

The Dickens Fellowship, North East England

Branch no: 198

NEWSLETTER

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PART I:

Our Munificent Secretary offers an address to the members and hints of hard work to come.

My Dear Fellow Dickensians,

Can I take this opportunity to wish you all a very Happy, Healthy and Prosperous New Year. I sincerely hope you have all had a wonderful festive season and the batteries are fully charged ready for the work ahead. 2008 is going to be very exciting for those of us who will be in attendance at the International Conference in Durham. According to our organiser Ruth Crofton everything is on target, she has lots of work for us all to do in between now and July.

2007 saw another wonderful year for the North East Branch. We went on several excursions, had several meals out and attended the theatre to see new productions of old friends. The culmination, of course, was a Dickensian Presentation hosted by our attending members. It was held at Low Fell Library, our meeting venue. It was a resounding success. There were several sketches and readings, and a quiz for which there were lovely seasonal prizes.

Everyone had a wonderful time, none more than ourselves. It gives us the greatest of pleasure to put before the general public anything that has a Dickens connection, so that, who knows it might well whet their appetites and give them the urge to read Dickens.

2008 saw, myself, as secretary, attending a meeting with the committee of The Millennium Centre here in Kibblesworth. It was to ascertain as to whether or not it was feasible for this venue to allow our branch a rehearsal space for our entertainment planned for the International Conference. This is to take place on the last evening of the Conference, and it was thought that having a "dress rehearsal" in the month of June would benefit everyone. Our offer was accepted wholeheartedly by the committee and the date was set for June 13th at 7:00pm. Everyone is looking forward to it immensely.

In closing I would like to say I hope 2008 is the best year yet for the North East Branch. It is going to be very exciting for all of us and hopefully we will get a chance to meet face to face members who we only hear of by name. I am geared up and ready to go for the year 2008. I hope you are all likewise.

Take care,

Sincerely in Fellowship,

Herbert (Hon Secretary)

PART II:

Our Methodical Editor contrast the duality of the writer and the nature of his legacies .



FROM THE EDITOR: There must be many people for whom their only knowledge of the works of Mr Dickens is drawn from the television. As we leave Christmas behind us, those of us who admire Mr Dickens and his books have to accept that the proliferation of television productions of his work leaves us with a dilemma of sorts. On the one hand, it is surely a worthy thing that he and his works remain in the eye of the public so long after his death while, on the other hand, there is no doubt that too few people take the time and the effort to enjoy his books in their original form.

This is one of the great pleasures of the Fellowship, that our monthly meetings allow us the opportunity to digest his books much as he prepared them. In fact, the schedule for our readings of *Our Mutual Friend* closely follows the monthly parts in which the work was originally presented.

And yet we too, as a Branch, now find that Dickens has become more than a writer, and – unsurprisingly – some of our recent monthly meetings have spent as long on discussions about Christmas Presentations or the International Conference as we have on the detail of his works.

This newsletter perhaps reflects this constant tension between Dickens the writer and Dickens the personality. As our duties as hosts for the International Conference loom closer, we offer some further details about schedules and arrangements. We also reflect on our own Branch efforts with our Christmas Presentation, while our Secretary offers a heart-warming connection between the charitable efforts of Mr Dickens and the present times. Ruth Crofton establishes a fascinating connection between Mr Dickens and the 18th-century writer Laurence Sterne, and we publicise some exciting efforts to bring the journalism of Mr Dickens to an on-line audience.

This is not the first time we have reflected on the dual nature of Mr Dickens, as a writer and as a ‘celebrity’ of sorts; certainly any reading of a biography of the man will mention his own lifelong efforts to balance his writing with the fame and notoriety – and all that that entails - that came with it. It is, perhaps, something that will always be with us.

This is the first of the now thrice-yearly newsletters - reduced from quarterly due, unfortunately, (but perhaps typically for so many people nowadays) because of work and family commitments. Our next edition will immediately precede the Durham Conference, so I would ask any potential contributors to please submit any material as soon as possible for what could be a ‘bumper’ edition.

