

The Dickens Fellowship, North East England

Branch no: 198

NEWSLETTER

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PART I:

*Whereby the Honorary Secretary tells of offers of help (from home and abroad)
and we emerge with dignity intact from our dramatic endeavours.*

Dear Fellow Dickensians.

As you are, I am sure, aware, the previous editor of this, our newsletter, has recently resigned due to more pressing commitments. I am sure that you will all join me in offering thanks to Gordon Stridiron for all of the work, effort and time he has put into producing what, to me and, I am sure, to you, has been a first class newsletter time after time. I sincerely hope that whatever ventures Gordon undertakes in the future, they will be very successful. On behalf of our branch, thank you very much indeed, Gordon.

So, my friends, that left us without an editor. I was devastated. I believe that our newsletter is part and parcel of the branch, therefore I sent out, with the minutes of our regular meetings, the sad news that, unless we could find a replacement we were to be without the North East England branch newsletter.

I need not have worried too much. Within a very short time, our Treasurer, Ruth Crofton, came up with a solution, that she would be willing to take over the reins if it were possible for Gordon to continue for another year. I consulted Gordon, and he kindly agreed to do this. I then had a call from our most recent member, Chris Robson, who said he would be willing to take over the position. The solution was there.

You may think that that was the end of the matter, but it is not. During this time of uncertainty, out of the blue came another offer of rescue, this time all of the way from Australia. Our member 'down under', Susan Hudson, rose to the occasion and offered her services as a replacement editor until things could be resolved domestically. I explained the situation to Susan via the wonders of the internet, and she was delighted to hear that a solution had been found closer to home.

So, my friends, I would like to take this opportunity to welcome Chris as our newly-appointed Newsletter editor. Thank you, Chris, from everyone. I feel sure that he will follow in the footsteps of our two previous editors, Ron Teasdale and Gordon Stridiron.

Now, to close with what seems an epistle. Our June 3rd Dickensian Presentation went very well in Low Fell, Gateshead, Tyne & Wear. There were, in the great tradition of the theatre (a profession very close to the heart of Mr Dickens) some hitches along the way, but despite this, the show, as it does, went on and the reception and applause following each sketch and reading was proof of the success. I have been asked already when our branch can offer another presentation but that, as they say, is something for further discussion. Can I close by offering my thanks to everyone involved in the presentation: your work and your efforts were truly appreciated.

*Yours in fellowship,
Mr Herbert Savory*

PART II:

In which the editor introduces himself and seeks to explain his intentions.



FROM THE EDITOR: It is with some trepidation that I address these few words to our readers. It is perhaps a sign of some inherent impetuosity that led me to offer my services as a prospective editor, certainly I acted without any heed to the feelings of my long-suffering wife, Margaret. Her reaction, upon hearing that Herbert had (rather too briskly for my liking) accepted my offer was a kind of “Oh no, here we go again” as she resigned herself to losing her husband to yet another (as she sees it) pointless and time-consuming endeavour. Well indeed (I imagined myself saying *very* forcefully) it may seem pointless to you, but this is Dickens for goodness sake!

And so it is, and here we are, almost 200 years since his birth, still reading and enjoying his works. What a joy it was to discover and become part of the North East Fellowship and to find kindred spirits sharing the simple pleasures of reading Dickens.

And what an honour to be asked to take over editorship of this small newsletter. I would like to thank my predecessors, Ron Teasdale and Gordon Stridiron for their superb efforts with the first nine newsletters. I would like to think that I can carry on in the same standard as both gentlemen.

I would also like to think that the spirit of this newsletter can reflect that of Mr Dickens himself. By that, I mean especially the spirit of joy and humanity that so suffuses his books. Mr Dickens may well be known by many as a social campaigner, or as offering a first-hand chronicle of 19th century England, but in many ways - certainly in his early works - his most common trait is surely his wonderful, youthful mockery. For almost nothing is beyond his cutting wit and delightful sarcasm. He appears, at times, almost unable to stop himself as he writes, as what begins with a serious-minded intent, soon shifts into a wonderful, life-affirming exercise in affectionate mockery, ridicule and mickey-taking.

And so, in this spirit of good humour, jest and gentle mockery, I would ask your indulgence and support in helping to make this newsletter at times serious, but also, at times, something that may bring perhaps one of the greatest of all gifts, that of joy and laughter, into our lives.

