The Mystery of 'Edwin Drood': An Architectural Clue

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Fig. 1. College Yard in Rochester as it used to be: a drawing by Alfred Rimmer, published in 1877.

Early in 1870, a promising young artist, Luke Fildes, was hired to provide the illustrations for Charles Dickens's new novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. The plan was for the book to be issued in twelve monthly 'numbers' (a number comprised thirty-two pages), with two illustrations in each number; Fildes was being commissioned to produce twenty-four drawings. The first number published was dated April 1870. Before his death, Dickens had seen the final proof for Number 4; he had seen a rough proof for Number 5; he had already written two chapters for Number 6. Those three numbers were published in due course, under the supervision of John Forster (Number 5 in a very different shape from that intended by Dickens), and Fildes supplied the drawings for them. In the end, therefore, he produced just twelve illustrations.

The finished drawings, all twelve of them, seem to have been sold by Fildes to some collector. He had stipulated with Dickens, from the outset, that the drawings should be his to keep (Storey 2002: 470). They are now in the Houghton Library at Harvard, spliced into a copy of the first edition of the novel (Rosenbach 1918: 79, Cox 1997: 15). Fildes preserved many of the sketches, studies and rough-outs that he had made in connection

with this project, and those drawings were still in his possession when he died. They are now divided between the Beinecke Library in New Haven and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Images of all of them can be found online, but many of the more interesting pieces were reproduced long ago, some of them more than once, in magazines and books (Meynell 1884, How 1893, Thomson 1895, Kitton 1899).

The illustration which interests me is the sixth one, the second of the two which appeared in Number 3 for June 1870. (This drawing, therefore, had indubitably been made to Dickens's instructions, and seen and approved of by him.) The subject is an incident near the beginning of chapter 12 (Dickens 1870:86–96), an altercation between Sapsea and Durdles witnessed by the Dean, Jasper and Tope. These five figures occupy the foreground; I have nothing to say about them. It is the background which I find significant. For anyone who knew their way around Rochester, that would be recognisable as being (almost) a view of College Yard, looking north towards College Gate from a point near the north-west corner of the cathedral.

That scene was picturesque enough to catch the eye of an artist from time to time. The drawing reproduced here (Fig. 1) is by Alfred Rimmer (1877: 126). (Other drawings exist of about the same date; there are some photographs too. The row of buildings on the left was demolished c. 1888; the house on the far side of the High Street, visible through the arch, was razed and rebuilt c. 1903. The gate and the buildings on the right are still there, looking much the same.)

Fig. 2. Fildes's sketch of College Yard, reproduced by Meynell (1884: 528). The original is in the Beinecke Library.

Fig. 3. A rough sketch of College Yard, with the figures put into position, reproduced by Thomson (1895). Again, the original drawing is in the Beinecke Library

Sure enough, among Fildes's drawings there is a sketch – a rapid but accurate sketch – which can instantly be identified as a view of College Yard (Fig. 2). Evidently Dickens had taken or sent Fildes down to Rochester, in spring 1870, to make a sketch of the scene that he wanted for a background here (and possibly some other scenes too). Fildes was standing further back than Rimmer, and further to the right, but those features which are represented in both drawings will be seen to match up exactly. The railings on the right enclose the burial ground north of the cathedral; the railings on the left enclose the burial ground of St Nicholas's parish; the parish church itself is just visible on the right. College Gate stands at the bottom of College Yard, at the entrance into the precinct from the High Street. Through the archway can be seen the jettied building on the far side of the street, at the corner of Pump Lane, which was, for as long as it lasted, an admired feature of the townscape.

Fildes made individual studies of each of the figures who was to appear in this drawing – the Dean, Sapsea (How 1893: 122), Durdles (Meynell 1884: 525, How 1893: 121), Jasper, Tope – and a rough sketch to show how the figures were to be positioned. That sketch was reproduced by Thomson (1895: 28); the original is in the Beinecke Library. For the background, Fildes used his view of College Yard, with College Gate at the far end of it.

The published illustration, engraved by Fildes's friend Charles Roberts from Fildes's finished drawing (Fig. 4), is mostly in close agreement with this preliminary sketch. But there is one striking difference: the gate has undergone a metamorphosis. Below Durdles's outstretched arm, the gate is still College Gate, just as Fildes drew it, with the jettied building on the High Street visible through the archway. Above, it is no longer the same. The upper storey of College Gate, as it appeared in Fildes's sketch, as it

appeared and still appears in reality, is a wooden structure, with weather-boarded sides and a steeply gabled roof. But Fildes has now replaced it with the upper storey of a different gate, which anyone who knew their way around Rochester would again be quick to recognise.

