



THE WILKIE COLLINS SOCIETY

IN SEARCH OF CHURCH HILL COTTAGE
Where Wilkie Collins wrote the opening chapters of
The Woman in White

by
Ken Nickoll



Broadstairs – the beach and harbour in the 1800s as Wilkie Collins would have known it

Wilkie Collins Society
August 2022



This flint-and-brick cottage off The Vale at Broadstairs has now been identified by the author as Wilkie Collins's Church Hill Cottage. It was here that he wrote the opening chapters of *The Woman in White* in August 1859

IN SEARCH OF CHURCH HILL COTTAGE, BROADSTAIRS
Where Wilkie Collins stayed in 1859 and wrote the opening chapters of
The Woman in White

Introduction

For six weeks in August and September 1859 Wilkie Collins, accompanied by his mistress Caroline Graves and her daughter Harriet, rented a house in the quiet seaside resort of Broadstairs. It was there, in Church Hill Cottage, that he penned the opening chapters of *The Woman in White*, one of the first Victorian sensation novels and “the quintessential novel-with-a-secret”.¹ But it wasn’t only the plot that contains a mystery. There is another riddle surrounding the book that has confounded Collins’ devotees for generations: Where exactly *is* Church Hill Cottage?

I began my quest for the house whilst researching my soon-to-be-completed book *Dickens in Broadstairs* in which I detail the 19 known visits Charles Dickens paid to the resort between 1837 and 1862. During his penultimate five-day visit in the summer of 1859, Dickens was hard at work on *A Tale of Two Cities* which was appearing in weekly parts in his new magazine *All the Year Round*. *The Woman in White* was due to be serialised in the same publication.²

Whilst there, from August 31 to September 5, he met up with Collins on at least two occasions – dining with him at Church Hill Cottage and then inviting Collins to eat with him at the Albion Hotel where he was staying.³ We know Collins was lodging in a house called Church Hill Cottage because six of his letters from the Kent resort bear that address. I am Broadstairs born and bred, with a keen interest in local history, yet I had never heard of a Church Hill, with or without a cottage. And a search for the building in Victorian maps and trade directories also proved fruitless.

But after several years’ research, I believe I have finally located the building where Collins wrote the beginning of his favourite book⁴ and where his friend and literary collaborator Charles Dickens came to dine.

¹ Lyn Pykett, *The Nineteenth-Century Sensation Novel*, Northcote, 2011 p. 5.

² *The Woman in White* was published weekly in *All the Year Round* from 26 November 1859 to 25 August 1860.

³ In Pilgrim, IX, pp. 110-111, Dickens writes to Collins on August 25, 1859, six days before travelling to Broadstairs: “...you two can dine with me one day – I can dine with you another and evenings similarly arranged”. In [0314] to Harriet Collins, 2 September 1859, from Church Hill Cottage, Broadstairs. Collins tells his mother: “...[Dickens] stays at the Hotel – dines here one day and we dine with him the next.”

⁴ It is the only novel named in the inscription Collins wrote for the memorial on his grave in Kensal Green Cemetery, West London: ‘Author of *The Woman in White* and other works of fiction.’ See Catherine Peters, *The King of Inventors*, Secker & Warburg, London, 1991, p. 432.

The first clues I found to the building's location appear in two biographies, *Wilkie Collins* by Peter Ackroyd and *Wilkie Collins, A Life of Sensation* by Andrew Lycett.

Ackroyd wrote:

...for six weeks they rented a house, Church Hill Cottage, on the Ramsgate Road. It was a quiet location, with a clear view of the sea from the downs; he liked to watch the various vessels as they passed perpetually.⁵

Lycett wrote:

He [Wilkie] was still not clear where he would stay. Once he had made up his mind about Broadstairs, he travelled to reconnoitre there on Saturday, 23 July. Through Dickens he knew James Ballard, landlord of the Albion Hotel, who directed him slightly out of town to the tranquil Church Hill Cottage. But it was still occupied and he could not immediately move in.⁶

Other clues came to light when I read an online edition of *A Wilkie Collins Chronology* by William Baker.⁷ Its entry for Wednesday, September 7, 1859, reveals that Collins: "Sends CW [his friend Charles Ward] directions to Church Hill Cottage, Broadstairs." If I could track down this letter to Ward, it might lead me, as it was intended to lead Ward, to the house.

I searched the internet and found this same William Baker had also co-edited a book called *The Letters of Wilkie Collins*, Volume 1, 1838-1865.⁸

I bought the book and found it contained eight letters relating to his Broadstairs visit, including this one to his friend Charles Ward with directions to the cottage.

