

The Dickens Fellowship, North East England
Branch no: 198

NEWSLETTER

Volume 14

September 2007

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PART I:

The Secretary gives notice of our intentions for next year, and speculates as to the best way to honour the great man .

Dear Fellow Dickensians,

You will of course, all know by now that we are to host the 2008 Dickens Conference in Durham City, at St Chads College, and with this years conference in Philadelphia USA now over, the attentions of many Dickensians will be turning the next one - ours! The excitement and tension is building here at branch level and we are anticipating a fantastic attendance from Dickensians world wide!

If it is within your power to attend our branch conference please do so. I guarantee that you won't regret it. You will meet lots of fellow Dickensians over the five-day period, and I am sure that you will make friends that will stay with you for the rest of your lives. Please do consider coming to 'Geordie Land' in 2008!

And now dear friends, to Dickens World. Portsmouth. The grand opening is now well past and all of the hullabaloo is over. There have been many items written about the attraction – both for and against.

A very notable Dickensian and past honorary General Secretary of the fellowship, Mrs Thelma Grove, has stated that although she thought there were early problems, these have now been rectified and that, in her opinion, it was well worth a visit. On the other hand, one of our ex-members, Mary Sharmen Hall has said, 'without fear of contradiction' that it was a waste of time and money. When she visited, she spent much of the time waiting in queues, without shelter form the rain, and that the end product did not justify the discomfort of waiting around.

These are two conflicting reports. My own view is that, not having visited, I really shouldn't be passing judgement. But I am worried that it will be more like a Disney-type approach rather than a true reflection of the work and nature of Dickens.

I often wonder what the great man himself would have made of it. As we all know, he had great affection for the theatre and he may well have felt it to be a wonderful show and a tribute to his works. Who knows? Perhaps one day our Branch will be able to visit and see for ourselves.

With kind regards

Herbert

The North East England Branch invite you to the

Dickens Fellowship International Conference 2008
in Durham
Wednesday 30th July – Monday 4th August 2008
Staying at St. Chad's College, South Bailey, Durham City

Amongst the oldest of the Durham Colleges, situated opposite the East end of the Cathedral and minutes away from both the centre of Durham and peaceful riverside walks, St. Chad's offers accommodation in single & twin rooms, some of which are en-suite. It will be possible to come early and stay on afterwards if wished.

Events include:

A Civic Reception in the Town Hall (where Dickens' appeared on his 1858 reading tour) – Wednesday.

*A trip to the famous open air **Beamish Museum** where you can glimpse life in the north east in bygone times (packed lunch provided) – Thursday.*

*A visit to **Newcastle** by train. Optional walking tour past sites connected with Dickens; tour of the Guildhall with its 18th Century court room – Friday.*

*Trip to **Barnard Castle and Bowes**, with time in the **Bowes Museum**, returning in time for the **Banquet**. Evensong at **Durham Cathedral** – Sunday.*

PLUS - lectures, entertainment, good fellowship . . .

Parking: the college has designated parking places, at a distance from the college. Situated as it is, there is no parking around the college itself – some system of shuttle-transport will be laid on for arrival and departure days. Cars are not necessary in Durham itself. A bus runs throughout the working day from the Cathedral to the market place & rail and bus stations.

Cost: about £400 inclusive of all but rail fare to Newcastle. Final prices are in process of completion.

Application forms will be available very soon on the web-site:

<http://www.charlesdickens-ne.co.uk/>

Further detail at this stage from Ruth Crofton – revrcrofton@aol.com. Bookings will be made via the college, which will allow payment by credit or debit card (NB American Express not accepted).

On the west door of Durham Cathedral is its famous Sanctuary knocker – any fugitive grasping this was assured sanctuary for a time. You don't need to be a fugitive to find sanctuary at Durham next July – come and discover for yourself the beauty of the north-east and experience it's hospitality. See you next year!

PART II:

The editor reminds us that not all is as it seems and that our collective endeavours may be less to do with books and more to do with visitors.