Fig. 4. The finished drawing, 'Durdles cautions Mr Sapsea against boasting', published in June 1870.

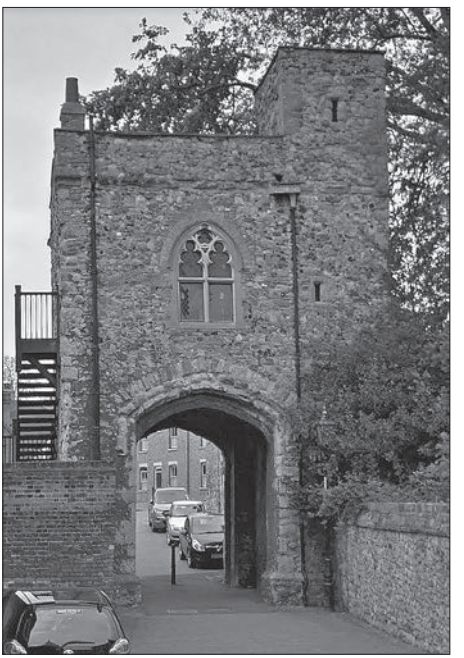

Fig. 5. Prior's Gate seen from the north. The window tracery is modern: a drawing by William Twopeny, dated 1843, taken from a point inside the garden on the right, shows the latticed window mentioned by Dickens (Swain 1986, plate 67).

This is Prior's Gate – the gate which formed the southern entrance to the precinct – seen from the north (Fig. 5). It was and is a stone structure, always at risk of getting overgrown with ivy, with a staircase turret at the north-west corner giving access to a flat roof. Though no separate sketch of Prior's Gate survives, not everything was kept – Fildes also did a sketch of Eastgate House, 'but that drawing was not preserved' (Meynell 1884: 527) – and it is clear that he must have made one. More than that, it is evident that he must have been instructed by Dickens to make one.

The gate which Dickens could see in his mind's eye was not a gate which actually existed. In its location it resembled College Gate: the fact that it stands next to the High Street is repeatedly made clear (e.g. Dickens 1870: 185). In its superstructure, however, it resembled Prior's Gate. That is how Dickens describes it in chapter 2, where the Dean, Crisparkle and Tope are worrying about the state of Jasper's health. 'They all three look towards an old stone gatehouse crossing the Close, with an arched thoroughfare passing beneath it. Through its latticed window, a fire shines out upon the fast-darkening scene, involving in shadow the pendent masses of ivy and creeper covering the building's front' (Dickens 1870: 5). That is how Dickens visualised the gate, and that is why Fildes's drawing had to be adjusted.

As far as I am aware, nobody noticed the discrepancy (or, if they noticed it, thought it worth mentioning in print) when the drawing was first published. In 1888, however, two Dickensian pilgrims arrived in Rochester – William Hughes and Frederic Kitton – who did see that the gate in the illustration was different from College Gate. Hughes wrote to Fildes, asking whether he could elucidate. Fildes (with an almost audible sigh) replied – but his reply goes only to prove that he had no distinct recollection of what he had done, twenty years (and busy years too) before (Hughes 1891: 128–9). Poor Fildes! Despite all his subsequent success as a serious artist, people kept asking him about Edwin Drood (Meynell 1884, Spielmann 1888, Kitton 1890, Hughes 1891, How 1893, Thomson 1895, Kitton 1899), and the upshot was always the same. He had never been told very much, and he had forgotten most of that. He tried to remember; sometimes he imagined that he *did* remember; but, in fact, he had forgotten.

Fortunately, this illustration speaks for itself. Though Hughes proceeded to tie himself up in knots, Kitton had a simple explanation: it seemed to him 'that, for the purposes of the story, the Prior's Gate is placed where the College Yard Gate actually stands' (Hughes 1891: 128). Later, after seeing Fildes's sketch of College Yard, Kitton spoke more vaguely of 'a gateway different from that existing at this spot' being substituted for it, 'in order to assist, no doubt, in promoting the novelist's obvious intention of disguising the identity of "Cloisterham"' (Kitton 1899: 211). That sounds very feeble to me: there are much more obvious signs than this

that Cloisterham is not the same as Rochester. For example, Cloisterham has a 'monastery ruin' where Rochester, rather famously, has a castle; Cloisterham has a weir close by, where Rochester has nothing of the kind.

I think Kitton was right – half-right at least – the first time. The change had to be made 'for the purposes of the story'. For some reason which Dickens was keeping to himself, it was necessary for the gate-house to have a flat roof, with a corner staircase leading up to it. And that would seem to mean that we have a new criterion for evaluating any proposed solution of the mystery. If the solution does not require Jasper's gate-house to have a flat roof, are we not entitled to decide that it cannot be the right solution?

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