Your course, on arriving at Ramsgate, is simplicity itself. You merely inquire for the Broadstairs' bus [a horse-drawn omnibus] (which meets every train) – get on it, or in it, whichever you please – and tell the man to set you down at this place...We look on to the high road by which you arrive, and are just the sort of house which nobody can possibly miss.⁹

The remaining letters give other clues both as to the description and location of the property, this one to Ward before his arrival:

⁵ Peter Ackroyd, *Wilkie Collins*, Chatto & Windus, London 2012, p 86.

⁶ Andrew Lycett, *Wilkie Collins, A Life of Sensation*, Hutchinson, London 2013 p 190.

⁷ William Baker, *A Wilkie Collins Chronology*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 106

⁸ William Baker and William M Clarke, *The Letters of Wilkie Collins*, Vol 1, 1838-1865, Macmillan, London 1999 pp. 168-179.

⁹ [O315] to Charles Ward, from Church Hill Cottage, Broadstairs, 7 September 1859.

I have just come back from Broadstairs, where I have taken a half-detached cottage all to myself, on the Ramsgate Road with nothing between me and the sea but the open down. We go on Wednesday, August 3rd, and if you like to come and finish your holiday with us, by all means do so. We shall be settled in a day or two with our own servants here, and we have got a spare bedroom. So if you come on the 5th or 6th you are sure to find us ready. Direct to me, after the 3rd August, at: Mr Wayhall's, Church Hill Cottage, Broadstairs.¹⁰

And this to his mother, Mrs Harriet Collins:

I left on Friday morning last, travelled on Saturday (in despair of finding another place to suit me) to Broadstairs and consulted the hotel-keeper there, who is an old friend of mine. The result is that I have got one of two little cottages standing, unconnected with other houses, outside Broadstairs on the Ramsgate Road. Between me and the sea there is nothing but the smooth down in front of the house and field and gardens behind it.¹¹

And again to Ward once he was in the Cottage:

There is nothing but the down between us and the "great water" – we are on the Ramsgate road, just outside Broadstairs – and we have got the cottage all to ourselves. Can't you manage, sometime in the course of the next six weeks, to get here from Saturday to Monday?¹²

Whilst I still hadn't identified the location of the cottage, the letters provide some useful pointers. The cottage was semi-detached and had a clear view of the sea. It was situated on the Broadstairs to Ramsgate Road. It had a minimum of three bedrooms for Wilkie and Caroline, her daughter Harriet and any guests. Both Ward and Collins' brother Charley stayed, but not at the same time.¹³ The cottages, backed by fields and gardens, were away from other houses on the outskirts of Broadstairs. The Broadstairs omnibus from Ramsgate Town railway station passed the cottage which was on the 'high road' between the two towns.

But there was one clue in one of the letters quoted above that everyone appears to have missed, probably because it is in the letter Collins wrote from his London home nine days *before* he started his Broadstairs holiday. Writing to Ward on July 25, Collins instructed all mail after August 3 – the day he was due to begin his holiday – should be directed to him at Mr Wayhall's, Church Hill Cottage, Broadstairs. It was Collins'

¹⁰ [0308] to Charles Ward, Monday, 25 July 1859.

¹¹ [0309] to Harriet Collins, Tuesday, 26 July 1859.

¹² [0310] to Charles Ward, from Church Hill Cottage, Broadstairs, Sunday, 7 August 1859.

¹³ Collins's brother Charley (Charles Allston Collins, 1828-1873) stayed in the guest room but left Broadstairs on Monday 5 September 1859, see [0314] to Harriet Collins, Friday 2 September 1859. Ward arrived to stay on Saturday 10 September, see [0315] to Charles Ward, Wednesday 7 September 1859.

disclosure of his landlord's surname, Wayhall, that finally led me to the location of this house with its important literary connections.

First, I searched through the Broadstairs census returns to see if a Mr Wayhall was living in the village in the mid 1800s.¹⁴ The 1841 survey had no Wayhall but there was a mariner called James Wales and his wife Mary. Despite the different spelling of the surname, this surely had to be Collins's landlord because the census gives their address as Church Hill Cottage. They were still residing there in 1851 but were missing from the 1861 survey.

Next, I purchased a CD containing the 1842 Broadstairs Tithe Map from the Kent History & Library Centre. The map numbers every plot of land in the parish.¹⁵ A separate document, the Broadstairs and St Peter's Tithe Award Schedule lists all the numbered plots of land together with the names of the properties, their owners and/or tenants, a description of how the land is being used, the size of the plots in acres, roods and perches and what tithe or land tax was to be paid each year to the vicar of St Peter's Church and/or the Lord of the Manor.¹⁶

Reading through the 32-page schedule, I eventually found owner and occupier James Wales at plot 75 – described as Church Hill Cottage – which comprised a house with large gardens.