FROM THE EDITOR: It is a common experience to discover that few of the works of Mr Dickens turn out quite how we might expect. His first full-length work, *The Pickwick Papers*, was intended, we are told, as a light-hearted satire on the notion of gentlemanly clubs associating in the pursuit of country and rural pleasures. It turned out to be a joyful catalogue of tenuously-linked episodes chronicling the inexhaustible ability of the human spirit to make a fool of itself and others.

Similarly, his final novel, *Our Mutual Friend*, begins with a fantastical scene of river-people on the Thames recovering a dead body, but then slowly but steadily explores the nature of deception and the corrupting power of wealth.

And now, as we move towards autumn, it seems that membership of our Branch begins to reflect this pattern. For many of us, our continued membership of the Branch and our attendance, for some of us, at the monthly meetings is driven by our love and affection for the works of Mr Dickens and a fascination with the complexities of his life. However, as the international Fellowship bids farewell to the Philadelphia annual conference so, almost imperceptibly, do the attentions of our small Branch begin to be drawn to the preparations for next year. No longer are we solely preoccupied with reading and discussing his works, now, almost, it seems, imminently, we are to begin in earnest with the preparations for 2008. Surely membership of the Branch has not quite turned out what we expected it to be!

As the summer of 2008 fast approaches, it is inevitable that this newsletter must reflect this shift in emphasis. Future editions of this newsletter, certainly those produced ahead of the Conference, will no doubt be more concerned with the practical realities of organisation and arrangements, than they will be with his works and his life.

If it is any consolation, it is perhaps to understand that Mr Dickens himself was often faced with similar situations. His fame may rest, principally, with his novels, but his day-to-day life in the middle of the nineteenth century was often preoccupied with organising *this* and directing *that*; his magazines, his speeches, his reading tours, is theatrical productions – even, we are reminded by Susan Hudson in this newsletter, going so far as to assist in the design of a washing machine for field hospitals!

PART III:

*The correspondent establishes a firm connection with Dickens
and the necessities of military laundering.*

Dickens, Florence Nightingale... and a Washing Machine

By Susan Hudson, in Australia

THE wonderful thing about Charles Dickens is that there is always more to discover. For example, although author Edna Healey detailed this story in her book, *Lady Unknown – the Life of Angela Burdett-Coutts*, in 1978, I have only recently come upon it.