PART II:

*Our Methodical Editor contrast the duality of the writer
and the nature of his legacies .*

Dickens Fellowship International Conference City of Durham 2008

Much work continues to take place as part of our preparations for the International Conference. The branch had an excursion to check out the Bowes Museum, and then the bus went on to Barnard Castle, Greta Bridge and Bowes – this sequence was unknown to myself (and my dog) who, instead, went direct to Bowes thinking everyone was doing likewise. The dog enjoyed the walk up and down the main street, and round and round the castle even if her owner was getting a bit cold . . . you will be glad to know that the conference time-table is protected from hitches of this nature!

The programme details are starting to come together, and information sheets and application forms have been sent to branches all over the world, and enquiries are starting to come in. I am pleased to report that on the Friday evening we will enjoy some silent black and white film adaptations of Dickens: David Williams, retired lecturer in film at Durham University, will lead, and brings with him musician George Hetherington, who will provide a live piano accompaniment, so we'll be able to experience the film as originally seen. I have been to film evenings presented by these gentlemen, and can guarantee you a wonderful evening.

A number of speakers are also firmly booked now: I am waiting to hear from some people, and searching out others. There is a conference website with downloadable application form – www.charlesdickens-ne.co.uk. A draft timetable has been agreed and can be seen in full on the website. (RC)

The Branch has a sub-committee charged with organising the Conference and we have now established a 'Task Force' to begin to delegate duties and responsibilities to different members. It is unlikely that anyone will escape, so no hiding beneath your desk or skulking at the back of the class!

Annual General Meeting 2008

The January meeting of the Branch was also an opportunity for the Annual General Meeting. An excellent turnout of members added some weight to proceedings, whilst the Branch President Ted Shaw maintained an ordered but light touch on matters. One item of disappointing news was offered by Mr Shaw when he informed the meeting that the York Branch of the Fellowship looked likely to fold, after the absence of key figures and declining levels of attendance became too damaging. The meeting suggested that our own Secretary write to the York members and offer them membership of the North East Branch.

The Branch Secretary also proposed that we extend honorary membership of our branch to Mr Alan S Watts, a well-known Dickensian with whom Herbert maintains regular contact. Mr Watts, the meeting was informed, was an indefatigable admirer of Mr Dickens and had dedicated much of his life to spreading 'the word' and it was felt that this would be a gesture that he would appreciate. The meeting offered a unanimous endorsement of the Secretary's proposal

Results of the elections for the North East Branch witnessed the following appointments:

President:	Edwin Shaw
Chairman/Secretary	Herbert Savory
Treasurer	Ruth Crofton
Minutes Secretary	Carolyn Walker
Website & Publicity	Ron Teasdale
Newsletter Editor	Chris Robson
Public Relations	Lynn Hitchen

Membership of the Branch is now a standard £12 per annum, with no differentiation between Full and Associate membership.

Herbert and Radio Newcastle

At the AGM our Branch Secretary informed us that there was a possibility that he may be invited to appear on a late-night broadcast by the local BBC station Radio Newcastle. This followed an exchange of correspondence between the Secretary and the host of the show, Ian Robinson, after the latter had admitted that he failed to understand how Mr Dickens could be considered to be a 'good read' in these modern times. After Herbert leapt to the defence of Mr Dickens, it was hinted that he may be invited to present his arguments live, 'on-air'. Watch, as they say, this space...

Court Circular

The Branch continues to be active in matters other than our monthly meetings. A group visit to Bowes and Barnard Castle last year was followed by a collective trip to the Newcastle Theatre Royal for a performance of the musical 'Oliver'. This production, by a local amateur group, drew a large and appreciative audience and was enjoyed by all. A few days after the success of the Branch Dickens Evening at Low Fell library, the members of the Branch descended upon the Secretary's home village of Kibblesworth for a lunch-time meal at 'The Plough Inn, where again a large group enjoyed themselves tremendously and entered into the festive spirit. A further lunch-time assembly was also arranged to commemorate the birthday of Mr Dickens, with the 'Gold Cup' in Low Fell chosen as the venue. Meanwhile, the sub-committee of the Branch who are specifically charged with arrangements for the International Conference continues to meet at increasingly regular intervals.

PART IV:

*Our Moralistic Endeavour continues a lengthy inheritance
in which charity and history connect.*



The Universal Beneficent Society is a national charity, founded in 1857, with Charles Dickens (pictured) as a founder member. The original aim was to 'assist financially all those in need with no distinction of class or creed'.