¹⁴ The decennial Broadstairs & St Peter's census returns are available for viewing free of charge at the National Archives at Kew, Richmond TW9 4DU. To book a visit go to www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/book-a-reading-room-visit/ Census returns are also available online at many libraries and country record offices as well on some commercial family history websites.

¹⁵ The 1842 tithe map of St Peter's, Thanet, including Broadstairs, is reproduced by kind permission of the Kent Archive Service. It is available for purchase on CD from Kent History and Library Centre. Email: archives@kent.gov.uk.

¹⁶ The Broadstairs & St Peter's Tithe Award Schedule is available online at www.kentarchaeology.org.uk/research/tithes/broadstairsthanet-st-peter#02.htm

1842 tithe schedule

Leonard Lewin Wheatley & Osborne Lathorn	Thomas Cramp	318	Scab Acre	Arable	<u>0.3.38</u>	<u>0.3.1</u>	<u>0.7.10</u>
	Thomas Blackburn jun	353	George Hill Four Acres	Arable	4.0.10		
		354	House Mound	Pasture	0.3.35		
		355	George Hill & Road Field	Premises	0.2.2		
		356	Road Field	Arable	7.0.30		
		357	Road Five Acres	---	5.0.31		
		358	The Great field	---	36.0.13		
		359	The Long Field	---	34.0.3		
		360	The Cliff Field	---	<u>6.12.9</u>		
					<u>94.1.13</u>	<u>15.15.11</u>	<u>39.6.10</u>
James Wales	Himself	75	Church Hill Cottage	Garden	<u>0.1.12</u>	<u>0.1.3.8</u>	
Mary Watts	James Pain	135	The Three & half Acres	---	<u>3.2.14</u>	<u>0.13.10</u>	<u>1.19.0</u>
	William Ward	443	---	Premises	<u>0.1.34</u>	<u>0.4.0</u>	
Thomas Witherden	Himself	166	House	Garden	<u>0.0.16</u>	<u>0.1.1</u>	

Excerpt from the 1842 Broadstairs tithe schedule showing, at Plot 75, James Wales owning and occupying a house with garden called Church Hill Cottage

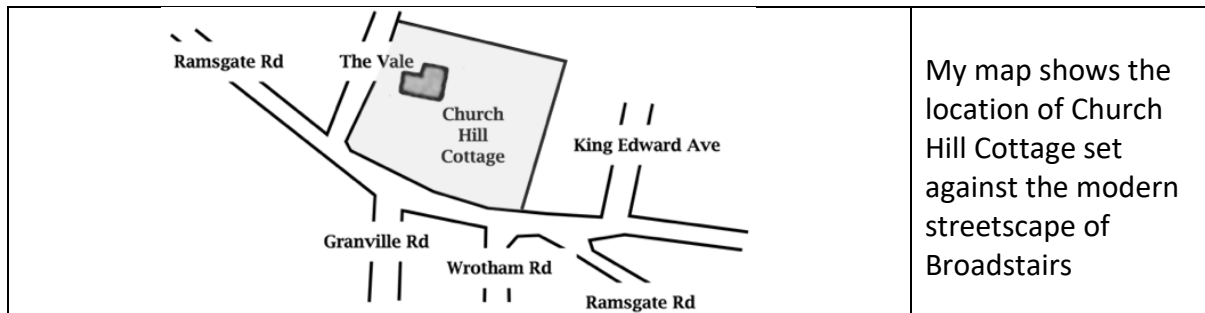
If I could now find plot 75 on the tithe map I would have Church Hill Cottage's location...and yes, there it was, just as Collins described it – on the Ramsgate road, on the outskirts of the village, with nothing between it and the sea.



Part of the 1842 tithe map of Broadstairs and St Peter's. The magnified section shows the red-coloured Church Hill Cottage at Plot 75. It is located at the bottom of the road now called The Vale near its junction with Ramsgate Road, King Edward Avenue, and Granville Road

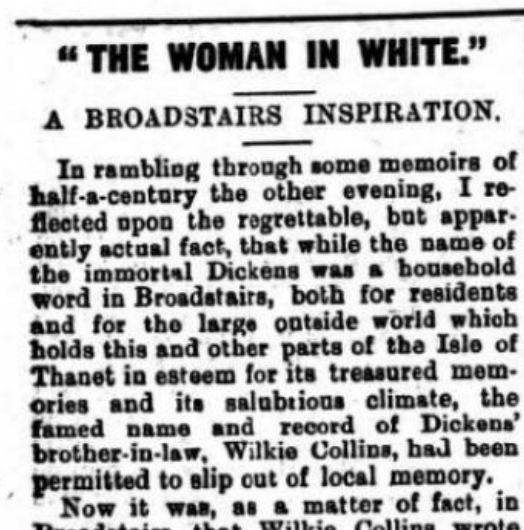
© Kent Archive Service

The tithe map places it on a quarter-of-an-acre site today bounded by The Vale, Ramsgate Road, Granville Road, Wrotham Road and King Edward Avenue.



