

The Dickens Fellowship, North East England

NEWSLETTER

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PART I:
The Secretary, tipping her hat to a man...

Dear Fellow Dickensians,

I do think that my first address to the Branch should be dedicated exclusively to our retired Secretary, Herbert Savory.

Herbert was the Secretary at the inaugural meeting of the North East Branch of the Dickens Fellowship on Monday 4th March 2002. At that time, the Branch was 'unofficial' in the sense that we were not formally affiliated to, or recognised by, the international Fellowship. At this first meeting, Herbert read out letters of encouragement from other branches and those who had offered support, among them George Yurkas from California, Jane Naseby from Cleveland and Tony Williams and Thelma Grove.

Herbert had long dreamt of the idea of starting a branch in the north east of England. He had attended annual conferences, had canvassed for support in the local press and media and had sought to build a tentative network of committed supporters. His enthusiasm was unbridled, and all of this from someone who, in his own words, was "the most unlikely of people to act as secretary for the North East Branch of The Dickens Fellowship."

Herbert's enthusiasm was clearly infectious and, to his great delight, on the 20th July 2002, the North East of England became recognised as an official branch of the International Fellowship. Now in an official capacity as Secretary of Branch number 198, he welcomed all. He never, as they say, looked back.

Herbert's ready wit, his easy going jovial ease with people from all backgrounds and his genuine enthusiasm for all things Dickensian was evident to all who visited Durham for the international Conference this year. In many ways, this was Herbert at his best. He had fretted and worried for over a year at the prospect of hosting the Conference. Here was his fledgling little Branch projected onto an international stage.

We were all aware of how much this meant to Herbert, but almost right from the start, his fears began to evaporate and he relaxed into a charming and delightful host. As Secretary, he had been asked to 'meet and greet' - an ideal first person to meet all visitors and welcome old and new friends - a jovial, familiar personality to offer a strong first impression.

Herbert's spectacular performance on the final night, during the entertainment provided by the north east Branch, was perhaps his real triumph. Almost effortlessly, and despite months of practice, Herbert blew away any of the lingering pomposity or seriousness that sometimes attaches itself to Dickens, by forgetting his lines, his moves and even his costume changes. He was, as they say, a real hoot. He did his branch proud and perhaps summed up the real ethos of fun and fellowship that Herbert has been so keen to engender.

Now that the Conference is a happy memory, Herbert has decided to resign as Secretary of our branch. He wants, he admits, to spend more time pursuing his other interests, painting, poetry, looking after his pet birds and working on his allotment. He will of course continue to be a valuable member of our branch and with a twinkle in his eye has warned me that he intends to enjoy our Branch meetings.

I know you will all wish to join me in thanking Herbert for his wonderful, wonderful time as Secretary, and for his dogged determination to see that his vision of a local Fellowship could and would become a reality.

Yours in fellowship,

Anne McLeod (Branch Secretary)

PART II:

The Editor, musing on books and the television...



FROM THE EDITOR: The Branch is currently working our patient way through *Our Mutual Friend* as our chosen Dickens book. Each month we offer a synopsis and discussion of four or five chapters and there is no doubt that this manner of reading and study has added greatly to our understanding of his last, great, complete novel.

However, one of the common threads throughout our discussions is the complexity of the book. It is a densely-packed novel, full of major and minor characters and possessed of a plot that relies greatly on assumptions as to the motives and intentions of the principle characters. This complexity presents itself as the master of two competing offspring. On the one hand, it is a source of delight and pleasure as we gradually expand our understanding of the story and begin to wonder at the skill and expertise of the author. On the other hand, there is this nagging question of how the book would have been received upon publication in the 1860's. What kind of audience would have been possessed of the sophistication that is surely needed to follow the twists and turns of the book when presented with the work in monthly instalments? To whom was Mr Dickens addressing when he wrote the instalments? Can a book that requires so much care and attention really have been intended for the 'common reader' or do we modern students do our predecessors a disservice in underestimating their wit and intelligence?