Mr Dickens and....

Many are the strange associations between Mr Dickens, his works, his characters and his era. In this occasional series we explore some of the more bizarre of these.

NUMBER 1:

Mr Dickens and.....a 1970's English 'heavy-metal' rock band.

Back in the 1970's a group of four young men from the English Midlands formed a rock band and, in pursuit of a eye-catching and distinctive name, decided to call themselves 'Uriah Heep' after the famous character in the novel *David Copperfield* by Mr Dickens.

Their music as not perhaps to everyone's taste, being - as was the wont of 'heavy-metal' bands - a mixture of heavily amplified rhythmic rock music, with the standard set-up of drums, bass guitar, electric guitars and screeching vocals. The appearance of the band had little to do with Mr Dickens or his works, with the members - as was the fashion of the time - dressed in denim, leather and all with long-hair. Possibly their only acknowledgement of the roots of their name was in the decision to call one of their earliest albums* "Very Heavy, Very Humble" in reference to the willingness of the character of Uriah Heep to describe himself - as an excuse for his ingratiating and scheming ways - as 'umble, sir, I am so very 'umble.'

The band achieved much success among the 'heavy-metal' circles of the day, touring across Europe and the USA. They were particularly renowned for their live appearances, and your editor is willing to admit that, in his younger days, he was an aficionado of such music (such is the youth of an adolescent, working-class boy in a northern industrial city of the 1970's!) and remembers with great affection watching the band at Newcastle City Hall!

(* - for our younger readers, an 'album' was not unlike a modern CD, except in that it was made of 12 inches of circular, flat vinyl - an oil-based derivative - which, when spun around a turntable, produced sound through the application of a fine needle)

NUMBER 2:

Mr Dickens and.....an eating establishment, offering poor service, in a Newcastle shopping centre.

The name 'Eldon Garden' is an ambitious, if faintly ludicrous, attempt by some property developers to bestow a sense of peace and tranquillity on what is essentially a soul-less indoor shopping area, elevated high above one of Newcastle's busiest bus-stations. Within this dreary space can be found 'Copperfields Tea Shop', offering the standard fare of refreshments and light snacks of the scone, tea-cake and cream cake variety. Whilst offering reasonable value vittals, of an acceptable, if unambitious, standard, visitors should not expect much in the way of service, as - on the one occasion the editor chose to visit - he was unable to find any willingness on the part of the staff to either look

interested in their work, or to commit themselves to seeing to the needs of the customers.

Other than the name of the establishment, and some rather poor drawings of 'Pickwickian' characters on the laminated and scuffed menus, there was little else to link the place with Mr Dickens.

NUMBER 3:

Mr Dickens and....the singing dog.

When the hugely popular stage musical 'Oliver' left it's stay at London's West End and began to tour provincial theatres in the late 1960's, one of the problems faced by the theatre troupe was what to do with Bill Sykes's dog during their temporary residence in these northern and midland cities.

The dog, of course, was an essential star in the stage-version of the hit musical as it performed a key and heroic role in this somewhat loose version of the book by Mr Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, by turning against his violent owner and leading the police and pursuers to the hiding-place of Bill Sykes after he has brutally murdered young Nancy.

Clearly such a role could only be performed by a theatrical dog, trained for the part and needing, as is the wont of those in the profession, to be pandered and molly-coddled when not enacting his arduous duties on the stage.

The ingenious solution of the theatre managers was to advertise for a local, pet-friendly, family to look after the dog and offer it a temporary home during the run of the play. So it was, that, on seeing an advert in the *Newcastle Evening Chronicle*, my own dear parents, with no theatrical background at all, responded to the advertisement asking for assistance. After a visit and inspection from an harassed and slightly miffed assistant stage manager - who clearly thought a career in the profession had not meant to include checking the credentials of potential pet-owners - we were asked to take on care duties, pet-food paid for and some free tickets thrown in. I do not recall that we had, as a family, previously owned a dog, although my father had been brought up with many such animals and possessed a remarkably calm temperament that endeared him to dogs wherever he ventured. To this day, however, I do think that the deciding factor was that we lived within a mile of the theatre (in Benwell) which meant that whichever member of the theatrical troupe was obliged to deliver the dog back to our house after the show, could very quickly rejoin their colleagues at their after-show supper and therefore nor miss out on any of the lovely and spiky gossip so beloved of the business.