The Society, which in 2007 celebrated 150 years of, it proudly states, 'helping those in need' extended the hand of friendship to our Branch Secretary, inviting him to speak at their 'Christmas Celebration' at St Martins Centre, Roman Avenue, Newcastle. Their logo and the photograph of Mr Dickens are reproduced from their website: www.u-b-s.org.uk and they are keen to celebrate their links with the author. The Regional Development Officer of the charity, Mrs Janet Wilkinson, send a warm note of appreciation to the Branch. The contents are as follows:

Dear Members of the Fellowship

I must extend my heartfelt thanks to you and your fellow Dickensian Mr Herbert Savory for helping to make the above event such a success. Herbert joined us for an afternoon of Christmas celebration with a Dickensian flavour. 2007 marks the 150th year of our charity's work and Charles Dickens was on our founding committee.

Herbert proved a great asset, not only doing the agreed reading for us but also acting as 'meeter and greeter' at the door and generally socialising with guests. He really added to the day and dressed in style, cut a dashing figure. Our beneficiaries very much enjoyed his jovial and courteous company.

A Christmas meal was followed by children from the local primary school singing carols, Dickens reading and information, then two profession singers took us through 'swing time' hits and popular tunes, ending in a sing-along and even some dancing!

A display entitled 'Past Times' told of the link between Dickens and UBS and held information on Dickens life and times. Booklets on past times of the local area were also available for people to take home.

Around sixty attended mainly older people and beneficiaries of our charity. Many were in their eighties and some in their nineties. For some it was a rare chance for social contact outside of their own four walls. Can I just emphasise again, that for reasons such as this, how very much appreciated and valued your support of our work is.

Yours, with many thanks.

Mrs Janet Wilkinson

PART V:

*Our Multifarious Connections are considered between
the writer and assorted activities.*

Mr Dickens and....

NUMBER 19:

Mr Dickens and.....the North East Branch Christmas Presentation 2007!!

On Wednesday Evening, 12th December, the North East Branch of the Fellowship were delighted to host a 'Dickensian Evening' at Low Fell library. In front of a warm and appreciative audience, the ensemble troupe performed a number of readings and interpretations of both the works of Mr Dickens and of Christmas. Those who attended were met with a glass of wine or fruit juice, and were invited to take part in a 'Dickens Quiz' that utilised a number of handsome single page descriptions of many of his works, scattered around the walls of the library. Many of the Branch had made wonderful efforts to be in Victorian costume, and this only added to the sense of occasion. Following a welcome message from both Herbert and Ruth Crofton, members of the Branch then performed a melodramatic excerpt from *Great Expectations*, in which Pip confronts both Estella and Mrs Havisham.

This was followed by some recorded Victorian songs, before members of the Branch took the opportunity to present one of Mr Dickens' less well-known sentimental works, in a reading entitled '*Boots and the Holly-Tree Inn*' taken from the 1855 Christmas edition of *Household Words*.

After an interval in which all assembled were offered further refreshments, including mince pies, chocolates and other assorted delights, as well as a further glass (or two) of wine, the duo of Christine and Lynn took the opportunity to perform a sketch from *Martin Chuzzlewit*, taking on the characters of Mrs Gamp and Betsy Prig, showing the more humorous side of Dickens.

With prizes issued to the winners of the quiz, the evening was brought to an appropriate finale with a reading from *Christmas Carol*, featuring many of the Branch as characters on the morning of Scrooge's re-awakening following his encounter with the three spirits.

Library staff thanked the Branch for their efforts, and asked visitors to complete a comments sheet before leaving. Judging from the tone of many of the comments, the Evening may well be considered a success. We modestly reproduce one or two kind words below:

"What a lovely evening, well worth turning out for. There was a good attendance and the fellowship were very welcoming. It was varied with quizzes and audience participation as well as thespian vignettes and readings. Thank you to Low Fell Library Gateshead for hosting this event and for all the hard work involved"

"It was a very pleasurable evening – acting abilities terrific. A good start to the festive season. Library staff hospitable to enable us to be here at this time."

"Very entertaining, humorous and a good choice of readings. Music was good as well."

"A wonderful evening. A perfect way to start Christmas. The readings were superb."

"Wonderful, wonderful. A joy to listen to and what a good start to Christmas. Thank you so much."

