



Share famous passions for Kent

“Kent, sir – everybody knows Kent – apples, cherries, hops and women.” Thus Charles Dickens described the Garden of England in *The Pickwick Papers*. But do you really know Kent and its surprising connections with other famous faces?

Day One

We begin in the historic city of Canterbury with a visit to its magnificent World Heritage Site. Take a tour around the atmospheric ruins of **St Augustine’s Abbey** and unlock the story of St Augustine’s great Christian mission to England. **Canterbury Cathedral**, where as first Archbishop he established his seat, remains an architectural treasure that has drawn pilgrims for centuries. Imagine Geoffrey Chaucer’s motley band of medieval characters on their way to the shrine of the martyred Thomas Becket, and drop into **The Canterbury Tales** reconstruction of their adventure.

Tudor playwright Christopher Marlowe was born in Canterbury – why not enjoy a performance in the theatre named after him? Over four centuries later, Orlando Bloom made his acting debut on a local stage. Before we leave Canterbury, sample some of its wide-ranging eateries. Orlando’s favourites include Café des Amis on St Dunstons Street.

David Starkey patronises Canterbury’s permanent farmers’ market. In fact he’s a fan of everything about Kent: “I love the countryside of woods and valleys, where I walk our dog; the superb locally grown and reared meat, fruit and vegetables, which I buy at the Goods Shed in Canterbury; the fresh fish from the coast. But what I love above all is the enormous range and variety of the county’s historic houses and cottages. And it was falling in love with one of these, which led me to move to Kent in 2005. I’ve never been happier anywhere.” That’s a real invitation to explore!

Next we head to the coast. **Margate** and the “glorious sunsets... the loveliest skies in Europe” beguiled one-time resident artist JMW Turner – over 100 of his works were influenced by Kent’s creative coast. Neighbouring **Broadstairs** was Charles Dickens’ favourite seaside escape. “You cannot think how delightful and fresh the place is and how good the walks,” he declared. Stroll the beaches in his footsteps and view Bleak House where he completed work on *David Copperfield*. **Dickens House Museum** gives further insights into his happy life and times here.

Brenda Blethyn loved the beautiful big, sandy beach at our next stop, **Ramsgate**. The BAFTA award-winning actress of *Secrets and Lies* fame was born here. Blethyn’s home has long since vanished, but you can follow the **Pugins Town Trail** to admire buildings by the 19th-century architect Augustus Pugin. The leader of the Gothic Revival, Pugin knew the seaside resort from his

youth and returned to design his own house. Stay in style: The Grange, restored by the Landmark Trust, is open for holiday lets.

Day Two

Now, let's zip down the coast in the company of James Bond, because our route from **Margate to Dover** is *Moonraker* and *Goldfinger* country: "a panorama full of colour and excitement and romance" (*Moonraker*) that captured author Ian Fleming's imagination. Stop off in **Sandwich** and relive the classic match between Bond and Auric Goldfinger at "the greatest seaside golf-course in the world": Fleming's club **Royal St George's** became Royal St Mark's in his novel. Continue to **St Margaret's Bay** where Fleming had his weekend home: look for the white house with green shutters to the north end of the beach before we relax the pace again in Folkestone.

Celebrity TV chef Phil Vickery was born in **Folkestone**. How's this for a recipe for good times, as revealed by Phil to BBC Kent: his favourite open space is The Warren with its magnificent cliffs between Folkestone and Dover and best view is Sandgate to Dungeness on a clear day. For a great pint, visit The Rose and Crown at Elham, where he started his cooking career in 1975..

Folkestone's neighbour, **Hythe**, appeals to walkers. After writer, actor and comedian Vic Reeves settled in Kent around 29 years ago, he had a passion for power walking and strode the 28-mile **Royal Military Canal**. Treat yourself to a ramble beside the peaceful waterway, or a spot of boating or fishing. Vic, whose Pett Productions based at Maidstone Studios, often films around Kent, "the most versatile county anywhere."