And so 'Toby' (for that was the off-stage name of the dog) entered our lives. And even now, some forty or so years since, I can't recall ever knowing such a lovely, lively and bright dog. He took to us, and we to him, straightaway and I must say, he had none of the vanity, ego or fragile emotions of many in his line of business, and he was, for me and my brother and sister, a delightful friend and playful companion for the few months he stayed in Newcastle.

He did, however, have one peculiar habit that betrayed his thespian roots, and that was a proclivity to 'sing' - in the manner of dogs - whenever my mother (who was, I believe, a regular user of her complimentary tickets) played a vinyl recording of the songs for the musical. In particular, the song 'Food, Glorious Food' produced a paroxysm of tail-wagging joy in the beast, and he would howl and whine repeatedly along with the song.

This was of course, manna from heaven for myself and my siblings, as we invited a succession of friends, neighbours and barely-known kids from our locality into our house, to listen in awe to the singing dog - at a stroke, elevating our position in the local pecking order. His performances also gave us the opportunity to barter for much-valued riches of childhood such as matchbox cars, live caterpillars and American comics. And bless him, never once did Toby disappoint us, throw a tantrum, ask for more money or decide that the audience was beneath him.

There is, inevitably, a down-side to the story, and that is that even now, with Toby long-since gone to the great actor's retirement home in the heavens, I can never hear that song when watching the musical without immediately hearing a ghostly howling and whining, drowning out the lyrics and over-laying the tune.

NUMBER 4:

Mr Dickens and.... 'The Morrith Arms Hotel' in Greta Bridge.

In the Friday, June 2nd, edition of the north-east morning newspaper, *The Journal*, a lengthy piece appeared by Mr Alastair Gilmour - the paper's 'Beer Writer' (*now, there's a good job!-Ed*) - extolling the virtues of a walk, a drink and a visit to the 'Morrith Arms Hotel' in Greta Bridge. Below is an abridged version of the article:

The dream outing for some people is swimming with dolphins; the more down-to-earth prefer walking with a purpose. With winter mud screw-driven off our rambling boots and map, camera, binoculars and anticipated thirst packed, it's off we go a'wandering. Inspiration comes from a new book by Charles Emmet, from the *Pocket Pub Walks* series covering County Durham and Teesside. And, of course, each one starts or ends in a pub - a just return for collecting aching limbs and perspiring brows along the way. Walk No 5 finds us in Greta Bridge, near Barnard Castle, and yards from the thundering A66. Start and finish is the Morrith Arms Hotel, renowned for its decent ale, great food, relaxed atmosphere and country manor ambience.

It is also well known for the mural surrounding drinkers and lunchers, depicting Dickens' characters and painted by John Gilroy, the Whitley Bay-born artist who famously created the Guinness advertising style of the 1950's. Remember the immortal toucan and the ostrich that swallowed a pint? Legend has it that Gilroy and a couple of helpers agreed to be locked in the pub until the mural was complete. They started painting on February 1, 1946, and ended on the 11th, on the condition that no-one could see it until they were finished.

When the work was finally unveiled, the faces portrayed on the dancing, singing, wassailing and carousing bodies were those of customers and staff. Cleverly, anyone standing at the bar seems immediately included in the shenanigans taking place behind them.

Brushes with culture are nothing new to the Morrill Arms. The 17th Century hotel was originally a coaching inn, offering overnight stops for the London to Carlisle mail coach. In 1839, Charles Dickens and his illustrator, Hablot K Brown (pseudonym, Phiz), lodged yards away while researching *Nicholas Nickleby*. The bar's link with Dickens through Gilroy's palette is splendid; the beer is even more palatable. "Please sir, can we have some more?"

A few days later, on Tuesday June 6th, the same newspaper carried a letter from a Mrs Margaret Young, of Whitley Bay, in which she offered some personal reminiscence of the Morrill Arms.

As an avid, long-time reader of Alastair Gilmour's articles, I was particularly interested in Friday's feature in his beer column about the Morrill Arms at Greta Bridge, and can give a little more information about Jack Gilroy, who painted the mural. He was certainly working on the mural after February 11, 1946. I was married on February 12 that year and spent my honeymoon at the Morrill.

