

The Dickens Fellowship, North East England

NEWSLETTER

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PART I:

Dickens, and the things that a Fellowship Branch has to do...

Dear Fellow Dickensian

Since our last Newsletter the Branch have contributed to a very well received Victorian Christmas Open day, had our customary Christmas dinner, held the Branch AGM and a celebratory meal to mark the occasion of Dickens birth.

The AGM was well attended as always and, for me, one of the most important items on the Agenda was the unanimously endorsed nomination of Herbert Savory as our new Honorary Vice President. A position he humbly accepted and richly deserves.

A number of events and activities are planned for the forthcoming year. Thanks to the contacts of one of our local members, Yvonne Kennedy, we have been invited to take part, in not one, but two, Local History events to be held in May in the Heritage Centre, housed in a newly, sympathetically, refurbished 12th Century church.

On Saturday the 9th May there is to be a widely advertised open day welcoming the people of the North East to come and talk to representatives from local Historical and Heritage groups. We will, of course, be flying the flag for Dickens.

On the following Friday we have been asked to provide an evening of Dickensian Entertainment. Chris Robson will provide a brief background on Dickens, which is always well received, Ruth Crofton will give her acclaimed talk on "Dickens and the North East" and the rest of the branch will contribute in the form of sketches and readings from several of Dickens short stories. The next Newsletter will have all the details on what we hope will be an enjoyable and informative evening for the unsuspecting North East public.

We are also hoping to send some time in London later in the year taking the opportunity to visits places with links to Dickens. Tony Williams has kindly offered to be our guide when we have agreed on dates.

It has been a struggle for some, but we are now, with mixed emotions, nearing the end of *Our Mutual Friend*. The jury is still out on how enjoyable a read it has been and discussions have taken place on how well the book was received by the public in comparison to some of Dickens more popular novels.

Rather than reading another novel straight away we have decided to explore some of Dickens short stories, *Pictures from Italy*, his journalistic contributions to *Household Words* and *All The Year Round* etc etc. So this is your opportunity to dust off your copies of his more obscure, less commercial works and choose a month for a discussion on one of your favourite pieces. All suggestions and contributions are welcome from near and far, as I see this as an ideal opportunity to expand our knowledge and understanding of the life and times of Dickens.

I myself am leaning towards "The Tattlesnive Bleater" which caught my eye recently while I was standing in, of all places, the sandwich queue at work! As our branch membership is wide and varied I await with interest the selection that has caught the eye of my fellow Dickensians.

Yours in Fellowship

Anne McLeod (Branch Secretary)

PART II:

Dickens, text messaging, mobile phone calls and the internet..!



FROM THE EDITOR: The effort of finishing this particular newsletter has been, at times, exasperating. The material supplied by the contributors arrived in good time, and the essential content of the newsletter was finalised at a relatively early stage. All that was needed was some polishing, some proof-reading, some tidying-up and a little bit of editorial content. However, finding the necessary time to sit, uninterrupted, and commit the required effort has been almost impossible in what has been a, personally, hectic and demanding month or so.

The modern world is possessed of so much ease of communication and contact. It can, there is no doubt, be liberating and enlightening. How many of us, I wonder, now explore our contact with the life and works of Mr Dickens through the medium of the internet? There are, indeed, plans well-advanced to provide a visual record of both *Household Words* and *All the Year Round* on an internet site, something that would be a marvellous resource to any amateur (or professional) Dickensian.

On the other hand, this free and swift movement of information and contact can possess disadvantages. How many of us, I wonder, are assailed on a daily basis by e-mails, text messages, telephone calls, both domestic and mobile, all of them seeming to conspire to interrupt, to beckon, to demand our attention.

Elsewhere in this newsletter, a short piece on transport in the times of Mr Dickens offers the information that it could take almost one and a-half days to travel the 240 miles or so from London to Greta Bridge – a journey fraught with obstacles and hazards. And yet in this modern world, many employers find little hesitation in asking staff to travel, say, the 400 mile return trip from Newcastle to Birmingham for a one-day meeting, wasted hours sitting among roaring traffic on busy motorways.

It is a common observation of those readers of the works of Mr Dickens that his novels often contain a series of remarkable and fortuitous coincidences and connections between the characters. This may be a fair point, but in a world in which he lived surely coincidence was a necessary device to establish connections? How much easier it must be for modern writers, with the plethora of options before them – text messages, the internet and the like – to maintain contact between disparate characters, rather than rely on the contrivances of mutual acquaintances and occasional connection.