I then found the following story in *The Thanet Advertiser* for April 28, 1917, which not only gave me further proof I had found the cottage Collins stayed in but also made me realise I already knew the building. Under the headline, "The Woman in White." A Broadstairs Inspiration, the reporter wrote:

In rambling through some memoirs of half a century the other evening, I reflected upon the regrettable, but apparently actual fact, that while the name of the immortal Dickens was a household word in Broadstairs, both for residents and for the large outside world which holds this and other parts of the Isle of Thanet in esteem for its treasured memories and its salubrious climate, the famed name and record of Dickens' brother-in-law, Wilkie Collins, had been permitted to slip out of local memory.



Now it was, as a matter of fact, in Broadstairs that Wilkie Collins wrote and christened his immortal work, 'The Woman In White'. For it is on record, as one can read in a letter written from Church Hill Cottage, Broadstairs, on August 15, 1859, that it was during 'a night walk to the North Foreland' that he hit upon this title which seemed to him 'weird and striking'.

I have recently paid a visit to The Vale in order to see Church Hill Cottage which I found lying snugly tucked away, under (alas!) a now changed name ('The Lodge'), beneath the shelter of tall ash trees and an old flint wall overlooking the east end of King Edwards [sic] Avenue. In those days there must have been an almost uninterrupted view over the Bay from this peaceful and secluded garden.¹⁷

¹⁷ *The Thanet Advertiser*, 26 April 1917, p. 6.

The disclosure that the cottage stood beside an old flint wall overlooking King Edward Avenue gave me a jolt of recognition. My uncle and aunt had lived in that road in the 1960s and I was a regular visitor. The rear of their house, The Lindens, had access to The Vale by way of a track beside which stood an old cottage which I now knew to be Church Hill Cottage. Not only had I known the family who owned the house but since my discovery a former resident of The Vale told me she and her neighbours had referred to the building as “Wilkie Collins’ cottage”.

I took a walk to The Vale and walked down the track towards the rear of the houses in King Edward Avenue. And there, shielded from view by more recent housing developments, stood Wilkie Collins’s Church Hill Cottage – now called Woodside Cottage – with the address 9, The Vale, Broadstairs.



These houses built in the 1860s now hide Church Hill Cottage from view

The track leading to the cottage, now renamed Woodside Cottage

Despite all the evidence I had found, there was still one nagging little doubt. In July Collins had described the house in his letters to Charles Ward and his mother as “a half-detached cottage”¹⁸ and “one of two little cottages”¹⁹. But from what I could see from the outside, it looked like one dwelling, not a “half-detached cottage”.

I took another look at the 1842 tithe map and noticed Church Hill Cottage on Plot 75 appeared to have an extra wing which is missing today. Could that once have been separate living accommodation?

¹⁸ [0308] to Charles Ward, Monday 25 July 1859.

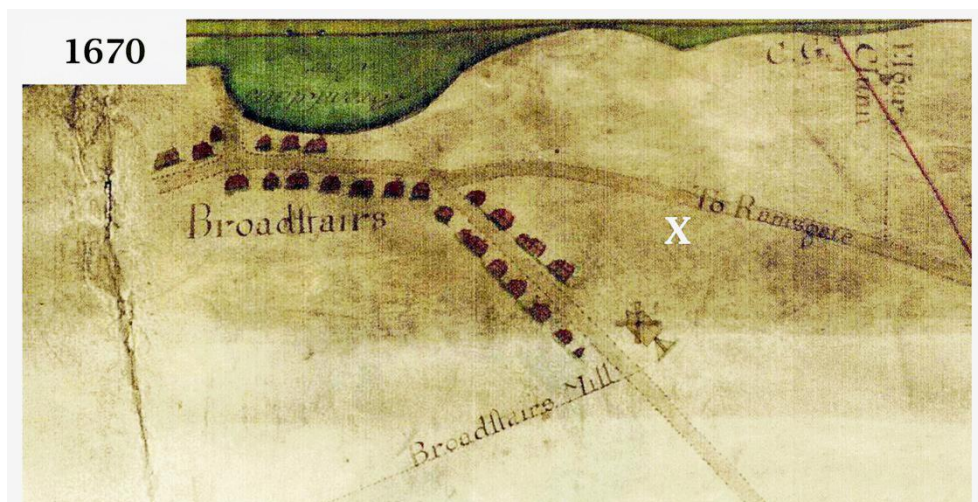
¹⁹ [0309] to Harriet Collins, Tuesday 26 July 1859.