Petrol was in short supply, but we managed to visit Darlington, Catterick Races, the Bowes Museum and of course, walked in the woods, crossed the Daisy Bridge and explored Eagleston Abbey. We were also shown through the pele tower house of Major Morrill's sister. I did not know that Jack Gilroy had helpers. Perhaps they left on February 11? Certainly the bar was open in the evening for our pre-dinner drinks. I remember his telling us one evening that he had spent the afternoon looking at pigs and one duly appeared in the mural. He and Major Morrill had become friends from Army days, I believe. I did want to Alastair Gilmour to know that his article had evoked happier times to a very old Journal reader of 88.

NUMBER 5:

Mr Dickens and.... "What the dickens..!"

A trawl through the internet, using key words, such as 'Dickens' as a search, often brings forward the strangest of connections. One American web-site is dedicated to explaining the origins of many familiar phrases, and a correspondent had enquired as to the background of the common phrase "what the dickens." The answer offered was as follows:

"Let us concentrate on 'dickens' as the important word here, since the word is contained in many different expressions: such as "what the dickens" "where the dickens" "how the dickens are you?" etc. The origins of the expression reach back further than Charles Dickens, though it does seem to have been borrowed from the English surname, most likely sometime in the sixteenth century. The surname itself probably derives from Dickin or Dickon, familiar diminutive forms of Dick.

The word "dicken" was - and still is, though people hardly know it any more - a euphemism for the Devil. It's very much in the same style as 'deuce' as in old oaths such as "what the deuce!" which itself is another name for the Devil.

The first recorded use of the expression can be seen in the work of William Shakespeare, in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. For example:
FORD: Where had you this pretty weathercock?

MRS PAGE: I cannot tell what the dickens his name is."

Charles Dickens on tour in Australia !

By SUSAN HUDSON in Melbourne, Australia

'Literature has given us many memorable characters (Jane Eyre, James Bond, Hannibal Lechter) but there are few who can match the cultural reach, colour and impact of Charles Dickens' Ebenezer Scrooge.'

So wrote Melbourne Age newspaper journalist Fiona Scott Norman in her review of Charles Dickens Reads a Christmas Carol – a one-man show played here by actor Phil Zachariah last December.

If it wasn't for Scott Norman's accolades, many might not have seen the show. As it was, there were queues of people, eager to buy a ticket for the performances in the old Carlton Courthouse that is now transformed into a theatre, a somewhat ironic reversal considering Dickens empathy with those facing the law or jail through hardship or adverse circumstances.

Zachariah has been performing Dickens' readings up and down the East coast of Australia for several years now. He says it started when his mother (a great Dickens' fan) took him to hear the great Welsh actor Emyln Williams read from the novels, and suggested he might do the same one day.

In his version, Zachariah dresses as the great writer did when he took his works on tour to America and other places in the Nineteenth century. Apparently Dickens first read *A Christmas Carol* in public on 27th December 1853 and acted every character using a different style, voice and face for each one. The performances were so energetic that he would require several changes of shirts that became drenched in perspiration.

The central theme of *A Christmas Carol* is very applicable to Australia at the moment, with recently introduced government changes to workplace laws that disadvantage workers.

Scrooge valued money more than people and was a miserable creature until redeemed. I was grateful to Zachariah and the production team at La Mama Theatre for reviving the timely message that meanness will never bring reward, and that the true spirit of Christmas - love and generosity - is the only way we are all going to survive.

After taking a wrong turn on the way out after the show, I bumped into the actor himself and we had a short conversation.

'Dickens always wanted to tour Australia, but never quite made it,' Zachariah told me. I said I was glad to see the geranium in his lapel. 'It's funny you know, but geraniums

have been my favorite flower since I was small.” I ventured to suggest he should take the show to England. “Well now, that would be a tall order,” he said. “To take Dickens home would be something quite daunting, but I might one day.”

PART IV:

Whereupon we stumble blindly into the strangest, and sometimes most tenuous, of connections.

Mr Dickens and....

Many are the strange associations between Mr Dickens, his works, his characters and his era. In this occasional series we continue to explore some of the more bizarre of connections.