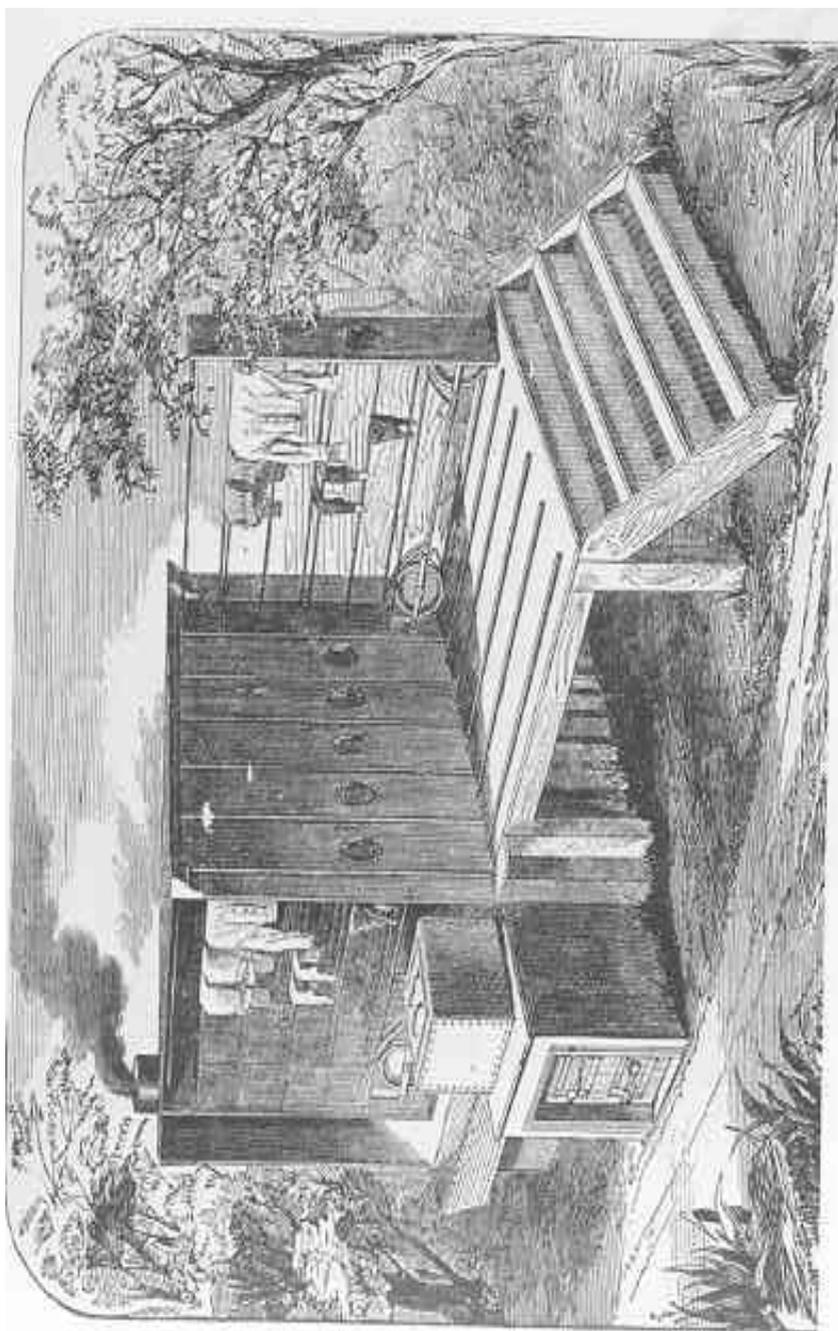
Burdett-Coutts was a very wealthy English woman (of Coutts banking fame) who collaborated with Dickens on various social reform projects, particularly the plight of destitute and impoverished women. Dickens, being older and more experienced, gave her a sense of purpose and together they established a home for wayward women in 1847, with varying success; neither had romantic views or extravagant expectations from the experiment. It was Burdett-Coutts horror of publicity about her philanthropy that awarded her the title ‘Lady Unknown’.

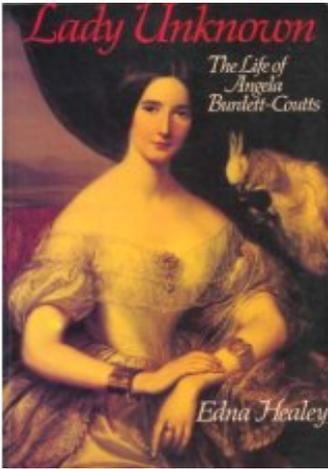
Another example of her charity lay in providing financial support to the wives of soldiers fighting in the Crimean War. She and Florence Nightingale were friends and corresponded regularly, and in one letter Nightingale described the sodden misery in the hospital there, especially in trying to provide patients with clean clothing and bandages.

Burdett-Coutts was only 38 when she and Dickens devised another scheme – a washing and drying machine to help solve Nightingale’s problem. The machine, built by a Mr. Jeakes of Bloomsbury at a cost of £150.00, could dry a thousand articles of linen in just twenty-five minutes.

It was six-foot square and seven-foot high, made of iron and wood with a copper attached for washing. The water in the copper was kept hot with heat from the drying closet and there was also a centrifugal machine, that cost an extra 18 guineas, to spin off the excess water from recently washed clothes. All was shipped to the Crimea in parts and reassembled on arrival.

The story and a line drawing later appeared in the *Illustrated London News* with Dickens sarcastically commenting at the time that “the machine was the only solitary administrative thing, concerned with the war, that had been a success!”