We live in a bustling, feverish world. As John Buchan once wrote; “In the perpetual hurry of life there would be no chance of quiet for the soul.” How right he was. So please accept my apologies for the delay in producing this particular edition – it is not my fault, it’s the type of world in which we live...!

PART III:

Dickens, his in-laws and how a whiff of scandal encouraged some contemporary newspapers to give him prominence for all the wrong reasons...

Much ink has been expended on articles about Dickens' immediate family – parents, siblings, wife, children, and on his relationship to his sisters-in-law, Mary and Georgina Hogarth – but very much less on the subject of his father and mother-in-law. Catherine Dickens' parents were Scottish and very musical; her father, George Hogarth, was an amateur viol-cellist and composer and her mother, Georgina, was daughter of George Thomson, a musician and publisher friend of Walter Scott's publishing firm. George became a close friend of the author and, having trained as a lawyer in Edinburgh, was also Scott's legal advisor.

At the age of 47, in the hope of earning more money to support his increasing family, George Hogarth left the law for journalism and the family moved to Halifax, Yorkshire, where he started the *Halifax Guardian*, then, in 1834, to London where he became music critic on the *Morning Chronicle*. It was there that he met the young Dickens, who was producing 'street sketches' for that publication. In 1835, George was appointed Editor of an off-shoot of the *Morning Chronicle* – the *Evening Chronicle*. Here, he invited Dickens to contribute further sketches to the paper and, when the complete *Sketches by Boz* (as Dickens was known) was published, he gave it a highly favourable review.

Dickens became a regular visitor to the Hogarth home (at this time there were five sons and four daughters, Catherine being the eldest) – enjoying musical evenings and apparently some rather more lively visits. In his biography of Dickens, Peter Ackroyd tells of the following incident: While the Hogarths were sitting in the drawing room 'a young man dressed as a sailor jumped in at the window, danced a hornpipe, whistling a tune, jumped out again and a few minutes later Charles Dickens walked gravely in at the door, as if nothing had happened, shook hands all round, and then, at the sight of the puzzled faces, burst into a roar of laughter.'

In 1836 Charles Dickens and Catherine Hogarth married, and relationships with the Hogarth family continued to be good. Mrs Hogarth attended Catherine's first confinement, and she and Dickens corresponded very warmly after the death of Mary Hogarth. When Dickens became editor of *Bentleys Miscellany*, he invited contributions from George Hogarth and made him music critic for the *Daily News*. It is also very clear that Dickens was initially very proud that the Hogarth's were connected to the Scottish cultural circles, a circle that admired then encouraged the young Dickens.

However, as the years passed, so relationships worsened, more or less in line with the worsening relationship between Charles and Catherine Dickens. In 1855, Dickens declared himself 'dead sick of the Scottish tongue in all its moods and tenses' and that he could no longer bear the 'contemplation of their imbecility.' With the eventual separation from Catherine, and the decision of her sister Georgina to remain with Dickens and run his household, relationships with the in-laws reached rock bottom.

As time passed, Dickens showed increasing signs of impatience and irritation with his parents in law, complaining about them in several letters in 1856 and 7, and when the process of his and Catherine's separation began the relationship shattered.

Mrs Hogarth came to stay with Catherine at Tavistock House, and the next day Dickens moved out to stay at his office at Wellington Street realising, no doubt, that the involvement of his mother-in-law in the legal proceedings meant there could be no quiet settlement. The fact that Georgina was remaining with Dickens and being very critical of Catherine, her sister, caused great distress in the Hogarth family, which is understandable, and a situation in which no parent would wish to find themselves, but Mrs Hogarth and another daughter, Helen seem to have originated – or at least not discouraged – rumours about Georgina and Dickens.

He responded furiously: in May 1858 he wrote of them as “two wicked persons who should have spoken very differently of me, in consideration of earned respect and gratitude.” Eventually George Hogarth issued a statement saying that his family had never suggested any “improper motive” for Georgina remaining with the Dickens family, Mrs Hogarth and Helen were forced to sign a statement denying belief in all rumours about Dickens, and Dickens himself forbade his children to speak or remain in the presence of their grandmother or aunt.

A sad and tangled ending to a relationship that had apparently begun with warmth. (RC)

As a postscript to the above, in February of this year, a number of national newspapers in the UK picked up on the story behind the impending auction of a diamond ring. This story is taken from the website of the *Daily Telegraph*.