Day Three

We now turn inland to the hop and orchard country of the **Weald**. First stop is the market town of **Ashford**. Writer Frederick Forsyth was born in here and it was one morning as he stood on Ashford's station watching men in identical dark suits and white shirts going off to their London offices that he vowed never to become "penguins" like them. He turned to journalism and novel writing instead. The scenic **Heart of Kent** countryside is perfect for exploring by bike or on foot – little wonder that Beijing Olympic gold cyclist Jamie Staff was born in Ashford or that 1500 metre Olympic finalist Lisa Dobriskey is a member of Ashford Athletics Club.

Drop into **Tenterden**, the "Jewel of the Weald" and reputed birthplace of William Caxton, printer of the first book in English. Victorian actress Dame Ellen Terry was another famous resident: tour her enchanting 16th-century home, **Smallhythe Place**, containing her personal and theatrical mementoes. Then, just a few miles west, we come to **Benenden**, childhood home of Jo Brand. Before Jo honed her sharp tongue on the comedy circuit, she lived in a converted oast house just outside the village, enjoyed local school life and even became a bell ringer in Benenden church.

For more magic, we head to Sissinghurst, home of *Have I Got News for You* star Ian Hislop. But the dazzling draw here is **Sissinghurst Castle Garden**, created by Vita Sackville-West and her husband Sir Harold Nicolson. Stroll through the individual garden "rooms", soaking up different ambiances and moods, hot colours and cool combinations.

We travel north now to pass through the market town of **Tonbridge**, where a 12-year-old schoolgirl called Kelly Holmes was encouraged by her PE teacher to take up running. When the 2004 double gold Olympic medal winner returned from Athens she was greeted by more than 80,000 fans on a parade around her home town. Nearby Hildenborough is home to another sporting great, boxing legend Sir Henry Cooper, and it's his recommendation that we follow to **Hever Castle**. Apparently, the double-moated 13th-century castle is his favourite building. Come face to face with another Henry here in the Long Gallery – costumed figures of Henry VIII and his six wives.

Day Four

From 16th-century to 20th-century icon: we next visit Sir Winston Churchill's **Chartwell**. Chartwell's glorious views over the Weald captivated Churchill and were the reason he made this his family home for 40 years. His cigar boxes and favourite yellow chair, and his paintings in the garden studio all conjure a picture of the statesman relaxing and recharging his batteries.

Another garden proved the inspiration for Charles Darwin. For at **Down House** he observed nature and carried out experiments to prove his groundbreaking theory of evolution: 2009 marks the 150th anniversary of publication of *On the Origin of Species*. Follow in Darwin's footsteps along his "Thinking Path" in the garden, look around you and get inside the mind of a genius!

Atmosphere and scenery change again for the final leg of our tour as we sweep into maritime Medway. En route, take a look at **St George's Church, Gravesend**, burial place of Pocahontas. The tale of how an Indian chief's daughter from Virginia, USA, helped early settlers in the New World is full of drama. Pocahontas died aged just 22 in 1617 and her life is commemorated in a stained glass window and statue.

A few miles on and we're back in Charles Dickens territory. **Chatham** was Dickens' childhood home for a few years from 1817. Long walks fuelled Dickens' young imagination with people and places that later appeared in his novels – meet many of his characters at **Dickens World**.

Then discover the backdrop to Pip's childhood in *Great Expectations*, including **Cooling** where lozenge-shaped tombs in the churchyard of St James gave Dickens the idea for the graves of Pip's brothers. St James's, originally built in the 13th century and now out of service, hasn't just inspired Dickens, however, internationally renowned musician Jools Holland lives at Cooling Castle.

Travel to **Rochester**, pick up a leaflet *In Dickens' Footsteps* from the Visitor Information Centre on the High Street and spot all the places that the author wove into his stories. Jools, a Deputy Lieutenant for Kent since 2005, also has special ties with the city: whether playing a charity concert in Rochester Cathedral or playing Rochester Castle Gardens with his fabulous Rhythm & Blues Orchestra: tour Kent and you'll find centuries-old places continue to inspire in fresh ways.

Share more famous passions for places at www.visitkent.co.uk