***Lady Unknown: The Life
of Angela Burdett-Coutts
(Paperback)***

*By Edna Healy is published by
Sidgwick & Jackson (1985)*

Angela Georgina Burdett-Coutts, 1st Baroness Burdett-Coutts (1814–1906), born Angela Georgina Burdett, was the daughter of Sir Francis Burdett, 5th Baronet, an MP, and the former Sophia Coutts, who was the daughter of Thomas Coutts, the wealthy banker who founded Coutts & Co.

In 1837 she became the wealthiest woman in England when she inherited her grandfather's fortune of nearly two million pounds sterling via his wife Harriot Mellon, joining, by Royal Licence, the surnames of her father and grandfather to become Burdett-Coutts, and was widely known as "the richest heiress in England". The Reverend Richard Harris Barham, in a ballad he wrote under the pen name "Thomas Ingoldsby" for the Queen's coronation as part of the Ingoldsby Legends, referred to her as 'Miss Anjaley Coutts' and she became a notable subject of public curiosity, receiving numerous offers of marriage.

She also inherited the country house at The Holly Lodge in Highgate, which was then just outside London, where she was famous for throwing large parties. However, she spent the majority of her inherited wealth on scholarships, endowments, and a wide range of philanthropic causes. One of her earliest was to establish a home to help young women who had 'turned to a life of immorality' to escape from prostitution.

Burdett-Coutts carefully avoided taking any side in party politics, but she was actively interested in phases of Imperial extension which were calculated to improve the condition of the black races, as in Africa, or the education and relief of the poor or suffering in any part of the world. Though she made no special distinction of creed in her charities, Burdett-Coutts was a notable benefactor of the Church of England, building and endowing churches and church schools. As Executor of the Will of the Reverend Chauncey Hare Townsend (the author of several volumes of poetry) she, with the Reverend Thomas Helmore (another poet), used a large sum from Townsend's estate, at his request, to build an elementary school in Westminster.

She also personally endowed the bishoprics of Cape Town, and Adelaide (1847), and the founding bishopric of British Columbia (1857). The granite fountain in Edinburgh, with a statue of Greyfriars Bobby was erected by Baroness Burdett-Coutts. (Source: [Wikipedia](#))

PART IV:

*The contributors remind us that many are the connections
between Dickens and the rest of the world.*

Mr Dickens and....

NUMBER 16:

Mr Dickens and.....the greatest Spanish writer of the 19th Century

Mr Bob Kelly of Chester le St, Co. Durham, has kindly written to the newsletter with some fascinating details about the international nature of Mr Dickens' influence.

After reading a copy of one of our newsletters, he wrote: "For fifteen years, 1971-1986, I was a keen student of literature in the Spanish language – both translated and in the original. One of the greatest writers from that country and born in the nineteenth century went by the name of Benito Perez Galdos, who has been called the 'Spanish Dickens'. He so admired Mr Dickens that he made a pilgrimage to Boz's grave in England. One of his best-known novels – *Fortunata and Jacinta* – published, I think, by Penguin, is about Fortunata, a lady of the lower orders, and Jacinta, a lady of the upper classes. It is an epic book with many rich characters. Galdos also wrote fifty historical novels, among them one entitled *Trafalgar*."

As Mr Kelly points out, the nineteenth century is inescapably associated with 'epic' novels, grand in scope, character, plot and ambition, and this is a trait that transcends national boundaries. For example, France had Victor Hugo (*Les Miserables*), Russia had Dostoevsky (*Crime and Punishment*), America had Herman Melville (*Moby Dick*) while Britain had, alongside Dickens, Thackeray, Austen, Bronte. As Mr Kelly points out, Galdos is to be included in the same canon of contemporary works.

NUMBER 17:

Mr Dickens and.....a former member of the 'International Brigade' in the Spanish Civil War.

Frank Graham was the first President of the North East branch of the Dickens Fellowship and was one of the main instigators of the successful moves to erect a 'blue plaque' to Dickens on the wall of the theatre on Nelson St in Newcastle where Dickens had performed on one of his reading tours.

Frank Graham was a champion of the North East and, when he was fit enough, a man of action to support his strong political beliefs. Because of his Communist connections and involvement in the hunger marches, he was marked out by Special Branch, in 1936, as 'one to watch'.