NUMBER 9:

Mr Dickens and.....the long-neglected grave of his brother

Our Branch secretary recently received an e-mail from a Derek Moore in which he asked: *I write to ask if the Fellowship is aware of the sad state of Fredrick Dickens grave here in Darlington and wonder if there is any interest in the up keep? It is something that I would be willing to do.*

Frederick Dickens was the younger brother of Mr Dickens, and died while living in the Darlington area, of, says Peter Ackroyd (*‘Dickens’ Guild Publishing 1990*) asphyxia induced by the bursting of an abscess on his lung. Frederick, suggests Ackroyd, was ‘the boy whom Dickens had taken into chambers...the brother to whom he always felt closest. He had become something of a lounge, something of a wastrel...and, in recent years, his improvidence and irresponsibility had been yet another burden on Dickens.’ (p1034).

The Branch have agreed to try and restore the grave to some semblance of decency, and in future newsletters we hope to explore this relationship further.

NUMBER 10:

Mr Dickens and....’The Bubbles of Finance’ by A City Man

Mr Bob Pykett of Leeds wrote to the Newsletter just before Christmas with some fascinating material on another writer on whom Mr Dickens bestowed some patronage and approval.

I forward, wrote Mr Pykett, herewith copy extracts from a book containing articles published sometime between 1859 and 1865. The writer, ‘City Man’ was pleased to acknowledge that in typical manner Charles Dickens gave permission to re-publication of the work of one of his brothers, as he sometimes called contributors to All The Year Round. I bought the book a few summers ago from an antique

collectables dealer at Helmsley. The present condition of the green covered pocket-sized edition is exceptional, testimony to the excellence of the printing trade of 1865.

Attached to the letter were some photocopied extracts from the book, in which the author offers a number of humorous observations of everyday London city folk of the period. The material is an excellent example of some of the contributions contained in the pages of *All The Year Round*.

An endorsement of the book is offered in the frontispiece:

"We advise our young friends to read some amusing chapters on 'accommodation' and 'borrowing' which have appeared within the least two months in Mr. CHARLES DICKENS'S *All The Year Round*." – *The Times*, May 31.

NUMBER 11:

Mr Dickens and.....mental arithmetic (as it used to be called).

The January edition of *Mr Dick's Kite*, the newsletter of the London Fellowship Branch, contained a marvellous example of mental arithmetic in the work of Dickens with an extract from *Bleak House* in which Mr Guppy and his friend Jobling take lunch. The bill is calculated by Bart Smallweed in the following manner:

"Four veals and hams is three, and four potatoes is three and four, one summer cabbage is three and six and three marrows is four and six, and six breads is five, and three Cheshires is five and three, and four pints of half-and-half is six and three, and four small rums is eight and three, and three Pollys is eight and six. Eight and six in half a sovereign, Polly, and eighteen pence out!

So, dear readers, if the total bill was 42.5p (in 'modern' money), how much would you have had to pay for one marrow?

NUMBER 12:

Mr Dickens and.....a visit to Sunderland.

Gordon Stridiron has kindly forwarded a wealth of excellent material for the newsletter, among which was a cutting from the *Sunderland Echo* of 16th November 2005. Reporter Sarah Stoner explores the connections between Mr Dickens and Wearside:

“Charles Dickens’ first appearance in Sunderland was an occasion he vowed he would never forget – for all the wrong reasons. The former newspaper reporter had already produced several novels...when he was booked for an amateur performance at the Lyceum Theatre in the town.

But, according to research by Sunderland-born teacher Ian Mole, the real-life drama surrounding the visit more than equalled the on-stage antics. Ian said ‘Dickens was always mad keen on acting and, on that day, he appeared in an amateur programme that included Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s Not So Bad As We Seem.

The theatre in Lambton Street was brand-new, the final slates had been nailed on the night before, and Dickens was worried it might collapse and crush the cast and crowd. Apparently, his usually phlegmatic persona had been ruffled by rumours put about the town by the owners of a rival theatre that the building was unsafe.

Ian’s research reveals that Dickens arrived in Sunderland at about midday and was in ‘a quandary’ about whether to go ahead with the show. ‘When he looked up at the roof, his fears weren’t exactly soothed when he saw it was of a new design consisting of an iron arch without any visible means of support.

He happened to bump into the builder, though, who calmed him by explaining he’d already tested the place out by inviting a large group of locals and asking them to sing and stamp as much as they wanted, without any mishap.

