

# The Dickens Fellowship, North East England

Branch no: 198

# NEWSLETTER

Volume 12

March 2007

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## PART I:

*The Secretary opens proceedings and challenges those gathered to pass a vote of thanks to one who opened her doors to our group and then, despite our manners (or lack of them), even allowed us back for a second visit.*

*Dear Fellow Dickensians.*

*As an introduction to this, our first newsletter of 2007, I would, firstly, like to thank one of our members for her wonderful hospitality. In January and February, we have been unable to hold our meetings in our usual venue, Low Fell library, as a result of refurbishment, and we were very fortunate that Christine Bolton suggested that we could meet at her house, high up one of the Durham hillsides in Tantobie. This provided us with a lovely venue for the two meetings and, Christine, I would like to thank you on behalf of our group - you are a star!*

*A number of events and activities are planned for the forthcoming year. We hope to have a Dickens Presentation in Low Fell Library in the spring, we hope to visit Bowes Museum to check out the possibility of it being one of the attractions on offer to our guests at the 2008 conference and in June we hope to have a meal out together in remembrance of the 'Inimitable Boz.' July brings us an invitation to sit in on rehearsals for a production of Oliver to be performed later in the year at the Theatre Royal Newcastle.*

*Of course, planning and preparation for the 2008 conference is beginning to increase in pace, and I am informed that all is well in hand for the occasion. Thanks again to Ruth Crofton, to Beryl and Ron Teasdale and to James, the administrator for St Chads College Durham, who is at the head of this steering group. I am so relieved and happy that these friends have taken on this immense responsibility. I doubt very much if it would have come about without them. Thank you all very much.*

*We ended 2006 with a lovely social evening when our Branch enjoyed a Christmas night out at Aspers Casino in Newcastle upon Tyne, and, with much planned ahead, we have already notched up our first social even of 2007. On a really nasty northeast England winters day - cold, wet and windy - our stalwart members met at the Gold Medal public house in Low Fell to celebrate the 195th birthday of the Inimitable Boz. It was as Dickens would have approved, a very warm, friendly, and congenial group that sat down to a wonderful array of food. The conversation was varied and wonderful. The venue was first class and I doubt if we could have found anywhere more suitable. As is traditional on such a special occasion, I proposed a toast to the Immortal Memory of Charles Dickens. I am sure that those of you who were unable to attend in person were there in spirit, as I am sure Charles Dickens was himself!*

*Enjoy the spring and Good Reading!*

*Yours in Fellowship*

*Herbert (secretary)*

## PART II:

*Wherein the editor offers a promise of progress and technological advancements, and then introduces a plaintive note as he looks for further help and assistance.*



FROM THE EDITOR: This is but only the third newsletter that I have had the pleasure to edit, but we continue to aspire towards higher standards with which to try and delight our readers. For the last edition, our Branch treasurer and indefatigable volunteer, Ruth Crofton, made arrangements with a printing group in Durham to produce the newsletter, and many of you, will, I assume, have noticed a marked improvement in printing quality.

This edition is being produced on a new PC, and there are, as such, some minor changes to fonts and layout that allow further improvements. However, despite any advancement that we may make in production techniques, the true test of the newsletter will remain with the quality of the contributions, and I am once again, delighted to say that I am in the fortunate position of having to leave out a number of kind offerings. Many, many thanks to all of you who have forwarded material for consideration.

Some of it, indeed, has been held over until we can do full justice to the material. Our next step is to explore ways in which we can incorporate photographs and 'scanned images' into this newsletter. Susan Hudson and Bob Pykett, for example, have sent some wonderful material that can only be fully appreciated if seen in the original condition. By the time of the next newsletter, planned for June 2007, we will be fortunate if we have made further strides in this direction.

Mr Dickens himself paid great attention to the appearance and style of the monthly magazines that he 'managed' during the mid-nineteenth century. In January, your editor spent a pleasant afternoon in the welcoming surrounding of the 'Literary and Philosophical Society' in Newcastle upon Tyne (or the 'LitandPhil' as it is best known) looking through the collected editions of *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*, the two magazines that were edited by Mr Dickens (with the help of, among others, WH Wills).

Future editions of this newsletter will, it is hoped, return to a consideration of his journalistic endeavours, for it is as often in those activities, as much as his classic literary works, that we can see the sprit of Mr Dickens; his appetite for life, for example, and his determination to forge ahead with his work. I do not wish to appear greedy or demanding, but any contributions along these lines will be much appreciated!

### PART III:

*As if to show that we are from parochial, we invite one of our international correspondents to show us things from afar.*

## **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 Emlyn 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 27<sup>th</sup> 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."

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#### 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 loungeur, 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 16<sup>th</sup> 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 pout 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.

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### 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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.”<sup>1</sup> (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...)

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<sup>1</sup> 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 Bigg 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.<sup>2</sup>

This was not his only visit to Newcastle: he had staged amateur dramatics at the Assembly Rooms, and was to revisit the city from 21<sup>st</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup> November 1861, and 4<sup>th</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> 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 18<sup>th</sup> 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

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<sup>2</sup> 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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*Next issue to be published June 2007. The editor would be grateful if any contributions for the next issue - and any material, however small, is welcome - could be received by May 31st 2007.*