Born in Sunderland, in 1913, Frank won scholarships to Bede Grammar School and then to King's College, at the University of London. He became active in student politics and joined the anti-fascist movement and was involved in the famous fight during Oswald Mosley's rally at the Olympiad, in London. He campaigned for volunteers to join the International Brigade for the Spanish Civil War and served in the British Battalion.

Frank fought in the bloody battle of Jarama in 1937 and the trench warfare which followed. As the casualties mounted, Frank was deeply affected by the loss of close friends from Sunderland and risked his life to help bring one of their bodies back from close to the fascist lines.

He toured England in a national campaign to generate support for the Spanish Republic and returned to the Brigade, taking part in the battle of Brunete. Injuries sustained in the Civil War prevented Frank taking an active part in the Second War. In 1945, he trained as a teacher and then taught for 15 years at Wharrier Street School, Newcastle. He later set up a publishing firm which, by the time he sold it in 1987, had published 387 titles, many of which had strong connections to the North East.

He died in his 90's and is remembered by Branch Secretary Herbert Savory as 'a really nice bloke' and was strongly involved in having the City Council erect a plaque to Dickens to celebrate the north-east connections.

NUMBER 18:

Mr Dickens and.....the mail-coaches of the 18th and 19th Century.

Branch member Bob Pykett forwarded some fascinating material on the mail coaches of the 18th and 19th Century. Dickens himself, in the 1855 Christmas number of *Household Words* wrote a marvellous seasonal story based upon such a trip: "There was no Northern Railway at that time, and in its place there were stage-coaches; which I occasionally find myself, in common with some other people, affecting to lament now, but which everybody dreaded as a very serious penance then."

Mr Pykett's material is taken from an in-house magazine produced by the Halifax Building Society in the 1970's. Such were the dangers faced by postboys in the late 18th Century that the Post Office advised senders of bank-notes to send one half by one despatch and not the send the other half until delivery had been confirmed. The Government were urged to set up a coaching service for the mail, each with an armed guard. The guards wore a military-style uniform, carrying weapons such as flint-lick pistols, a blunderbuss and cutlasses.

The horses would be changed regularly at coaching inns, with no more than five minutes allowed for the swap, and guards would be held accountable for unnecessary delays. For all that, and even with improvements to the road surfaces and coach design, the average speed was only 10mph in the 1820's – although it is a moot point to consider that modern commuters, struggling to cross the Tyne Bridge during rush-hour, perhaps travel even slower than that!

PART V:

The Branch provides a willing volunteer to explain the attractions of Mr Dickens to readers, and tells of hidden talents and interests

Jill Spearmin is a member of the Branch who rarely misses a monthly meeting. Behind her deceptively 'quiet' exterior lies a lady of some talents and energies who is, it is plain to see, clearly enjoying her steady discovery of the pleasures to be found in the works of Mr Dickens.

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

I must say that I am relatively new to Dickens as a serious reader. We read *Nicholas Nickleby* as a group last year, and I have also read most of *David Copperfield*. We're currently reading *Great Expectations* and I also read that book at school as part of my 'O' levels. I find that they're much easier to understand when we read them as a group! Some of the books are harder to read than others, but I like reading them with the group.

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

Great Expectations is my favourite. At 15 and 16, reading it at school, I thoroughly enjoyed it then. Now that it's our current book, I'm getting even more out of it. I've done two of the synopsises for the meetings. I've still got the notes from school, somewhere! One of my jobs has been working as a classroom assistant, and the students happened to be studying Dickens and I was able to offer some input into the group on the book.

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?

My mother loves old films and television shows, so she thinks it's great that I'm reading Dickens. At first, some of my friends were puzzled about me reading Dickens, but once I'd explained things to them, that what we do is more like a reading group and that you don't have to be an expert on Dickens or anything like that, they seemed to understand and support what I do.

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

After I left school, I had very little to do with Dickens. I maybe watched some of the famous films, the black and white ones, and the musical *Oliver*, and some of the television serials that were on, but didn't actually read anything of his. I still had happy memories of reading *Great Expectations*, though, but didn't necessarily think that I would begin to read him seriously at all.