One thing many Branch members agree is that none of us would recommend *Our Mutual Friend* to anyone seeking a way into the wondrous delights of Mr Dickens. Far better, we assert, to offer one of his earlier pieces, or even the novel's immediate predecessor, *Great Expectations*, as a delight to tempt the uninitiated.

Ironical, then, that whilst we slowly and methodically pick our way through *Our Mutual Friend*, many people perhaps unaware of Mr Dickens and his works, will be enjoying the BBC television adaptation of *Little Dorrit*. Here is the writing of Mr Dickens rendered large, with marvellous characterisation and dramatic verve, dressed in a veneer of authenticity by skilled designers and writers.

It can be tempting to be dismissive of television, theatre or cinema adaptations of the works of Mr Dickens, claiming them to be simplified versions of works of great skill and depth, but there is no doubt that they can also preserve the place of Mr Dickens in the minds and intellectual culture of our times. And if they serve to lead anyone at all into reading the original works, then surely they are deserving of our praise and support. More likely, is it not, that a new reader will be led into Dickens by a television's adaptation than by, say, trying to come to terms with a book like *Our Mutual Friend*?

PART III:

The Branch, and some of the things that concern us...

Branches Off...Although the International Conference occupied most of the time and energies of the Branch over recent months, other matters have also served to demand our attention and we continue to plan for forthcoming events.

In June, the Branch hosted a 'Dickensian Evening' at the delightful Millennium Centre, on a beautiful Summer evening, in the former pit village of Kibblesworth – home to our erstwhile former Secretary, Mr Savory. The evening served in some ways as a minor rehearsal for the impending International Conference, but a decent audience of locals enjoyed a mixed night of activities. After introductions and an account of the life of Dickens from Ruth Crofton, the Branch offered entertainment in the form of sketches featuring Pickwick and Bardell and, from *Great Expectations*, Miss Havisham. Tea and biscuits during the interval, to be followed by quiz results and prize-giving before further sketches featuring Boots at the Holly-Tree Inn and the now-famous double-act of Lynn and Christine performing Sairy Gamp and Betsy Prig.

As has been mentioned in Anne McLeod's introduction, Herbert Savory took the decision to step down from the post of Secretary after the International Conference. Although there were initial concerns about his departure, the Branch were united in understanding his motives and reassured by the decision of Anne to accept the post as his successor. The position of Honorary President also fell vacant during the year when Ted Shaw – descendant of the 'infamous' William of Shaws Academy in Bowes, the reputed model for Dotheboys Hall - decided to step down. His successor, announced after an exchange of correspondence with Herbert, was to be Paul Schilke, who accepted the post with much gratitude.

A wonderful social evening for Branch members was hosted by Ruth Crofton following the Conference and her return from a much-needed holiday, at her home, much in the manner of a de-briefing session and wind-down after the hectic months of preparation for the Durham meeting.

Bensham Grove in Gateshead, a wonderfully preserved house that now has charitable status, has sought to establish connections with our Branch as they look to secure funding opportunities to ensure their survival. As part of the growing connection, the Branch will be assisting at a Victorian Day presentation on Saturday 6th December. A programme of Dickens-related talks and readings has been planned by the Branch and the next newsletter will carry a report of the day

Below are some details on Bensham Grove for the uninitiated:



In the early 1800's Joshua Watson, a cheesemonger living over his shop in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, purchased Bensham Grove, together with three allotments on Gateshead Town Fields. He planned to use the house as a country cottage for his family.

The River Tyne, although not as polluted as it easy to become in later years, was already showing the signs of being a hive of industry and commerce of the future. It is no surprise, therefore, that Joshua was attracted to the golden cornfields, bluebell woods and windmills of Bensham. It was near enough to continue his business on the Quayside, but rural and healthy for the children.

And so began the lifelong involvement that three successive generations of the same family had with the house called Bensham Grove. All belonging to a well respected Quaker family, Joshua, Joseph and Robert lived with their families almost continually at Bensham Grove until the early 1920's. Each generation enlarged and improved the house, resulting in an eclectic mix of Georgian and Victorian features.