"I enjoyed the humour and the whole event. A Christmas Carol to begin this Christmas, what better than we should follow the example. It was excellent. Thank You."

NUMBER 20:

Mr Dickens and.....an on-line opportunity to view *Household Words* and *All The Year Round*.

The Dickens Journals Online (DJO) Executive Summary (taken from the website www.djo@buckingham.ac.uk).

What is it? The project is called *Dickens Journals Online* (DJO). Its aim is to digitise and make freely available, as an educational and literary resource of unusually broad appeal, the two weekly magazines edited by Charles Dickens throughout the 1850s and 1860s. They are a treasure trove of good writing by over 300 authors; Dickens himself published *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Hard Times* and *Great Expectations* in their pages, as well as over 200 articles.

Why is there a Project? The motive goes well beyond pure conservation. It's not just that the originals are rare and decaying – a fully searchable facsimile online edition, with commentary, notes, and bespoke educational resources for schools, universities and the general public, will bring the material alive in a myriad of new, relevant, and stimulating ways.

When will it be complete? DJO is designed to be fully operational by 7 February 2012, the bicentennial anniversary of Dickens's birth. It will both build on and extend his reputation internationally. It is a project with a natural base at the University of Buckingham and a clear regional home in the South East. Although Dickens is often represented as a writer inspired primarily by London and the city, anyone familiar with his life and work knows that his creative interaction with the geography, topography and people of the South East is absolutely fundamental

The DJO are keen to seek financial assistance from well-wishers; full details can be found on their website.

PART VI:

Our Militant Contributor asserts her opinions about a hero and defies all to offer a challenge.

Anne McLeod had been a Branch member for just over one year, but as she reveals in this interview, she has been a reader of Mr Dickens since an early age. During the Branch reading of Great Expectations, Anne achieved some notoriety as a fierce critic of young Pip, in contrast to those who offered a more sympathetic view of the protagonist's situation!

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

No! The more I read the more I find to add to my Dickens background reading list. A life's work I think.

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

Great Expectations. I was delighted to join the North East Fellowship in November 2006 and find that the next book for discussion was my favourite. I would like to formally thank the members for graciously allowing me to single-handedly challenge the views held on Pip and for indulging me in discussions on his real character. I still say that his Great Expectations were set at birth and despite being an orphan he had an expectation of surviving a relatively comfortable and secure childhood with an education and prospects of employment on his doorstep. Not for him an early death, like Little Nell, the beatings of Smike or the prospect of a life of crime and possible deportation that lay ahead of Oliver. Enough! I hear you cry. Move on.

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 Dad's family hail from the Isle of Skye and are all book lovers. My Great Great Grandfather read anything that he could get his hands on that came over from the mainland. It's hard to imagine a life without access to books, newspapers, and instant world news. Whenever two or more McLeod's meet for any length of time, talk inevitably turns to books. We all therefore have access to a wealth of shared books and information, the likes of which our Grandfathers could only dream. Friends tend to reflect on the time wasted on Dickens trying to pass Literature exams and are bemused that I not only read him voluntarily but do enjoy his works.

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

His ability to paint a picture with words. A picture of England created for a very impressionable child thousands of miles from home. They do say a picture paints a thousand words but I would much rather have the thousand words from Dickens and paint my own.

How did you become involved with the Dickens Fellowship?

I saw an advert in the local free paper and rang up. Herbert was so engaging and enthusiastic. I turned up to hear the closing chapters of that years book. The discussions were wide and varied leading to casual reference to aspects of Dickens life of which I had no awareness. I was hooked.

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

I will always have a soft spot for Beatrix Potter and have a passion for Shakespeare, attending as many plays as I can during the Newcastle season. I tend to take trashy Jeffrey Deaver novels on holiday alongside the obligatory Dickens. The current book in my car is about the Stevenson family and their history of building Lighthouses and I have half-read books on Egypt and Leonardo Da Vinci in my emergency bag. As you have probably guessed, I am a bit of a literary Magpie.

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

I travel a lot for work and tend to read while waiting for trains or domestic flights. A book is one of the few things that I know I can take through security without being challenged. I have a tiny garden but enjoy reading on a summers evening after work with a glass of wine. In the winter I have a big leather arm chair next to the fire. As my partner works away for most of the year I am seldom disturbed once settled down.

Do you have a preference for paperbacks or hardbacks?