And how did you become involved with the Dickens Fellowship?

Through Herbert. I'd met Herbert through the church that I belong to, and when he talked about Dickens and that he organised a local group I thought that I'd go along as it sounded interesting. I'm still here!

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

I love Shakespeare. They're hard works to decipher at first, but worth it in the end. He's got so much to say about people and why they do what they do and what makes them special. *Macbeth* was one of the works that we did at school and I loved it! It was that what got me interested in Shakespeare. I also love reading Thomas Hardy – again, I first read him at school and in some ways he's similar to Dickens in that he constructs these detailed worlds but at the heart is what people do and why they do it. Another book that I enjoyed greatly was *Watership Down*, I've read it a few times and enjoy the film as well, it's a great book. Frank McCourt also wrote a book called *Angela's Ashes* that I've read recently and that was fantastic. I started reading that in bed and it was so good I stayed awake reading nearly all of it, when I usually fall asleep if I reading bed! Apart from fiction, I also love reading factual books, especially history and books about wildlife

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

I usually read in an armchair at home. It's especially nice if I've got the fire on and it feels really cosy, when it's like that I can really get lost in a book.

Do you have a preference for paperbacks or hardbacks?

Paperbacks – they're lighter and easier to carry around!

Tell us something about yourself and your background?

I am an only child and was born in Gateshead, in Dunston, just across the Redheugh Bridge. My dad was born in London and he was an electrician, and mam was a chemist's assistant, what we now call a pharmacist, and she worked in Gateshead. I went to school in Dunston, to junior school and then senior school. Dunston is where I lived, but it can be rough and some of the schools when I was there could be horrible places because of the other kids. I didn't have a very good time when I went into the senior school (for over-elevens) and was actually attacked by some other kids. I didn't know what had happened, but I know that I woke up in hospital.

After that my parents took me out of that school, and I went to St Anne's Convent across in Newcastle, in Elswick. I had to get two buses across to school every day, one into the town from Gateshead, and then another bus up to Elswick. I liked it at that school. We were taught by a mixture of ordinary teachers and some of the Nuns, who we had to call Sister. It was an all-girls school but it was quite strict.

When I left I went to college in Gateshead. I've had all sorts of jobs since, but I love working with children and have had jobs in schools as a classroom assistant.

I've got lots of hobbies and interests! I love walking and love getting out into the countryside around Newcastle and Gateshead. I'm what people call a 'twitcher' because I go bird-spotting and can identify most local species of birds. I play the piano a bit! I did have some proper lessons, but can play a bit 'by ear' and 'by touch.' I love classical music and in fact all sorts of music. My favourite song is by a group called 'A-Ha' called 'Take on You' – I love it.

I used to do a bit of ballroom dancing and once won a big national competition. Talking of competitions, one happy memory is of winning a 'James Bond' competition in a newspaper and the prize was an all-expenses paid trip to Vienna in Austria! I went with my mother and we stayed in one of the poshest hotels and were taken round loads of locations that had been used in the film, and were given loads of souvenirs. Great.

I also, of course, love the company of my friends. I'm involved with my church and have made loads of friends through that. I've known Carolyn (Walker – one of the Branch who was profiled in a previous newsletter) since I was five years-old! And that was *** years ago! Incidentally, I also speak Norwegian!

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

Dickens did not just write about people, he also wrote about some of the big issues that his society faced in the at time – slavery, working conditions, schools, the problems of poverty. I know that things have changed, but we still have major issues in our times and I think that Dickens helped to show us that we should always try and challenge some of the problems that we face.

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've mentioned that I love the old films and enjoyed some of the television serials, but I also love the idea of Dickens being shown in the theatre. I know that Dickens loved the theatre, and I always think that it is a challenge to show his own works on the stage, and that when they work they are brilliant.

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

Obviously, *Great Expectations*, because it is the current book for our Branch.