Before I could write this article for the Wilkie Collins Society, I was honour bound to speak to the current owner and ask for their permission. Perhaps they would have some information about whether the original house was detached or semi-detached. I introduced myself to the owner, Pauline Landen, and showed her the evidence for my claim. She was thrilled at the thought of living in such an historical building and gave me her consent to make public my findings. She also allowed me to examine a bundle of old deeds, maps and other legal documents relating to the house. And it was these that gave me the final pieces in the jigsaw – proof that today’s Woodside Cottage is indeed Church Hill Cottage and that it was once divided into two cottages. Using these documents, plus newspaper notices and several censuses, I have been able to piece together the history of the site.

Timeline

A 1670 Broadstairs map shows Church Hill Cottage is yet to be built. My white X marks its eventual location. The house is also absent from a map of 1797.



1831 to 1851

The first mention of Church Hill Cottage was in 1831. On September 6 the *Kentish Chronicle* announces the forthcoming auction of Church-Hill Cottage “situated at the south entrance of Broadstairs and adjoining the grounds of Piermont House”.²⁰

BROADSTAIRS.
Freehold Marine Residence.
 CHURCH-HILL COTTAGE.

TO BE SOLD BY AUCTION,
 By Mr. HALE,

ON MONDAY, the 12th of SEPTEMBER, 1831,
 between the hours of 3 and 5 o'clock in the afternoon,
 at the ROYAL KENT LIBRARY, BROADSTAIRS, subject to
 such conditions as will be then and there produced, a most
 Desirable substantial newly-built

Freehold Marine Cottage

situated at the south entrance of Broadstairs, on the road
 leading from Ramsgate, and adjoining the grounds of Pier-
 mont House, the late residence of H. R. H. the Duchess of
 Kent. The situation commands the most extensive Land
 and Sea views of any in the Isle of Thanet.

The COTTAGE consists of two good parlours, four good
 bedrooms, a dressing room, a nursery or back parlour, a
 kitchen, bath and bed chamber, a terrace in front of

The 1841 census of Broadstairs lists mariner James Wales and his wife Mary as occupying Church Hill Cottage. The single slash after a name indicates a separate household within the same property. The double slash indicates a separate, unconnected premises. The census shows the Waleses share the premises with three other households. A total of eight people live in the house – seven adults and one child.

		Priscilla do	13		1	2
Church Hill cottage	176	James Wales	50		Maxim	2
		Mary do	45			2
		George Miller	40			2
	18	John Bruce	35		do /	2
		Louisa do	30			2
		Martha Warren	20		do +	2
		Jane do	20		do +	2
		Hannah White	40		2 / 4 +	2
		Joseph Harris	70		do +	2
cottage corner		Mary Wood	40			2

²⁰ *Kentish Chronicle*, 6 September 1831, p. 1a.

The 1851 census of Broadstairs lists mariner James Wales, aged 61, and his wife Mary, as still occupying Church Hill Cottage. No other households are recorded as being present.

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Parish or Township of		Ecclesiastical District of		City or Borough of		Town of		Village of	
Household No.	Name of Street, Place, or Road, and Name or No. of House	Name and Surname of each Person who abode in the house, on the Night of the 30th March, 1851	Relation to Head of Family	Condition	Age of		Rank, Profession, or Occupation	Where Born	Whether Single, or Married, or Widowed
					Males	Females			
17	Church Hill Cottage	James Wales	Head	Mar	61		Mariner	Kent, Deal	—
		Mary Wales	Wife	Mar	58		Mariner's wife	Kent, Broadstairs	—
18	One House Uninhabited						Proprietor of Houses	Kent, Broadstairs	—

1860-1861

Three properties are erected at the side of Church Hill Cottage, fronting The Vale (originally called 1, 2, and 3 Church Hill Houses or Churchill, now 3, 5 and 7 The Vale).

On March 27, 1860, the *Kentish Gazette* announces the sale of Church Hill Houses, “together with a cottage . . . situate at Church Hill, Broadstairs”.²¹ The occupier’s name is given as Mr James Wayhall, probably the same James Wales listed as the occupier of Church Hill Cottage in the 1841 and 1851 Censuses.

SALE TO-MORROW.

BROADSTAIRS, KENT.