In later years, when the house was donated to the Bensham Grove community as centre for learning, it became known as the Bensham Settlement. This concept was in all likelihood based on the controversial settlement at Toynbee Hall in London from the last nineteenth century, where progressive-minded university teachers and students were encouraged to become part of a disadvantaged community in Whitechapel and to assist in educating the poor through lessons and by example.

Although suffering some inevitable changes, the essence of the house remains. It is easy to picture the children playing in the garden, or to visualise the formal dinners where distinguished guests from all walks of life sat down with the three 'fine specimens of good North Country Englishmen, Quakers....with strong solid intellect...'

Bensham Grove to this day still follows their principles and beliefs in promoting and improving life in the Bensham community

The Branch Christmas evening has been arranged for Monday 15th December at the Victoria public house on Low Fell, just along from the library. Members and guests are asked to arrive from 6.30pm for a 7.00pm booking.

PART IV:

The Conference, as seen by an American friend...

It would be immodest of us to present our own narrative of the Conference weekend, so we are delighted to present this lovely report on The Dickens Fellowship 102nd International Conference by Barbara Zimmerman, of the Philadelphia Branch in the USA. Our grateful thanks are offered to Barbara for her kind permission to reproduce this report, the first copy of which appeared in The Electronic Buzfuz newsletter. (www2.cruzio.com/~varese/dickens/index.html)

The Dickens Fellowship 102nd International Conference was held in Durham, UK, July 30th to August 4th, 2008. The ancient city of Durham is best known for its Norman-style Cathedral which dominates the skyline and is the final resting place of St. Cuthbert and The Venerable Bede, the 'Father of English history'. During the Middle Ages, the Cathedral was a place where criminals would seek sanctuary by banging the doorknocker and gaining admission inside. In the days to follow, we would explore the theme of Sanctuary.

I arrived in Durham Wednesday 30th July after a three-hour train ride from London and was greeted immediately by Herbert Savory, secretary of the North East Branch, in the lobby of St. Chad's college. In the Quadrangle, I quickly found my welcome packet and room assignment (it's easy when your name begins with a Z, err, I mean a Zed! It's always last.). I was shown to the Lightfoot House by Ruth Crofton, who made prompt arrangements for my very heavy bag to be carried up the stairs for me. My immediate neighbour was Susan Ham from the Bristol/Clifton Branch who proved to be pleasant and very helpful to me in the days to come.



We met at 6:30 for dinner in the dining hall of St. Chad's...everyone chatting, greeting old friends and snapping photographs of each other. After a welcome, and grace by Rev'd Ruth Crofton we were served a delicious three-course meal by the very congenial staff. We all signed a birthday card in honour of Joan Dicks' "39th" and of course sang a chorus of 'Happy Birthday' to her!

A short walk down Bailey Street brought us to the Durham Town Hall where Charles Dickens visited 150 years ago and gave a reading of his *A Christmas Carol* in the then new building. We enjoyed a sherry reception followed by a welcome by the Lord Mayor and an inspired performance of *A Christmas Carol* by Gerald Dickens in the tradition of his famous ancestor. The main hall is an impressive space dominated by a beautiful stained-glass window depicting four bishops of Durham. After the performance, Gerald was kind enough to pose for photos with many of our group and mentioned he will be travelling to the Philadelphia area next fall. Since the night was still young, a group of us gathered at a nearby pub to share a pint and become better acquainted. Our little group included Dickensians from Australia, New Zealand, Germany, Great Britain and the United States.

After a restful night's sleep through which the sound of the Durham Cathedral bells entered my dreams, we met for full English breakfast in the dining hall... everyone seemingly well rested and ready to go! Our lectures were held in the Marquee and on this morning we heard informative presentations by Malcolm Andrews on *Dickens and Laughter* and John Addyman on *Robert Stephenson - Engineer Extraordinary*. Coffee, tea and yummy cookies were waiting for us in the Quadrangle, where we picked up our packed lunches and were given instruction where to board the buses for the Beamish Museum.