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

One of his greatest strengths is how he uses his humour to express his ideas as well as his more serious side. His descriptions of how things were in the nineteenth century are fantastic and bring that time so alive. But there is also that side of Dickens that forced people to look at the rights of the ordinary person, that make us realise that he was more than just an entertainer

PART VI:

The story of a dramatic railway accident and the author's urge to save his own handiwork, as well as the lives of others.

As a prelude to the Branch's choice of *Our Mutual Friend* for our 2008 book, we reproduce below an article from the excellent 'Dickens Project' website, hosted by the University of California in the USA. (<http://humwww.ucsc.edu/dickens/index.html>)

The Staplehurst Disaster: 9th June 1865

Dickens took a "vacation" trip to France at the end of May 1865. Before leaving he told Forster: "Work and worry...would soon make an end of me. If I were not going away now, I should break down. No one knows as I know to-day how near to it I have been..." But rest was not the only reason for Dickens's departure. He was also going to France to visit Ellen Ternan.

As was usually the case, Dickens continued to write, even while on vacation. While in France he worked on the second chapter of the sixteenth number of *Our Mutual Friend* (drawing towards the close), and brought the manuscript back to England with him in the pocket of his overcoat. With Ellen Ternan and her mother, he boarded the ferry and travelled from Boulogne to Folkestone. On this occasion a fellow-passenger noticed him and recorded the following observation: "Travelling with him was a lady not his wife, nor his sister-in-law, yet he strutted about the deck with the air of a man bristling with self-importance, every line of his face and every gesture of his limbs seemed haughtily to say -- 'Look at me; make the most of your chance. I am the great, the *only* Charles Dickens; whatever I may choose to do is justified by that fact.'"

Dickens, Ternan, and Mrs. Ternan were booked into a first-class carriage and they took the 2:38pm tidal train from Folkestone to London. Passing the town of Headcorn thirty-three minutes later they approached the viaduct over the river Beult just before Staplehurst where the accident would take place. They were travelling at a speed of fifty miles an hour on a downward gradient. At that moment, repair work was being conducted on the viaduct itself (which was in fact little more than a bridge) and two of the rails had been lifted from the railbed and placed at the side of the track. The foreman in charge of the construction site had consulted the wrong time-table, and he did not expect Dickens's train for another two hours. Furthermore, and, against regulations, the flagman who was supposed to give warning to oncoming trains of any obstruction was only 550 yards from the construction site. The train conductor saw the red flag and applied his brakes, but it was too late. The train approached the broken line in the rail at a speed of between twenty and thirty miles per hour. It jumped a gap of forty-two feet, and swerved onto the bed of the river below. All of the seven first-class carriages plummeted downwards -- except for one car. That car was the one occupied by Dickens and the Ternans, and it held by its couplings onto a second-class carriage. Dickens's car had come off the rail and was now hanging over the bridge at an angle.

With a makeshift arrangement of planks Dickens managed to extricate the Ternans from the suspended carriage, and as he was doing this, he saw the other first-class carriages lying at the bottom of the river bed. With his familiar aplomb he went returned to the teetering carriage, and took out a travelling flask of brandy as well as his top hat. He filled his hat with water, clambered down the bank, and then began his work among the injured and the dead. He found a man with a cracked skull; he gave the man some brandy, poured a bit of water on his face, and laid him on the grass beside the stream. The man said only "I am gone," and then died. A woman with a blood-covered face was propped against a tree; Dickens gave her a little brandy from his flask, but in a moment she too was dead. The scene was covered with corpses and injured bodies. One young passenger, Mr. Dickenson, later recalled how it was the urging and assistance of Charles Dickens that ultimately helped to free him from a pile of twisted wreckage. Another passenger would later recall how Dickens, with his hat full of water, was "running about with it and doing his best to revive and comfort every poor creature he met who had sustained serious injury."

And then, as he prepared to take leave of the death scene, Dickens did a remarkable thing. Remembering that his manuscript was still in the pocket of his overcoat, he clambered back into the swaying carriage and retrieved it. He then travelled back to London with the other survivors on an emergency train.