VALUABLE
FREEHOLD DWELLING HOUSES,
KNOWN AS
CHURCH HILL HOUSES,
WITH COTTAGE, COACH-HOUSE, STABLE, AND
GARDEN,
Situate at Broadstairs, in the Isle of Thanet, Kent.

MR. J. STANER
Is instructed by the Mortgagee,
TO SELL BY AUCTION,

ON WEDNESDAY, MARCH 28th, 1860, at Two for Three o'clock in the Afternoon, at the KING'S HEAD HOTEL, MARGATE, the following Valuable Freehold Property, in One Lot:—

All those substantial and newly-erected brick-built FREEHOLD DWELLINGS known as “Church Hill Houses,” together with a COTTAGE, Coach-house, 2-stall Stable, Out-houses, and Garden, situate at Church Hill, Broadstairs, at present in the occupation of Mr. James Wayhall. One of the above Houses contain five, and the other four, good bed-

The 1861 Broadstairs census reveals a fourth house has been built in the grounds of Church Hill Cottage, this time in front of the building, fronting Ramsgate Road. This is initially called 4 Church Hill or 4 Churchill and in later decades Woodside, York House, the York Hotel and York House Nursing Home. In the late 20th century it was converted

²¹ *Kentish Gazette*, 27 March 1860, p. 1e.

into flats. The entry describes 1, 2, 3 and 4 Church hill as “newly built”. The census does not record the Waleses as still living there.

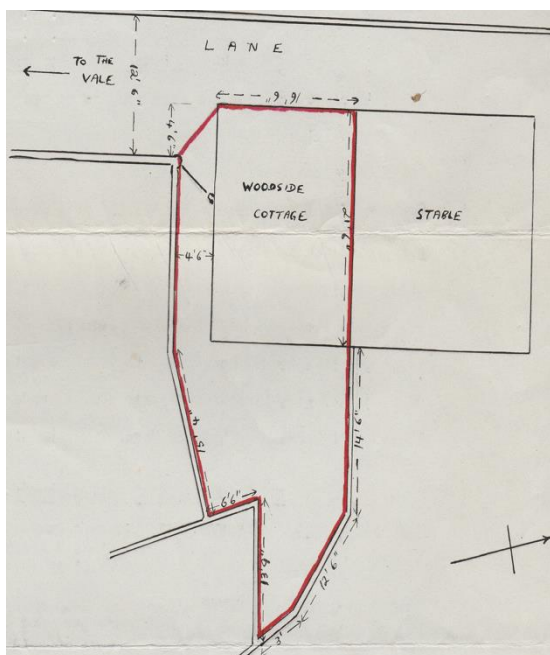
12, 2, 4 Churchill	14	Ann	Do	Wife	Mar	27	1
12, 3, 1 Conway Villas	1	Mary C	Barby	Wife	Mar	27	1
		Phil	Do	Daughter	Unm	23	1

At some stage Church Hill Cottage falls on hard times. The left-hand side, now called Woodside Cottage, continues in human habitation but the right-hand side becomes a stable and coach house on the ground floor with a hay loft and storerooms above.

After World War II

A Conveyance dated November 13, 1947, relating to the sale of the cottage for £250 by the owners of the York Hotel to a Mr Peter Murdoch, contained a plan.

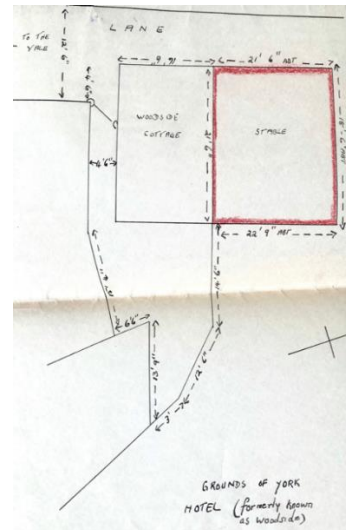
The sale is of the left-hand side only, not the adjoining stable and hayloft. The Conveyance describes the premises for sale in these terms:



All that piece or parcel of land situate at the rear of the York Hotel, The Vale, Broadstairs . . . together with the cottage and premises situate thereon and known as ‘Woodside Cottage’ (formerly known as ‘Churchill Cottage’ and ‘The Lodge’) but excluding the stable and coach house adjoining thereto. All which premises are more particularly delineated in the plan drawn hereon and thereon edged in red...