A diamond ring that supports the theory that Charles Dickens had a secret love-child has been sold at auction for £26,000. The 0.9 carat ring has long courted controversy as it is regarded as final proof that Britain's most famous novelist had a long-standing affair with his sister-in-law Georgina Hogarth.

The Victorian writers' present-day relations claim the ring was passed on to Georgina's son Hector following his death - because he was the author's illegitimate son. Now an anonymous collector from Northern Ireland has paid £26,000 to beat three other bidders for the ring, which was a gift to Dickens from the famous poet Alfred Tennyson in 1854.

Dickens' close relationship with Georgina, who lived in the family home, fuelled torrid public rumours that they were enjoying a long-standing affair. The literary giant always denied the "monstrous misrepresentations" about their relationship, and even forced her to undergo a humiliating public virginity test.

But descendants of Georgina, who have asked not to be named, claim the ring proves the writer had an illegitimate son with their distant relative. They even have a press cutting from 1922 that supports their claim. The clipping, from the December 31st 1922 issue of *The Statesman* shows a picture of Hector and names him as the youngest son of the famous author.



The newspaper shows "Mr Hector Charles Dickens, youngest son of the author Charles Dickens, born in 1854" in Calcutta at the graveside of one of the writer's legitimate sons. The photograph caption also says: "Mr Dickens, who has a hotel in Simla, the Goodwood, has worn for many years a gold ring presented by Alfred Tennyson to Charles Dickens."

Nigel Ward, from Nigel Ward & Company Auctioneers in Pontrilas, Herefordshire, said: "I don't think there was any really any doubt about the authenticity of the ring. We had a lot of people coming to the sale to view the ring and one of them said they needed to speak to me. They were friendly with an Ian Dickens who lives somewhere in Cambridgeshire and is the great, great grandson of Dickens and had seen what we had been saying on the website about the ring and was able to collaborate it all. He said it was all known about in the family but that they didn't really talk about it. Hector was the son of Georgina Hogarth and was then employed as a housekeeper in the family home. Throughout his life Hector was known as Charles Dickens the younger."

Dickens was given the ring, inscribed 'Alfred Tennyson to Charles Dickens 1854', whilst married to Catherine with whom he had 10 children. Historians accept that Dickens had an affair with 18-year-old actress Ellen Ternan during their marriage. But until now there has been little evidence to prove rumours he was in a relationship with Catherine's sister Georgina in the family home.

Dickens slammed the "monstrous misrepresentations" in his journal 'Household Words' and rumours of the affair were quashed. But Georgina received £8,000 cash and a hoard of jewellery when he died in 1870 - much more than his estranged wife Catherine or mistress Ellen.

The ring was sold alongside two wills, written paper work, family trees and newspaper cuttings which are claimed to prove the link.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/>

PART IV:

Dickens and an American library – or how the act of volunteering leads to a serendipitous discovery...

Barbara Zimmerman, of the Philadelphia Branch in the USA, has kindly sent us a fascinating story of a connection between Mr Dickens and the contents of a marvellously preserved private library in her home town. For the uninitiated (and the editor is one!) a 'docent' – according to the dictionary - is a North American word for a tourist guide working in some museums or cathedrals.

I volunteer as a docent at the Rosenbach Museum and Library, a small historic house and library in centre city, Philadelphia. The house was the home of Phillip H. Rosenbach and his younger brother Abraham Simon Wolf Rosenbach, or the 'Doctor', as he was known. Phillip was a dealer in fine and decorative arts, antique furniture and anything with a royal connection. There is a clock made by Marie Antoinette's clockmaker in the dining room and Joseph Bonaparte's own washstand is in the parlour!

Doctor Rosenbach was an antiquarian book dealer and collector, well known in his day as the 'Napoleon of the Auction Room'. He was instrumental in obtaining many of the priceless rare books and manuscripts found in some of our most distinguished libraries here in the United States including the Widener Library at Harvard, The Huntington Library in California and the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C. The Rosenbach Museum and Library at 2008-2010 Delancey Place, was founded in 1954 to preserve their eclectic collections for future generations.



In the fall of 2007, with the encouragement of a few friends, I enrolled in the Rosenbach docent-training program, which lasted twelve weeks and covered everything from incunabula, to British Literature, to Americana, from the Folios of Shakespeare to the poetry of Robert Burns to the writings of Abraham Lincoln. It was a challenging programme, and out of a starting class of twenty-four students, eight graduated. I passed my 'tour' exam on the 5th of March 2008 and have been leading tours through the historic house and library since.