This worked with Dickens for a while, but he was still worried that the earlier rumours might cause the audience to panic and stampede at any sign of something going wrong. He was like a cat on hot bricks all night.’

Dickens need not have worried, however, as the show ‘went down a storm’ with three deafening cheers and huge applause for local scenery designer Clarkson Stanfield. The Lyceum burnt down in 1856, but re-opened later that year...

Dickens’ second appearance in Sunderland was on August 23, 1858, when he gave a reading of his works at the Wilson Street Music Hall in Pallion. The most popular sections that he read were from A Christmas Carol and the trial scene from The Pickwick Papers.

PART V:

In only the most decorous of manners, we ask one of our members to reveal all, and trust that no-one will be offended.

There is, as the old saying would have it, 'no show without Punch.' For this edition we have, therefore, included in our show our Branch secretary, Herbert Savory, without whose urging and prompting and nagging and fussing and pleading and cajoling, there would likely be no northeast Branch of which to speak. At short notice, and from the middle of a lengthy convalescence as he recovers from a knee replacement operation, he sent us these responses...

To be honest, have you actually read ALL of Dickens' works?

No. I fall a long way short of this. I have, many times, set myself the goal of achieving it but so far I have never succeeded.

Of those that you have read, do you have a particular favourite?

Yes. *A Christmas Carol*. Without a doubt, this is my favourite book. I own at least 70 different publications of this little gem. I find it such a heartwarming story and one that in my opinion should not be kept to be read at Christmas time alone. I read and re-read it many times throughout the year. My second favourite is *Great Expectations*. It was the film of this story that introduced me to the world of Dickens.

Do those of your family and acquaintances who know of your affection for the works of Dickens think that you are ever so slightly barmy?

Yes indeed. Not only family, I should add, but many friends also! Before I retired my work mates were continually trying to catch me out with questions on Dickens, never managed I am pleased to say. Some thought me very knowledgeable on the subject and some even went so far as to say I was very well versed in the works of Dickens. Just goes to prove how little they knew on the subject!

What was it that first introduced you to a love of Dickens?

David Lean's fantastic film of *Great Expectations*. I have lost count of how many times I have watched it and never ever weary of it. It always feels so new and sparkling to me.

And how did you become involved with the Dickens Fellowship?

Now here's a strange answer! Many years ago I was watching one of my, then, favourite tv shows, Blue Peter – a children's magazine programme. One of the presenters, a red haired chap whose name slips my memory, took on the role of Dickens and gave a first class reading from one of his works. Impressed, I contacted them in the hope they would be repeating it, as I did so want to tape it.

The answer was in the negative but they did inform me of a Dickens Fellowship based in Doughty Street London. The rest is history, so to speak. I still have the letter and cherish it.

Do you only read Dickens, or do you have other writers of whom you are particularly fond? If so, who?

I have a very eclectic choice when it comes to reading matter. Starting with the Bible and on to JK Rowling, Dean Koonze and, believe it or not, tucked in there somewhere are the works of Catherine Cookson.

I find these works by a local writer, so easy to pick up and while away an hour or two. No serious study needed. Better still they mention many places I know and frequented as a kid. I believe I have every book she wrote and most certainly do own very many videos made of her stories.

Where do you do most of your reading of Dickens? Is it in a favourite armchair, at a desk, in bed etc?

I do most of my reading in my favourite chair. To attempt to read in bed is courting with disaster. I usually fall asleep after a very short time, forget everything that I did read and have to start all over again next day.

I have, anyway, been strongly advised to not read in bed as it stimulates the "brain" - wherever it may be in my body - thus causing restless nights. Suffering from Sleep Apnoea I can well do without more restless nights. I sometimes manage on no more than four hours a night.

Do you have a preference for paperbacks or hardbacks?

No real preference, it is what is inside the covers that matter. I do own some very nice hard backs but the majority of Dickens' readings are with paperbacks.

Tell us something about yourself and your background?

What a question!! I have been called a 'rough diamond.' I hope I am right in taking it as a compliment! I believe I am as rough as they come. A broad Geordie accent, of which I am very proud, by the way.

I am, perhaps, the most unlikely of people to act as secretary for the North East Branch of The Dickens Fellowship. I didn't have much of an education as such, but that still didn't stop me from admiring Dickens, in film form. I also enjoyed poetry, when I got the chance to read it, and I love good music from Blues to Classical, and I love art.