Three years later in 1950 Murdoch purchases the adjoining stables with rooms over for £150 and converts them back into a habitable state. Church Hill Cottage is now back to how Collins would have known it. A Conveyance with a map relating to this purchase, dated June 12, 1950, describes the property:

All that piece or parcel of land situate at the rear of the York Hotel, The Vale, Broadstairs, together with the coach-house and premises etc and standing on the whole of the said piece of land situate and bounded on the South by the premises known as 'Woodside Cottage' (formerly known as 'Churchill Cottage' and 'The Lodge') and bounded on the West by the garden ground of York Hotel aforesaid and on the East by a lane leading from The Vale aforesaid all which premises are for the purposes of identification only more particularly delineated in the plan annexed hereto and thereon coloured pink...



Pauline Landen's documents show that in 1951 Peter Murdoch sells the cottage to Rupert Sydney Kent and Valerie Marie Kent. A conveyance dated March 31 of that year shows the Kents paid £1,600 for

THE SCHEDULE above referred to

FIRST All that piece or parcel of land situate at the rear of the York Hotel The Vale Broadstairs in the County of Kent Together with the cottage and premises erected thereon or on part thereof and now known as "Woodside Cottage" (formerly known as "Churchill Cottage" and then as "The Lodge") The Vale Broadstairs aforesaid

All that piece or parcel of land situate at the rear of The York Hotel The Vale Broadstairs in the County of Kent Together with the cottage and premises erected thereon or on part thereof and now known as "Woodside Cottage" (formerly known as "Churchill Cottage" and then as "The Lodge") The Vale Broadstairs aforesaid.

The fact the cottage had previously been called The Lodge is worth noting. The journalist who wrote the article in *The Thanet Advertiser* headlined 'The Woman in White' in April 1917, reported the cottage was then called 'The Lodge'.

A relative of the Kents who visited the cottage in the late 1950s has since told me it then had two old wooden spiral staircases, one at each end of the house – further evidence that it had at one time been semi-detached. Prior to it being sold to Pauline Landen in 2004, the cottage was refurbished and one of these staircases was removed.

All the information provided above clearly shows the house named Church Hill Cottage at Broadstairs in which Wilkie Collins wrote the opening chapters of *The Woman in White* in 1859, still exists and is today called Woodside Cottage, at 9, The Vale.

When I first introduced myself to Pauline Landen, she kindly gave me a tour of the house which is much more spacious inside than it appears from the outside.

I looked out from one of the windows from which Collins stated in his letters he had a clear view of the sea, Sadly, building development means that open outlook is long gone.

But I could clearly picture Collins sitting at his desk in front of that window as his ink-charged quill pen scratched out the opening lines of *The Woman in White*:

It was the last day of July. The long hot summer was drawing to a close; and we, the weary pilgrims of the London pavement, we're beginning to think of the cloud-shadows on the corn fields, and the autumn breeze on the seashore.²²

A visit

One of Collins's guests at Church Hill Cottage that summer was his brother Charley who would marry Dickens's daughter Kate the following year.²³ His stay coincided with that of Dickens. One evening as Charley and Dickens strolled along the seafront, they saw a poster advertising a young mesmerist, stage name the Infant Magnet, who was appearing that night at the Broadstairs Assembly Rooms. The notice listed one of her feats simply as "The Rigid Legs".

Dickens wrote to his daughters:

[We] were overpowered with curiosity and resolved to go. It came off in the Assembly Room, now more exquisitely desolate than words can describe.²⁴

After paying their shilling entrance fee, the two men took their seats and waited for the entertainment to begin. Suddenly, from behind a screen, they heard what Dickens describes as "mysterious gurglings of water...and then a slippery sound" prompting him to whisper to Charlie Collins: "Soap." At this his younger companion burst out laughing in what Dickens described as "a ridiculous manner".

²² *All the Year Round*, vol. II, 26 November 1859, pp. 95-96

²³ Catherine Elizabeth Macready Dickens (1839-1929) married Charles Allston Collins on 17 July 1860. After his death in 1873, she married the artist Charles Edward Perugini (1839-1918).

²⁴ To Mary and Katey Dickens, from the Albion Hotel, Broadstairs, Friday 2 September 1859, Pilgrim IX, pp. 115-116.

Dickens's letter continued:

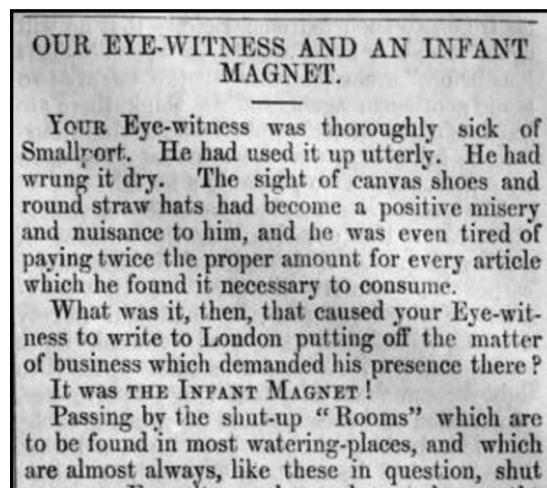
It proved to be the young lady washing herself. She must have been wonderfully dirty, for she took a world of trouble, and didn't come out clean after all – in a wretched dirty muslin frock, with blue ribbons. She was the alleged mesmeriser, and a boy the alleged mesmerised.