Shortly after our graduation, over lunch with several of my fellow docents, we discussed how rewarding it would be to create a special themed tour. The collection is extremely diverse and lends itself to endless interpretations. What theme would we do first? We chose romance!



With the help of our accommodating instructor, several knowledgeable and very helpful curators, and our brilliant librarian we are ready to kick off 'Romance at the Rosenbach' in February 2009 to coincide with Valentines Day. The docent-led tours will alternate with the regular house tours on Wednesday evenings and all day Saturdays throughout the month of February and last approximately fifty minutes.

So why am I telling you this? Well, the best part of my job is that in Dr. Rosenbach's personal library there is a wonderful Dickens collection. First editions galore, broadsides to his theatricals, part of the manuscripts for *Pickwick Papers* and *Nicholas Nickleby*. (How vividly I recall my trip to Dotheboy's Hall in Bowes last summer!) And, imagine, there is even a lock of his hair! Every time I go to work I bask in the warm glow radiating from the Dickens collection on the north wall of the east library. Ok, there is really no increase in temperature or actual glow (the curators would be horrified!), but it is pretty special!

And the very best part is that Dickens will play a major part in our upcoming Romance Tour. We will tell the compelling story of Mary Hogarth and the effect her death had on him and his work. Mary died in his arms in May of 1837. He called her his 'perfect angel'.

He was devastated and for the first and only time in his career, he missed a deadline! At the time, he was writing the *Pickwick Papers*, and won't it be marvellous to point out the manuscript in his own distinctive hand as we relate how Mary became the inspiration for many of his heroines in other novels like *Oliver Twist*, *Martin Chuzzlewit* and *Bleak House*.

Sharing the spotlight with Charles Dickens, to mention only a few, will be Oscar Wilde's handwritten copy of *Salome* (in French), *A Woman Scorned*; Robert Burn's poem *Ode to a Bonny Lass* written to his handsome Nell; James Joyce's manuscript of *Ulysses* – 'The Man-Killer' (Nora Barnacle's nickname); and the story of the Charles II document box which has a very lurid history as you may well imagine!

I guess it is easy to see why I love my job even though I don't take home a paycheck. Being surrounded by the wonderful collections of the Rosenbach brothers is very special for me. And personally, I'm hoping to kindle a flame of interest in the hearts of my guests and send them off with a desire to learn more about the Inimitable Boz!

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Dear Friends in the North East,

I am thrilled to report that both museum staff and visitors agreed...our Romance Tour was a resounding success. Even our favourite old curmudgeon Sam, who minds the front desk, was impressed with our efforts, and THAT's high praise indeed. Gracing Sam's desk was a beautifully decorated basket full of (what else?) Hershey Kisses for our guests, although we all had our fair share. (*Editor – I believe this is some kind of confectionary?*)

To coincide with our romance theme, the museum offered a brand new 'hands-on' tour called 'Love Letters'. This tour featured romantic missives by noted figures such as founding father Dr. Benjamin Rush to his future wife Julia, Marlene Dietrich to Mercedes de Acosta (Dietrich wrote all her love letters on blue paper in green ink), William Shakespeare to Anne Hathaway (one of the William Henry Ireland Shakespearian *Forgeries*), as well as a revealing letter from John Keats to his love, Fanny Brawne. Since the 'hands-on tour' was presented by museum staff, the public was permitted to actually *hold* and read these historic documents. It was brilliant!

I will tell you also, the lock of Dickens' hair was dead centre in the vitrine on the partners' desk in Dr. Rosenbach's library with the handwritten page from *The Pickwick Papers* manuscript right beside it. The curl of hair is such a warm brown colour; I wish all of you could have been there to see it. To have these relics on view for the entire month was so special. Too bad February is the shortest month of the year.

The speculation has already begun about what comes next and we docents are holding our (collective) breath hoping the 'powers that be' will give us the go-ahead to start researching our next project. We've had an idea or two (or 20!), the first being 'Mystery at the Rosenbach'. The first edition of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* that stares back at me through the glass of the library shelf seems a natural place to start, hmmm? Another potential theme is, 'Divas and Rakes of the Rosenbach' for which Sir Mulberry Hawk from *Nicholas Nickleby* seems sufficiently rakish to be a contender. Perhaps some of you may offer some thoughts or suggestions?

PART V:

Dickens and one of his admirers – but this time no scandal!