I had a leaning towards these in the very early 50's, but at that time and from where I came, it wouldn't have been manly to admit it. My father would have probably disowned me had he known!

My employment has been very varied. I served my time as a brass moulder in Clarke Chapmans. I then spent two years in Germany in the Royal Regiment Of Artillery. Coming back, I spent two years on the beat as a policeman in Gateshead, my home town.

This was my downfall with regards to serving my full time as a copper! I then went from building site to building site for many years, never able to settle down anywhere. The latter years of my working life were spent as a driver for Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council, until I was forced into early retirement due to heart problems.

I love to tend my allotment, close to where I live in Kibblesworth, an ex-mining village just outside the expanding conurbation of Gateshead.

Apart from growing stuff, I keep 18 pigeons, 13 canaries, 10 Zebra Finches and, of course, I have my faithful friend Sascha, a West Highland White Terrier whom I love to bits.

Betty and I will have been married 51 years in June and we have 3 daughters, 4 granddaughters, 1 grandson. 1 great granddaughter, Emma, and 1 great grandson, Dillan.

I will be 70 in March, don't feel it mentally, but physically I do at times. Enough said I think.

In your opinion, what is it about Dickens that continues to make his books so relevant to the 21st Century?

I believe the social situations that prevailed in Dickens day are still with us today. Child neglect, child prostitution...there is still that great divide between the rich and the poor; one law for them and another for us. We still have desperate working conditions and with the fat cats doing their best to do away with unions, these will only get worse. I could go on but don't want to ruffle any feathers.

Of the various and many attempts to render the books of Dickens in other ways - film, television, radio, readings, theatre - do you have any preferences?

I don't have a preference, anything to do with Dickens and I am hooked. I love them all.

Those of you who are able to get to our own conference in Durham in 2008, please do so. It will be a time you won't forget.

My home, as some of you already know, is a mini shrine to Dickens and everyone, Dickensians or otherwise, is most welcome to visit, to browse, have a cuppa and a chat. We would like nothing better.

Which, if any, of his books are you currently reading?

On the Dickens front, *Great Expectations*, our Branch book of the year. But I am also reading, along with that, volume one of a twelve volume set of books which deals with the 'Earths Last Days.' It delves deeply into the second coming and that battle between good and evil. This is my second reading of these works by Tim LaHaye, and Jerry B. Jenkins.

Fiction, perhaps, but nevertheless a fascinating read.

If you were asked to 'sell' Dickens to those who've not yet read any of his works, how would you go about it?

To sell Dickens is a very difficult task at the best of times, and I can prove this by the number of times I, and others, tried in vain to start a Dickens branch in the northeast. We did succeed in 2001, but only after many, many, attempts.

I would suggest they start by reading *Christmas Carol*, then progress on to *Hard Times*, asking them to reflect on the likeness of those days with times in the present century. I would gradually introduce them into other works a little more complex, hoping that the first two had whetted their appetites. I would advise watching films of his works and listening to audio recordings, also of course visiting the theatre whenever possible.

Anagram Corner

Volume 11 offered readers a number of anagram based on places and characters in *Nicholas Nickleby*. Here are the answers:

People

1. Smike
2. Kate Nickleby
3. Ralph Nickleby
4. John Browdie
5. Mr Matalini

Places

1. Bowes
2. Greta Bridge
3. Dotheboys Hall
4. London
5. Portsmouth

(Readers may have spotted the error with Dotheboys Hall – the anagram should have read 'The Boy Shall Do')

PART VI:

A connection is confirmed and it is one that shall sustain us as we continue to anticipate our visitors next summer.

Dickens Fellowship International Conference
City of Durham 2008

‘2008 minus 150 years’

In the year 1858, Charles Dickens began a nationwide reading tour; one that was to take him west into Devon, to Ireland and, immediately after Ireland, North East England, and Scotland.

