HG Wells on the Kent Coast

H G Wells - H G as he was known - came to the Folkestone area in 1896 for the benefit of his health. Initially he rented a small, furnished house in Sandgate - Beach Cottage - which was so close to the sea that in rough weather the waves broke over the roof. He then moved to a nearby semi-detached villa, Arnold House, while supervising the construction of his own house by Charles Voysey, the well-known Arts & Crafts architect.

Spade House, now a Grade II Listed Building, is halfway down the hill from Folkestone Leas to Sandgate. In a commanding position overlooking the sea, with at that time a water-powered lift to The Leas literally on the doorstep, this became the home for H. G., his wife Jane and their two sons for nine hectic years.

During this time Sandgate has been aptly described as the world’s literary centre. Friends living nearby included Joseph Conrad in Postling, Henry James in Rye, and Edith Nesbitt, author of *The Railway Children*, in Dymchurch. Frequent visitors were George Bernard Shaw, Arnold Bennett, Ford Madox Ford and Sir James Barrie, as well as political figures such as the local MP, Sir Edward Sassoon, and his friend the young Winston Churchill.

In Sandgate, Wells enjoyed the most productive period of his long career. Some of his novels and stories are vividly situated in the local landscape. In *The First Men in the Moon*, Wells fictionally launched his astronauts from Lympne Ridge overlooking Romney Marsh. *Kipps* - featured in the play and film *Half a Sixpence* - shows the young hero walking along The Leas and round by the churchyard into Church and Rendezvous Streets.

The Leas and the Lower Sandgate Road provided the setting for his 1902 novel *The Sea Lady* whom Wells described as appearing out of the sea ‘very lovely in a close-fitting bathing dress’ and taking possession of his writing desk. Now the
café by the seashore in Folkestone is called *Mermaids* after the central character.

So often a visionary ahead of his time, Wells’ *War in the Air* was published in 1908, just nine years before Folkestone was actually the first town to experience bombardment from the air in May 1917.

In Kent Wells’ romantic activities, often regarded as scandalous, blossomed. A serious one was with a young Cambridge student Amber Reeves who was encouraged by her mother to take long walks with Wells to discuss subjects relating to her studies in moral philosophy.

Their passionate relationship was conducted in secret apart from Wells’ wife, Jane seeming to accept her husband’s ‘free-love’ philosophy - until Amber began boasting of it to her Cambridge friends. Her father, suddenly alert to what was going on, threatened to shoot Wells and the affair exploded into an outrageous scandal. Amber demanded Wells give her a baby and they fled to Le Touquet. When Amber realised Wells would never marry her, she returned to England. Astonishingly, he then sent for Jane and his two sons and it appears they played happily on the sands together before returning to Sandgate.

This scandal together with the publication of Wells’ ‘feminist’ novel *Anne Veronica* were too much for respectable Folkestone where Wells was a Borough Magistrate. So in 1909, the family escaped to London.

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