Hardbacks for reference and paperbacks for novels. As I prefer to conjure up my own pictures of characters I like novels with plain covers. I tend to jealously guard my hardback books and know who has borrowed them and for how long. Unless there is some sentimental value attached I quite happily give away paperbacks to friends or charity.

Tell us something about yourself and your background

I was born in Newcastle and, aged two emigrated, with my family, to South Africa. Christmas Eve 1963 we set off on a magnificent steam train to huff and puff our way down to Southampton Docks. Two weeks later, upon arrival in Simonstown, we moved into a glorious house, the type of which a townie can only dream. As my older brother and I were English we were not eligible for State Education. Instead we were sent to a private convent for children of English ex-pats. A single story cream building, wrapped around well tended lawns overlooking the bay. Idyllic. It was here, using wonderfully illustrated glossy books imported from England, that I learnt to read. I have never looked back.

The first books that I can truly remember are a child's abridged version of a *Christmas Carol*, *Great Expectations* and *Wind in the Willows*. My view of English cities was that of crime, hunger, poverty and cold, where children were lucky to survive unless there was family money. I thought that the countryside was a far better place to live, full of sunshine, haystacks, babbling brooks and happiness. In the absence of TV these mental pictures remained until my return to England.

On the return sailing deck quoits or table tennis were not for me. To be left in peace to read I agreed with my father that in case of the ship sinking he could find me in the same steamer chair every day, wrapped up in a tartan rug on the starboard side under the funnel. The ship's librarian recommended *Nicholas Nickleby*. It terrified me. In the early chapters every page I turned, I turned with trepidation. It filled me with pictures of violent school masters in miserable cold schools full of overcrowded classes, learning through repetition with questioning of any kind quashed with a timely blow. When returning the book I must have had a haunted look and very wary of opening another book by Dickens the librarian introduced me to the wonderful world of Beatrix Potter. To this day I have a light easy read which I can dip into when reading Dickens.

Needless to say, when I did arrive back in England, my fears were nearly all well founded! The school was a dark grey austere Victorian building with concrete play grounds rather than gardens and a teacher of whom Squeers would have been proud. The strap was liberally applied to huge classes without any fear of rebuke and if you were out of step reciting endless times-tables the blackboard duster was hurled with unerring accuracy.

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

I watched a financial programme over Christmas which looked at the different views on the effects of Christmas. Employers spoke of increased absenteeism, expectation of bonuses and the loss of business during the festive close-down. Employees spoke of office parties and reduced bonuses. The general public spoke of crowded shops, long term debt, pickpockets and the pressure to buy the latest Technology. I lost track of the references made to a Dickensian Christmas, Scrooge, Bah Humbug, Mr Micawber, Debtors Prison, *Great Expectations*, *Hard Times*, etc. Need I say more?

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?

Radio, readings and theatre. I did however enjoy *Bleak House* last year. A stroke of genius by the BBC to serialise it. I know of people who actually bought the book as they couldn't wait for the end. Unfortunately productions of this quality are rare. *Oliver Twist* has been done to death on TV and film and its most recent version, and that of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, had poor reviews. The purists amongst us may well have questioned the interpretation. Where are the less well known *Pickwick Papers*, *Edwin Drood* etc?

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

Our Mutual Friend. This is a book of which I had no awareness and have so far managed to resist the urge to watch the DVD. I don't think it is going to be any easy book to read so intend to make the most of the discussions. I have already confused Mr Twemlow with a table!

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

If you are a reader you will find your way to Dickens. Thankfully I was introduced at a very early age. I think librarians should be more proactive. Engage more with parents, taking note of the type and volume of books taken out by their children. Offer parents of toddlers a flexible but structured regularly reviewed reading list. Try and capture a child's imagination with a challenging story rather than feeding them a diet of Disney stories.

My other great passion is Economic and Social History. Schools could use Dickens books to illustrate to older children the consequences of the Industrial Revolution, Penal reform, Poor Laws, etc. This could be done by reading a passage or two or as a footnote for background reading.

PART VII:

Our Meaningful Inheritance is examined and we shed light on a Yorkshireman, long-gone.

For many lovers of Dickens, one of the great pleasures is the manner in which he leads you to other great and notable writers, both to those who wrote prior to Dickens to those who followed him. Branch member, Ruth Crofton, here introduces us to one such writer.