It was a tumultuous year: the deed of separation from his wife, Catherine, was signed in July; there were continuous problems in the wider family; disagreements – then the punishing schedule of travelling the length of the country. Perhaps, though, the readings provided a space in which to forget the chaos around him, and to lose himself within the characters he had created

On Tuesday 21st September, he arrived in “Little Darlington”, reading at the Central Hall. The next day brought him to Durham, where he read in what was then the New Town Hall: “At Durham we had a capital audience too – led by Dean and chapter, and humbly followed up by Mayor and local Bores – but the Hall not large enough and the City not large enough, for such a purpose as your friend’s.” ¹ (A Civic Reception is arranged for us at the Town Hall on the first evening of the Conference – the Mayor will be there, but I maintain a dignified silence on the matter of local bores...)

¹ Letter to WH Wills, 24th September 1858, Station Hotel, Newcastle

Following the reading, he walked to Sunderland, a distance of some 13 miles, noting the mining community as he went along, to read at the Theatre Royal.

He then walked to Newcastle, (12 miles) where he stayed at the Station Hotel. In the New Town Hall (on the site of the Big Market but now, sadly, demolished) he read the *Carol*, as at the previous three venues, but stayed on to read *Dombey* at a matinee and *The Poor Traveller* and *Sairy Gamp* in the evening. Then it was off to Edinburgh. ²

This was not his only visit to Newcastle: he had staged amateur dramatics at the Assembly Rooms, and was to revisit the city from 21st-23rd November 1861, and 4th – 5th March 1967 when he read at the Music Hall in Nelson Street.

On the Friday of Conference, delegates will have the opportunity to travel to Newcastle by train from Durham (a journey of only 15-20 minutes), where a walking tour is organised through what was a new, vibrant part of the city when Dickens visited, past the places where he stayed and performed, down to the Quayside, where a tour of the Guildhall, with its 18th Century courtroom has been arranged.

On the 1867 visit, Dickens and friends took time to go to Tynemouth and have a walk along the sea-front, only to be soaked by a particularly high wave. We are happy to point the way to Tynemouth, but if delegates wish to enact this particular happening, you're on your own, folks!

Ruth Crofton

² Tour information from Malcolm Andrews *Charles Dickens and His Performing Selves* OUP 2006

PART VII:

*Pass on gentle reader, for all you shall find here shall be mockery and wit.
But for those of a broader disposition – start here:*

***Chatterbox**.....The much-anticipated Branch Christmas night out at a local casino proved a massive disappointment to lovers of scandal and gossip as no-one, no-one, behaved badly at all. Most members danced neatly around the lure of the gaming tables, and almost all politely declined that all-important 'next' glass of mulled wine. No one refused to pay, and no one went home with someone else's cracker. Dickens would have been disappointed. Plans are already afoot, meanwhile, to hold the next bash at a local sewing bee....*

*The recently enforced idleness of **HS**, recovering from an operation, has not only, we believe, meant that allotments and singing birds have been occasionally neglected, but has also put a huge strain on Mrs HS, to whom our sympathies extend as she struggles to adapt to having him, as it were, under her feet and in harms way.*

*Recent Branch meetings at the home of **CB** have been delightfully cosy and cheery, but the most recent meeting had many members casting scornful glances at others whose stomachs appeared to be rumbling indecorously. No one seemed willing to admit to a gurgling digestive system, although the manner in which **JS** attacked the various nibbles placed her as the main culprit in the eyes of many. It was only the eventual confession, and emergence, of **CB**'s elderly pup that solved the puzzle - the beast's proclivity to grumble and groan from under the chair had all the while been the source of the mysterious sounds...*

The Branch AGM rattled along without too much ado, and members were impressed by the way in which almost everyone was elected to some position or other, or asked to sit on some sub- or rules revision committee. One proposal under consideration for next years AGM will be that it may well be simpler to list those NOT elected or nominated....

Next years AGM will, we are lead to believe, see the creation of an additional elected post, as - in anticipation of greeting the visiting great and good at the impending conference - the Branch is to elect someone to the post of official translator to allow our guests to understand the broad dialect of our Secretary.

The Dickens Fellowship, North East England

Branch no: 198

The Branch officers are:

Hon. President:	Mr Edwin Shaw
Hon. Secretary:	Mr Herbert Savory
Hon Treasurer:	Revd Ruth Crofton
Public Relations Secretary:	Ms Lynn Hitchen

Membership subscriptions are:

Full membership:	£14.00 per annum
Associate membership:	£7.00 per annum

The branch meets at Low Fell Library, Gateshead, at 7.00pm on the first Monday of the month. New and prospective members are most welcome.

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