The act was a shambles from start to finish. First, the Infant Magnet had somehow managed to mislay her accompanist, resulting in an appeal for anyone in the audience to come forward and play a tune on the piano. No one would. Then the startled spectators had to dive for safety when the “hypnotised” boy suddenly came out of his trance and performed half-a-dozen rapid backflips in their midst.

A highly delighted Dickens described the evening in his letter as “never to be forgotten” and “more ludicrous than any poor sight I ever saw.”

In addition to Dickens' letter to his daughters, I have uncovered another description of the Infant Magnet's performance in Broadstairs that evening 163 years ago. Charley Collins, a talented artist who numbered Pre-Raphaelite painters amongst his acquaintances, had recently taken up Dickens' offer to write a series of humorous sketches for *All the Year Round* under the pseudonym “Our Eye-witness”.

On October 15, six weeks after their visit to the Assembly Rooms, his 3,500-word story called ‘Our Eyewitness and an Infant Magnet’ appeared in the magazine.²⁵



Thinly disguising Broadstairs as ‘Smallport’, he chronicles their outing in comic detail – the seediness of the room and its furnishings, the rowdiness of the apple-crunching bathing-machine boys who had been let in for free to swell the meagre audience and

²⁵ ‘Our Eye-Witness and an Infant Magnet’ Charles Allston Collins, *All the Year Round*, 15 October 1859, pp. 597-600.

the inability of 'The Professor' who compèred the evening to complete a single comprehensible sentence.

The farcical finale saw the boy, having again been "hypnotised" by the Infant Magnet, rolling around on the ground, fighting invisible assailants.

Collins takes up the story:

They had sent him to the show in a "Dickey;" a dreadful subterfuge (the sale of which should be illegal) which bears the semblance of a shirt; while, in reality, it is only the front of one. The Dickey behaved very well for a long time. Through all the squarings and strikings out, the buffetings of the air, and the cuffings of imaginary adversaries, it kept its place; but when, in the final crisis of destructiveness, our youngster flung himself, wallowing on the ground, then the last thread, or the final tape, or the critical button, or something or other, gave way, and the deceptive piece of wearing apparel dawned upon the company in all its native hideousness.

It was too much for the gravity of even the Magnet herself. All eyes went to the shirt-front; whisperings and covert laughter, and explosive splutterings of bathing-machine boys, gathered force and volume, till at last the attention of the combative youth himself was drawn to the derangement of his attire, and, as he rolled over in one of his paroxysms, he managed to turn his back to the audience, and capture the floating ends of the treacherous Dickey—and thrust it back into his waistcoat.²⁶



The Assembly Rooms, Broadstairs in 1871

²⁶ *Op. cit.* p. 600.

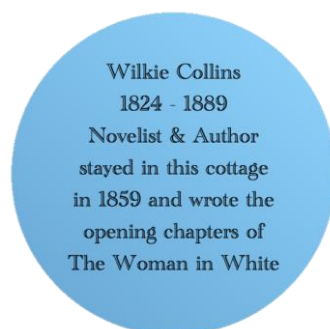
After their hilarious evening at the Assembly Rooms, Dickens strolled the few yards to the Albion Hotel where he was staying and Charley Collins walked the 500 yards back to his brother's lodgings at Church Hill Cottage on the outskirts of the village.



The Albion Hotel, Broadstairs, at the beginning of the last century. Dickens stayed there during his visit to Broadstairs in 1859 and invited Wilkie Collins and Caroline Graves to dine with him

Plaque

There are several commemorative panels on buildings around Broadstairs honouring Dickens's stays and the names of the novels he wrote in them.



How a plaque recording Wilkie Collins's stay at Church Hill Cottage might look

Now Church Hill Cottage has been rediscovered, I hope the relevant authorities will consider erecting a similar plaque to Wilkie Collins.



The back of Church Hill Cottage today.
When Collins stayed here in 1859 this would have been the front of the house
with uninterrupted views of the North Sea from its windows.

This edition of
IN SEARCH OF CHURCH HILL COTTAGE
Is limited to 200 copies

