

## The Six Poor Travellers' House

The name of this house refers to the better-known, but not necessarily the most interesting use of the building; it has also been called the Travellers' Rest, the Travellers' Almshouse and the Travellers' House. In the 16th Century, as stipulated in Richard Watts' will, poor travellers were provided with one night's lodging in the six bedrooms at the rear of this property. Because the Poor Law Act of 1576 stated that if you had less than fourpence you would be considered a vagrant, could be whipped and returned to your own parish, the travellers were also given fourpence.

**The House:** Changes in the house's use have required additions to the building. 1614-15 accounts record the expenses for the *'new staires at the back of the house and for digging a new way into the cellar'*. This was probably due to the arrival of children into the house. No further alterations were made until 1771 when the house, including roof and chimneys, was repaired and the front of the house was clad in Portland Stone. In 1854 a travellers' supper room was added to the back of the house and in 1923, a bathroom for the travellers' was installed.

**The Travellers:** Travellers continued to stay in the house until just after World War II started. The Defence of the Realm Act prohibited casual wayfarers from entering this protected area due to security concerns. So, the house closed on 20<sup>th</sup> July 1940 and never opened to travellers again.

**The Children:** *'Sixteen poore children who would otherwise lye in idlenesse and be fitt for noe use'* were committed to the care of the house in 1615. They were taught to spin, weave or whatever was deemed suitable *'according to their abilities and capacitie'*. They were taught to read and write, and many were apprenticed to trades and craftsmen within the city.

**A House of Correction:** The House was also used as a house of correction for petty offenders. In 1653 Rochester City Council agreed that a house of correction should be set up at the almshouse. The correction was set in the cellar where the thick plank oak door with an iron grill remains today. In 1793 an order was made to close the House of Correction and in 1798 the last keeper was given notice to quit.

**Charles Dickens:** On 11<sup>th</sup> May 1854 Charles Dickens visited the house with the Editor of Punch, Mark Lemon. The house provided Dickens with the subject for his Christmas story *The Seven Poor Travellers*, which appeared in the December issue of *Household Words* that year.

**A Museum:** In 1979, to mark the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Richard's death, the house was renovated and the ground floor was converted to a museum to tell the story of the previous 400 years and the good that has been achieved by Richard Watts Charities.