Dickens returned to Gad's Hill Place the next day, and told the landlord of the Falstaff Inn that "I never thought I should be here again." His eldest son found his father "greatly shaken, though making as light of it as possible -- how greatly shaken I was able to perceive from his continually repeated injunctions to me by and by, as I was driving him in the basket-carriage, to 'go slower, Charley' until we came to foot-pace, and it was still 'go slower, Charley.'"

Dickens had also lost his voice: "I most unaccountably brought someone else's out of that terrible scene," he said, in strange parallel to that theme of double identities which informs *Our Mutual Friend*. It was two weeks before he properly recovered his voice. Of course he wrote many letters, some of them dictated to Georgina, in which he dwelt briefly upon the horrors of the accident but in which he constantly attributes his own shakiness not to the crash itself but to his work among "the dying and dead..." In the longest letter (to Thomas Mitton), he made it clear that he wanted to avoid being examined at the inquest into the disaster. The reason for this is clear enough; if the fact that he was travelling with Ellen Ternan became public knowledge, it would have caused a scandal.

PART VII:

The pleasures of gossip and mischief-making bring matters to a conclusion.

Chatterbox..... The cruel and vicious nature of relationships was displayed in all its ugly glory at a recent Branch meeting when our esteemed Hon Secretary, a Mr HS, found himself frustratingly indisposed due to major reconstructive surgery on a troublesome knee. There were one or two who suggested that his absence was, in fact, due to cosmetic surgery, rather than the knee, but even the most naïve among us were aware that no amount of botox, tucks and pulls could possibly make any difference to his aged visage. However, more cruelty was shown when an anonymous minute-taker (a Ms CW) informed the meeting that the Secretary wished to know if the assembly had gone off successfully in his absence. Rather than kind words of encouragement along the lines of 'no, no, you were a big miss' or 'it wasn't the same without you', the group unanimously agreed that the Secretary should be told that it had, in fact, been one of the best-ever meetings and that it had been a slick and professional gathering rather than the usual shambles. Needless to say, Chatterbox was shocked by these cruel and untrue taunts and, anxious that the Secretary's recovery would not be further delayed by such wicked mockery, sought to distance himself from some of his more cruel colleagues.....

In a brazen defiance of traditional democratic conventions, the September meeting of the Branch were shocked to find themselves plunged into the middle of a dramatic election for the Branch's 'book choice' for 2008. Chatterbox shall save the perpetrator of this snap election the indignity of revealing his identity (a Mr HS), but there were strong mutterings along the lines of 'no-one said we were going to do this' and 'I don't know any of his other books', 'How do you spell Barnaby', 'remind me what books we've read already' and 'are we using the single-transferable vote system or is it just first-past-the-post' before order was restored by the Returning Officer (CW again). Clearly much planning had gone into this mini-coup, as pre-printed voting slips were suddenly passed round the group, with barked instructions to 'write the title of the book you want on the slip!' only to find the meeting descend into chaos as members began to rebel against this authoritarian behaviour. The primitive and natural love of the British for fair play and a good set of rules began to find expression as members began openly to discuss with each other what they should write. Sadly, this tentative flowering of popular democracy was quickly put down as the Secretary and Returning Officer - both of whom are suspected as being 'in on the act' - demanded a prompt return of completed slips. The announcement that the votes had been counted and the choice for 2008 was 'Our Mutual Friend' was greeted with disbelief by all except the Secretary who quickly announced that he had been able to secure a bulk-discount price reduction on copies of the novel and that members should bring along cheque-books, cash or 'provi' vouchers to the next meeting.....

The recent Branch outing to Bowes Museum and Barnard Castle - a sort of 'recce' ahead of the 2008 Conference - was sadly marred by the behaviour of the wife of an anonymous Branch member (a Mr CR) who clearly disgraced herself by a) being nice to the Secretary b) buying a coat to protect herself against the unseasonal chilly weather - from a Charity shop! - and c) failing to bring along some 'bait' for her much-neglected husband. Needless to say, we are assured that she won't be invited on any further trips.

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 December 2007. The editor would be grateful if any contributions for the newsletter - and any material, however small, is welcome - could be received by November 30th 2007.