At Beamish we were transported around the outdoor museum by restored electric trams and double-decker buses, which looped continuously between several stops throughout the area. We visited a restored historic 1913 town and toured period homes, stores, a printer's shop and dentist's office to name just a few. See Mary Jane Mallonee or me for details of some very scary stories we heard in the Dentist's Office there! When it began to rain, we were glad to duck into the working pub for some refreshment, only to find a lot of other Dickensians had the very same idea!

Back in Durham at dinner, we were served roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, which reminded me of our birthday dinner at the Marigold Restaurant last February...minus the Dickens' punch! Our entertainment that night was the heart-warming SNUG group, i.e. Special Needs Unity Group. We were brought from laughter to tears and back again watching this very special ensemble sing and dance together. Of course they received a rousing round of applause and a standing ovation from our appreciative group.

Too early to say goodnight, several of us braved the reportedly haunted Shakespeare Pub. The only spirits we noticed however were in our glasses!

Friday, August 1st and another full English Breakfast before our lectures ... Wendy Jacobson on *Amy Dorrit – A Fugitive and a Vagabond – Finds Sanctuary* and Andrew Sanders on *Dickens Out of Town or Dickens Out of his Depth*. (Dickens? Out of his depth? Hmmm...) More coffee, tea and cookies followed by Ray Anglesea on *A Hidden Place*.

After a delicious buffet lunch (we were always eating!), we once again boarded buses and headed for Newcastle. Along the way, our local guide pointed out 'The Angel of the North', voted one of the wonders of Britain in 2002.

The 'Angel' has a 54-meter wingspan, almost the size of a jumbo jet, and is 20 meters high, quite an eye-opening sight on the horizon. In Newcastle we were given a guided tour through the Guildhall, the ancient centre of municipal government of the town. Mary Jane and I then set off on our own to explore the city before meeting up with several others of our group at the train station for a quick ride back to Durham. From Durham Station, we chose to walk back to St. Chad's, taking in the sites and sounds of this very old town...no fear of getting lost with the majestic spires of Durham Cathedral looming above all.

After dinner we were treated to *A Night at the (Silent) Movies*, which were old film adaptations of Dickens' works with live piano accompaniment, presented by David Williams and George Hetherington.

Saturday morning found us at the Annual General Meeting (after a full English breakfast...see the pattern here?). The roll call of the branches is my favourite part and Mary Jane and I were very proud to represent our Philadelphia Branch. We listened to the Joint Honorary General Secretary's report and voted unanimously with regards to the 'moor eeffoc' or 'Coffee Room' at the Dickens House Museum on Doughty Street. On the subject of future conferences Beth Bliss, whetted our appetite for Cleveland in 2009!

Our afternoon was spent at Bowes Village where we visited the St. Giles churchyard, where Dickens walked and saw the gravestone that was to give him the inspiration for Smike in *Nicholas Nickleby*. Nearby we walked through what was once William Shaw's School, the model for Dotheboy's hall and since converted into several very nice flats! It is a far cry from what was at one time a place of so much suffering for the students there...

At the Bowes museum we were awed by the amazing collection of furniture, ceramics, textiles and artwork. Our tour finale was a 35-second performance by the Silver Swan, the icon of the museum, and well worth the wait! Back to Durham for a rest, before we donned our eveningwear for the Conference Banquet at 7:30. Each table was named after one of Dickens' novels and I quickly found my place at the *Great Expectations* table. Mr. Michael Rogers said the grace....

*In fellowship assembled here, we thank thee Lord for food and cheer.
And through our Saviour, thy dear son, we pray God bless us everyone.*

after which we enjoyed a delicious meal. The menu included....

*Pickled Herring & Salmon Salad served with Stottie Fingers
Roasted Lamb Shank with Root Vegetables & Mead Gravy
Minted Mashed Potatoes
Ribbons of Steamed Spring Greens
Poached Pears in Red Wine
Served with Clove & Cinnamon Cream
Local Cheeses served with Oatcakes and Port
Coffee and Mints*

Toasts were made by Mr. Herbert Savory, Prof. Michael Eaton, Mr. Michael Quinn, The Mayor of Durham and Rev'd Ruth Crofton. After the banquet, many of us lingered in the quadrangle late into the night, speaking of Dickens and Shakespeare until our eyelids grew heavy.

