotty in his search for Emily. ‘I went with him over Westminster Bridge, and parted from him on the Surrey shore’.

Today, this part of the river is in the Borough of London. (In Victorian times, the north bank of the Thames was part of the county of Middlesex. The south bank of the Thames was part of the county of Surrey).

**Which is the north bank and which is the south bank of the Thames?**

Walk back towards the front of the Houses of Parliament. You should be able to see the east end of Westminster Abbey at the same time.

In 1834 a fire destroyed most of the old Houses of Parliament. One of the few parts to be saved was Westminster Hall. After the fire, a competition was held to find the best design for the rebuilding of Parliament. The competition was won by the architect Charles Barry. Look carefully at the style of architecture of the present Houses of Parliament.

**Can you see where Barry got his inspiration from?**

**Clue:** Look again at Westminster Abbey. Describe the similarities between this medieval building and the more recent Parliament building.

**Why do you think this design was popular enough to win?**
You may wish to sketch some of the architectural features that the Lady Chapel of Westminster Abbey and the Houses of Parliament share. A blank page has been left for you to sketch.
Dickens was born in Portsmouth but moved to London as a child. His father got into debt and was put in a debtor’s prison. The young Dickens had to work in a factory by the river Thames. He labelled bottles for six shillings a week. Dickens never forgot this humiliating experience. After a while, Dickens was able to go back to school and continue his education and as a young man, he became a reporter for the *Mirror of Parliament*. This journal collected together speeches made by MPs and summarised debates.

Keeping the Houses of Parliament on your left and Westminster Abbey on your right, walk down the road. Victoria Tower Gardens is on your left and makes a pleasant picnic stop if you have the time.

The river can be viewed from here. Or continue walking until you see Great Peter Street on your right. Walk along Great Peter Street. Look out for Lord North Street on your left. St. John’s Church is at the end of the road.

What do you think of the architecture of this church? It is considered to be one of the finest examples of English Baroque buildings and was built in 1728. Dickens considered it a very ugly building. In *Our Mutual Friend* he described it as,

> “a very hideous church with four towers at the four corners, generally resembling some petrified monster, frightful and gigantic, on its back with its legs in the air”

You may wish to sketch the church on your ‘Sketching’ page.

English Baroque architecture features:
- Complicated shapes
- Large curved forms
- Twisted columns
- Grand stairways
- High domes

St Paul’s Cathedral by Sir Christopher Wren is another example of the style.
Look carefully at this map of London. It was drawn in the late 19th Century by a man called Charles Booth. Booth colour coded it to show different levels of poverty in London.

- **Black** is used to show the poorest housing or slum housing.
- **Blue** is poor too.
- **Red** is ‘comfortably off’.
- **Yellow** is ‘wealthy’.

**How wealthy was this part of Westminster in the 19th Century?**
Continue along Great Peter Street and then turn right into St. Ann’s Street.

In Victorian times, this was the location of one of the worst slums in London. Writing in his magazine *Household Words* in 1850, Dickens referred to this slum as the *Devil’s Acre*. The houses were low lying and prone to flooding, overcrowded with poor sanitation. The mortality rates were very high. Dickens tried to raise awareness of the poor housing conditions through his writing. Many of his most famous novels, such as *Bleak House* contain descriptions of slum housing in London. These are some of the words he chose to describe a fictitious slum called ‘Tom-all-alone’s’.

Ruinous Dilapidated Crazy Tumbling

The French artist Gustave Doré sketched the *Devil’s Acre* in 1872. After spending many months sketching in London, he published pictures of the city. Although his work was popular, some critics complained that his pictures focused too much on the poorest areas of London.

**Can you think of some words to describe the Devil’s Acre as shown in Doré’s picture below?**
Turn left into Old Pye Street

In the late 19th Century, the slums of the Devil’s Acre began to be cleared and new, clean, well-lit flats were built in their place. You can still see the flats built by George Peabody (an American philanthropist who spent most of his life in England) on Old Pye Street. The new buildings were opened in 1882 and had 396 dwellings, 3 bathrooms, 90 laundries and 180 lavatories.

Imagine you are a journalist reporting on the wonderful new clean housing. Can you think of a catchy headline for your report?

Retrace your steps and turn left onto St. Ann’s Street. Walk to the end of the road, turn right and then right again. You will find yourself on Marsham Street. One of the buildings on your right has a sign which reads Public Baths.

Can you spot the separate entrances for men and women?

Public bath houses began to be built in the 1840’s. It cost a penny for a hot bath and people could even wash their clothes in the Public wash-house. Since most people living in London at this time had to collect water in a bucket from a shared pump, access to hot water was a rare treat. These bath houses were first built in 1847 and then they were rebuilt in 1892.

What impact do you think they had on the local community?
Walk back up Marsham Street (the road turns into Great Smith Street) and then right to find yourself back at Westminster Abbey where your tour began.

Dickens was buried in Poets’ Corner (inside Westminster Abbey) in 1870. He had wanted a small, private funeral and no fuss. Only twelve mourners attended, made up of family and close friends, together with the Abbey clergy. After the funeral, many people came to pay their respects. So many flowers were thrown into his grave that they overflowed.

**What is Dickens’ legacy?**

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**Do you think popular writers can change attitudes today?**

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All sketches by Elizabeth Somerville.

Portrait of Charles Dickens courtesy of Dickens Museum [www.dickensmuseum.com](http://www.dickensmuseum.com)

Booth poverty map of London courtesy of the Library at the London School of Economics [www.booth.lse.ac.uk](http://www.booth.lse.ac.uk)

Engraving by Gustave Doré courtesy of Westminster Archives Museum [www.westminster.gov.uk/services/libraries/archives](http://www.westminster.gov.uk/services/libraries/archives)

Useful information on London at the time of Dickens can be found in ‘London in the 19th Century’ by Jerry White published by Vintage, 2008.