Laurence Sterne 1713 – 1768

By Ruth Crofton

Several times in our discussions, we have wondered which writers may have influenced Dickens, so I was interested last year to discover one such in Laurence Sterne. In a review of the early parts of *Pickwick Papers*, the magazine *The Athenaeum* declared that *Pickwick*, as well as being composed “of two pounds of Smollett” had “three ounces of Sterne” and I became intrigued as I looked closer into his works and life.

Sterne was an Anglican priest: born in 1713 at Clonmel, in Ireland, the son of a professional soldier, he was sent away to school in Halifax, aged 10 and, through the financial help of a cousin, went on to Jesus College Cambridge, then took the usual course for men of limited means of entering the church. Aided by his uncle, Dr Jacques Sterne, Archdeacon of Cleveland and Precentor of York, he became vicar at Sutton-on-the-Forest in 1738, adding the parish of Stillington six years later.

During these years his creativity was mainly channelled into preaching, in his own churches and quite often at York Minster; a gifted preacher if something of an eccentric character, Sterne was very intelligent and quick-witted, an “eccentric genius” is an expression often applied to him – but other than a couple of sermons and a poem, he published nothing until 1759, when a wrangle between local church dignitaries inspired a satirical pamphlet, *A Political Romance*. This was suppressed, but had given Sterne confidence to write and he turned, at the age of 46, to literature.

His life at the time was not satisfactory: he was often very ill, suffering from consumption (pulmonary tuberculosis) since university days; his marriage was not good, partly due to his own infidelities but also to the nature of his wife (her cousin described her: “Mrs Sterne is a woman of great integrity and has many virtues, but they stand like quills upon the fretful porcupine”); like Dickens’ marriage, it ended in separation, but unlike Dickens, the separation was mutually agreed. Their only living child was a daughter, asthmatic and epileptic, and he had no hope of preferment in the church, having by now alienated his influential uncle. “I wrote” he said in 1760, “not to be fed, but to be famous”



1760 Portrait of Sterne by Sir Joshua Reynolds

The book that made him famous and helped keep him fed was *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, the first two volumes of which were printed in January 1760. It was an immediate success, and when he visited London in the March all copies had been sold, and the author sought out; when it was discovered that he was a very witty, personable man, the invitations from rich and influential people poured in. When he later travelled in Europe in search of a healthier climate, he found similar renown.

Why the fuss? It was, and remains, a very unusual book, described as post-modern before the term had been invented. It famously includes two blank pages for chapters to which he returns later; a completely black page following the account of the death of the parson Yorick; one of his own sermons and, intriguingly or frustratingly, according to your taste, the whole tale – told through Tristram as narrator – moves forward from the hero’s conception via “progressive digressions,” for he argues that a life story cannot be told in a linear way, but following the thoughts and memories that are triggered by the story.

We enter, in short, into a conversation, but one over which we realise Sterne has firm control. This is also a preacher's trick, apparently to veer away from point at issue, in order to curve back to it with a strengthened argument. The characters are large, and the humour often bawdy (a fact for which, as a churchman, he was much criticised) but it is also a significantly moral tale, and there are gentle "sentimental" passages, and here, in Sterne's strength in portraying sentiment or feeling, lies a considerable influence upon Dickens.

Dickens regarded highly *Tristram Shandy* and the book that followed it, *A Sentimental Journey*, in which Parson Yorick narrates a journey to Europe in terms of the people he meets. The latter book contains what I believe to be a most powerful rebuttal of slavery, in which Yorick tries to free a starling in a cage, as the starling cries, "I cannot get out." Dickens refers to this in *Bleak House*, where Mr Skimpole says, "I am not like the starling; I get out." (Ch. 37) The assumption that readers would recognise the reference is interesting.

The pathos within Dickens' work – for example the death of Little Nell – is directly in the "sentimental" vein: "Sentimental" was understood at the time as sympathy and feeling arising from a view in the 18th century church that people were basically good, with a predisposition to benevolence, rather than basically sinful. Sterne, however, further believed that this sympathetic feeling and sexual feeling were closely bound together, so that Yorick, though very much as Mr. Pickwick, an innocent abroad who always intends to do the right thing, is unlike Dickens' hero in that it is his own sexuality that so easily leads him into strange places. To each his time, of course; when Dickens was writing, Sterne was well out of favour, and Dickens unusual for openly admiring his literary gifts and humour.