Sunday morning came around much too quickly, heralded by the ever-present Cathedral bells and my alarm clock. I had a lovely walk through the town and along the River Wear and I won't even mention the Full English breakfast waiting for me when I returned.

The morning program consisted of lectures by Tony Williams on *Dickens and the North of England*, Michael Slater on *Writing a Biography of Dickens*, and Alan Dilnot on *'Don't Go Home': Looking for Sanctuary in Dickens*. After lunch, Thelma Grove spoke on *The Greatest Reader of the Greatest Writer of the Age*.

Following the lectures, we attended the magnificent Durham Cathedral, the finest Norman structure in the whole of England, for an inspiring Evensong, in which Rev'd Ruth Crofton participated.

With a bit of free time before dinner, we had time to indulge our own fancy. I remember thinking, "O my! It's the last night already!"...and strolled around trying to fix the ancient city in my memory. Dinner was followed by brilliant entertainment by the members of the North East England Branch & friends. (Words are not enough...you just had to be there!) We were also serenaded by the Dunelm Singers, a very talented local County Durham group. And then it was over. Lots of 'Good-byes!', 'See you in Cleveland!' and exchanging of addresses so as to 'Keep in touch!'

One final breakfast and goodbyes and I was whisked away by taxi to the train station for the journey back to London! Later that evening, I joined several Dickensians from Cleveland and New York for an Italian dinner on The Strand in London to reminisce about the past five days and anticipate next year's conference in Cleveland. It was a memorable time and I will never forget the 102nd International Dickens Conference in Durham!

Barbara Zimmerman
Philadelphia, PA.
August 2008

Some remembered moments from the Conference from Carolyn Walker

- *SNUG – a heart-warming and life-affirming performance: ALL of it, but especially 'Something So Strong' and the finale, 'Somewhere Out There.'*
- *Gerald Dickens' performance at the Town Hall – amazing*
- *Herbert and I cutting and arranging the name places – what a laugh!*
- *Beamish in the rain – and everyone still enjoyed it!*
- *Chris pushing the marquee's rain-filled roof!*
- *At the Banquet – the waiting staff all dressed up, really appreciated!*
- *Herbert hamming it at the Branch performance*



PART V:

The member, her story and her thoughts....

Claire Fitzgerald is a 'distant' member of the north east Branch, living, as she does, in Boston, USA. For many of the north east Branch, the Durham Conference was the first opportunity to meet this remarkable lady. After an initial, modest decline, she kindly consented to be the subject of our Q&A and supplied the following, marvellous account of what is truly a life well led!

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

No, I have not read all his works. I have read and re-read all the novels and many of the short stories, but I have not read things like *The American Notes* or *The Uncommercial Traveller*.

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

My all-time favourite is *David Copperfield*, perhaps because it was my first. When I was twelve years old I was confined to bed for over a year with an illness. Naturally I became bored. I was a voracious reader and had read all the books available to me. In an effort to relieve my boredom, my mother brought me a book suggesting "it might be a little difficult for you, but try it." It was *David Copperfield*, and I immediately fell in love with all the characters, especially the Micawbers. It helped that both my parents read avidly and both were Dickens fans so my mother and I had great times discussing Copperfield.

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?

I don't think my family consider me slightly barmy, but I think they are slightly outraged when I firmly state that the second Sunday of each Month is my 'Dickens' Day', so don't invite me to any parties, weddings, or christenings on those days, because I won't come!

And how did you become involved with the Dickens Fellowship?

I've told how I was introduced to Dickens through *David Copperfield*, but none of my siblings liked Dickens' works and although my children have read some of them, only one son is really interested. Also, none of my friends are at all interested. Therefore, after my mother died I was lost - I had no one to "talk Dickens" with.

Then, in 1994, a gentleman named Francis 'Barney' Duane visited the Dickens Museum in London and David Parker asked him why there was no Fellowship Branch in Boston. On Barney's return to America, he put an invitation in the Boston Globe for any Dickens lovers to join him in forming a Boston Branch. Happily, he had a good response, our Boston Branch was formed, and my joining the Fellowship has greatly impacted and enriched my life, far more than I could ever have imagined.

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

I do have a great many 'favourite' authors. I love Howard Spring, another British author whom I feel is woefully under-appreciated. His stories and characters are right up there beside Dickens. I also love Anya Seton, Jeffrey Archer, Edwin O'Connor, John Grisham, RF Delderfield, Tolkein and Galsworthy...and oh, so many, many more, far too many to list!

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

I read anywhere and everywhere - on the bus, in a waiting room - always have a book in the car "in case" I have to wait. Also, since I drive a lot I listen to books on tape. They are great, but only if they are "unabridged."

Do you have a preference for paperbacks or hardbacks?

Paperbacks are, of course, easier to carry, but there's nothing like the feel and look of a good hardcover, especially if the paper is fine.

Tell us something about yourself and your background?

I must start by telling you that I am truly a candidate for the honour of the happiest woman you could meet. Since I cheerfully admit to being just a year away from eighty years old, to tell my whole story would require a book, but I'll do my best to keep it brief!

I live in Somerville, Massachusetts, a city about six miles northwest of Boston. I was born in Boston - the youngest of nine children, but the first one to be born in a hospital. I was brought home from the hospital to the house in which I still live! Most people seem to find that quite amazing! It goes without saying that it was a big house for this lively Irish family - there was always something going on, but honestly despite 'minor' upheavals like the depression years and the Second World War, the house was always brimming with people and Fun!

After a few part-time jobs during my high school years, I worked for eight years as a secretary until my marriage to a great guy and the birth of my first child. Between 1954 and 1964 I had seven children, four girls and three boys. For the next thirty years I was a stay-at-home mother and since we lived with my parents it was always a very interesting and busy life with constant visits from our extended family. Naturally there were the difficult times and we had our shares of downs along with the ups, but there was always, always so much joy. We were not at all well off but while bringing up the family I always made sure that, although we might be financially poor, we were always culturally rich with a wealth of good books and great music.

After the deaths of my parents - by which time my children were out of high school - I decided to go back to secretarial work and did some temporary assignments until I found a full-time job that I really loved. I got my first driver's licence at the age of 54 and that, coupled with my full-time job, helped in the big transition in my life when, sadly, my husband died in 1988. To keep busy, I took courses and became a Certified Professional Secretary and also taught literacy and English as a second language for a number of years. I was determined to live my own active life and not to depend on my children for company! In 1989 I changed jobs to work for a wonderful husband and wife team and I still work with them three days a week. We are truly good, good friends.

For hobbies I love cooking, baking, reading, knitting, music of all kinds (except heavy metal!), scrabble games, jigsaw puzzles and travel. I've had five trips to Ireland (the home of my parents) and four to England for Fellowship Conferences. I also love doing automobile trips and bus tours. Obviously I have a big family - four siblings still living, seven children, six in-laws, and seventeen grandchildren. They are all wonderful, and very good and helpful to me and I love them all dearly, but I also love my contemporaries. I'm very close to my brother and my three remaining sisters and I have loads of wonderful friends. I still go out to dinner once a month with a group of six high-school friends and keep in touch with many of my former co-workers. I'm always on the go!

One of the biggest delights in my life was joining the Dickens Fellowship in 1994, and that has brought great happiness. My trips to England resulted in my making more very special friends with whom to correspond, and that is so enriching!

I also adore cats - all cats. I had two darlings- Jennie and Jazzie - but sadly they both went to cat heaven in the last year. I'm currently feeding a great big stray cat I've named Thomas Tiger; trying desperately to coax him into being an indoor cat, but he's having none of that. He likes the wide open spaces.

Previously I had two dogs at the same time - a German shepherd 'Kaiser' and a yellow labrador, 'Barney' but sadly they, too, passed on. So now, after the holidays, I'm planning to hopefully get two more cats and maybe, just maybe, a dog also! Great expectations!!