The two men were very different, both physically (Sterne was almost six feet tall and very gaunt) and in attitude and approach. Unlike Dickens, to read Sterne's work is to be aware that you are being addressed directly by the author himself, and Sterne was often referred to as Tristram, or Yorick, using this conflation of author and character to his own advantage in publishing several volumes of his sermons under the name of Yorick.

Both men, however, died relatively young. Laurence Sterne died in lodgings in London in 1768, just after the publication, to great popular and critical acclaim, of the first two volumes of *A Sentimental Journey*. Reading of the medical treatment given to him, one suspects that 18th century medicine did nothing to lengthen his life!

His house in Coxwold, near Easingwold, (Shandy Hall) to which he moved when he added that village to his charge in 1760, is owned by the Laurence Sterne Trust, and is open to the public from May to September on Wednesdays and Sundays, 2.30-4.30pm. This attractive house and its lovely gardens, which he found a place of retreat and health, is well worth a visit.

Further reading:

The definitive and very readable 2-volume biography is by Arthur H. Cash: *Laurence Stern, The Early & Middle Years* and *Laurence Sterne: The Later Years* and Ian Campbell Ross *Laurence Sterne, A Life*.

PART VIII:

Our Mischievous Purveyor of gossip and tittle-tattle continues his ways and his means.

Chatterbox..... The Branch visit to the impressive surroundings of Newcastle's Theatre Royal for the musical 'Oliver' was not without some tribulations for one or two members. Perhaps the most worrisome concern was the tendency of an anonymous wife of a member (a Mrs CR) to commence her own sing-a-long-a-Dickens on hearing the opening notes of the first song. This, despite her flagrant inability to either hold a note or match the tempo. Matters were only made bearable by the delightful offer of some confectionary from an anonymous source (YK) who clearly showed her great taste by sharing some high quality chocolates of a standard far greater than the Secretary's predilection for Werthers Originals.....

The Christmas Presentation by the Branch at Low Fell library, while judged a success by many visitors, also offered a tantalising glimpse into the backstage world of the performing arts. It did not go unnoticed that some members of the Branch were first in the queue for interval refreshments, nor were the eagle-eyed able to ignore the curious fact that the winners of the quiz were, in fact, family members of one of the cast. However, perhaps the most remarkable discovery was the ease with which two anonymous Branch members (CB & LH) so effortlessly slipped into the role of the inebriated Mrs Gamp and Betsy Prig. Whether or not the teapot with the stage-prop 'water' contained something a little stronger, or whether these two have some other familiarity with the behaviour of an intoxicated lady is a question that should be best left unanswered.....

At the festive gathering of the Branch at 'The Plough' in Kibblesworth there was some initial confusion as the large group of Branch members sought to arrange themselves around their allocated tables. After some polite shuffling, re-jigging and squeezing, matters were then thrown into even greater confusion by the actions of one anonymous member (a Mr HS) who proceeded to lift up his own table and move it to the other side of the room. This had the dramatic effect of leaving the put-upon Mrs HS stranded on her own, with neither table nor colleagues for company. Proceedings were salvaged by that indefatigable good lady Mrs HS who then upped and rejoined her partner - no doubt words would have later been exchanged over the family hearth.....

Whilst words are, so to speak, the tools of the trade for Mr Dickens, a recent Branch meeting was briefly interrupted by the casual manner in which the Branch Treasurer (RC) was able to drop the delightful word 'serendipity' into the monthly discussion. Her eloquent explanation of the word, and the manner in which it was so skilfully deployed almost derived a round of applause and left Chatterbox wondering whether we should offer some sort of prize to the member who can outdo this fine effort....

The recent AGM almost descended into chaos when, just at the moment when the Treasurer announced that the annual subscriptions would be £12 and were now due - 'but that she could wait until the end of the meeting to collect contributions!' - there was a mass scramble for cheque-books and loose cash as almost every member concentrated on immediately passing money around the table (with stage-whispered 'how much did she say?' 'who do I make it payable to?', 'what's the date today?') to the extent that the rest of her important report was then tragically lost in the confusion....

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:

Membership: £12.00 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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