I know that you asked, but I honestly can't think of any skeletons in the family closet! I've truly been blessed with great kids who married great people. Happily they all get along famously, even all the in-laws, frequently vacation together and always are ready to help each other.

God has been very good to me and I have good reason to be grateful. I truly am happy and am in good health so I have no right to complain about anything. Lest I sound like a 'Pollyanna' let me say that of course we all have difficulties and concerns but I've learned a few things over the years. For one thing, I refuse to worry in advance about anything. The adage 'If you pray, why worry - and if you worry, why pray?' is my mantra. I simply don't worry, I just pray that I'll have the strength to handle whatever comes. Another favourite 'Claire-ism' - as my kids call it - is 'view all things in the light of eternity - if God isn't going to judge me on it, it's not important!' It works for me!

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

Unfortunately, human nature being what it is, we don't seem to learn from history, so we still are faced with many of the same problems Dickens addressed in his writings...education, pompous politicians, poor working conditions, unfeeling employers, etc. so of course his books are still relevant.

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 feel any strong preference regarding the interpretations of Dickens works - I'll take them any way they come. I loved the BBC production of *Bleak House*, but didn't at all like the production of *Martin Chuzzlewit* some years ago. However, nothing surpasses actually reading a book and seeing the words.

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

Our current Branch selection is *Little Dorrit*. I am re-reading it and enjoying it even more than the first time. The excellent discussions with our members and their carefully prepared papers add immeasurably to my enjoyment. *Dorrit* joins my other favourites: *Bleak House*, *Great Expectations* and *Our Mutual Friend*.

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 encourage a new reader to Dickens I think I would try to stress his humour. I always enjoy his way of having the characters repeat a particular phrase i.e., Mrs. Gummidge: 'I'm a lone lorn creatur and everything always goes contrary with me' or Micawber's 'something will turn up.' Right now my 14-year old grand-daughter is reading *Great Expectations* for school, so I'm hoping to spend some time discussing it with her in the hopes of helping her to understand it. She's already called with some questions, so wish me luck in my efforts to perhaps gain a new member for the Fellowship!

PART VI:

The poet, now that he has retired...

Beamish in the Rain by HS

Doesn't soond vury nice does it?
but accordin te aal whaat went, it waas great.
two hoors a sun n two a rain
a typical English summa.

Them thaat went saw th North East of ard,
pit hooses, a farm, n th dentists !!
the co-op, 'n the even went doon a drift mine,
th waas trams, n trolleys n by aal accounts these wa weel used.

This waas afore th parnie came, n it poured,
so aas aal gud visitors,
n troo Geordies alike,
th headed fo th pub te shelta, n te hev a swift pint.

Too late waas th cry!!, th otha bus hed beet thm tiv it
in th finish aa beleive th waa lucky te git a gill apiece,
then it waas back on th charabang n headin fo St Chads,
a place o sanctuary.

Efta a wesh n brush up, n theyd combed tha hair,
which made them aal luk brand nu,
it waas time fo dinner,
which waas as usual, a treat.

Follerin thet waas too hoors o sheer bliss,
we wor entertained by SNUG, a brilliant group
o laads n lasses whaat did themselves proud,
we laughed n we cried, te see just whaat could be achieved by special needs young people.
Then off te bed et th close of an wonderful day.

The Dickens Fellowship, North East England

The Branch officers are:

Hon. President:	Paul Schilke
Hon. Secretary:	Anne McLeod
Hon. Treasurer:	Revd Ruth Crofton
Public Relations Secretary:	Ms Lynn Hitchen

Membership subscriptions are: £12.00 per annum

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

To contact the Branch secretary:

Anne McLeod
12 Blackstone Court
Blaydon Burn
Blaydon on Tyne
NE21 4HH
Tel: 07833 105697
E-mail: cleotwemlow@btinternet.com

To contact the Newsletter Editor:

Chris Robson
2, Lilac Road
Walkerville
Newcastle upon Tyne
NE6 4TL
Tel: 0191 2634921
E-mail: crobs@hotmail.co.uk

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