Margaret Webb became well known to many of the north-east Branch at the Durham conference last summer. A friend of our Treasurer and erstwhile Conference organiser Ruth Crofton, Margaret appeared on the first morning and proceeded to spend the rest of the weekend in a charmingly unflappable manner. Her good cheer and willingness to muck-in, as well as her ready willingness to not take anything too seriously or worry about anything at all, was a perfect addition to our ranks. She kindly offered us this insight into her relationship with Mr Dickens.

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

No, I have **not** read all Dickens' works. I haven't even read most of them.

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

My favourite is *David Copperfield*. I remember reading it first at Primary School in what I suppose was an 'edited' version for young children. I was incensed by the way the very young David was treated, delighted by Aunt Betsy and the donkeys and rather ashamed of David's snobbish behaviour (as a young man) towards his old friends.

I also love *A Christmas Carol*, again a childhood introduction but I always covered up the illustration of the scary third spectre when I got to that page

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 think folk believe that I must have plenty of time to sit and **read** Dickens – it can often be seen on television, you know! – but I also think that my affection for Dickens bestows a kind of 'way out' kudos!

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

My father's bookcase and those junior versions that I've mentioned earlier. My father had all of the works of Dickens and was a great admirer himself, but never forced them upon me. As long as I'd washed my hands then I could help myself and dip into the books without restriction. Dad would mention a character and that would set me off. He was particularly fond of Mr Micawber – probably because he could identify with his waiting for *something* to turn up. My mother too had a love of the characters, although perhaps more from the films than the books.

And how did you become involved with the Dickens Fellowship?

This was through my friendship with Ruth (Crofton) and I had, for example, visited conferences in Portsmouth and Amsterdam as an 'observer' before joining the North East Branch as a 'long-distance member'.

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

I read almost anything, and usually everything recommended by friends, book programmes or serialisations on BBC Radio Four. This includes books from the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries! I've just finished reading *White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga. This is set in India and won the Man Booker Prize in 2008, and I'm currently re-reading *David Copperfield* as I've persuaded my small book group to try it for next month's meeting. I enjoy detective stories, especially those by Stuart Pawson who sets his novels in the city of Leeds and around the Yorkshire Dales – a bit of holiday escapism.

My 'comfort' book is the first part of *Under the Greenwood Tree* by Hardy. I think I almost know it by heart. The description of walking through the woods in the dark is marvellous, and the intrigues of the village choir, or quire, as the vicar wants to move with the times are both sad and funny – nothing changes! *The Beano* and *The Dandy* used to be favourites of mine too, but perhaps these don't count as great literature?

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

I'll read **anywhere**, mostly with a cat on my lap unless of course I'm travelling. When I was a teenager the kitchen was a favourite place, much to the irritation of my busy mother. I think that curled up in bed is perhaps my favourite reading place.

Do you have a preference for paperbacks or hardbacks?

I like hardbacks for home reading but paperbacks are easier to transport. I don't really mind either, I suppose.

Tell us something about yourself and your background?

I was born in the Black Country, in Oldbury in the West Midlands and lived in and around this area until I was 23. I went to Dudley (home to both the equally famous zoo and comedian Lenny Henry!) to do teacher-training from 1960-63 and taught in the Midlands for two years before moving north to Leeds.

I eventually became the Headteacher of a Middle School for 9-13 year olds and then – after re-organisation – a Primary School for 5-11 year olds. I just love the Middle School system and was sad to see it go, but also enjoyed my time with the younger children. I took early retirement and continued to live in east Leeds.

I am a member of a Methodist/United Reformed Church LEP (Local Ecumenical Partnership) and am fully involved with that. As a spin-off from the Methodist Church, I am heavily involved with the National Executive of the Wesley Guild and the Nigeria Health Care Project charity. Together with others, I visit Nigeria every other year. I have also recently become involved with a small charity in South India and visited there twice.

I enjoy reading, craftwork, theatre, concerts, meals with friends, holidays and chatting. Housework comes bottom of the list.

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

Dickens is still relevant in the 21st century because the characters that you meet in his books are those that you meet in real life – and if you don't know them personally then you know of them. He wrote about 'timeless' situations – poverty, child labour, exploitation and sheer wickedness, all of which still exist.

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 like most of the radio adaptations. The famous *Great Expectations* film with John Mills as a young Pip encountering Magwitch in the cemetery – shudderingly good. Of the versions of *A Christmas Carol*, almost all have something to offer. Patrick Stewart and Scrooge's laugh on Christmas morning – unbeatable for a transformation – while the ballet and Muppets version are also excellent.

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

Re-reading *David Copperfield*.

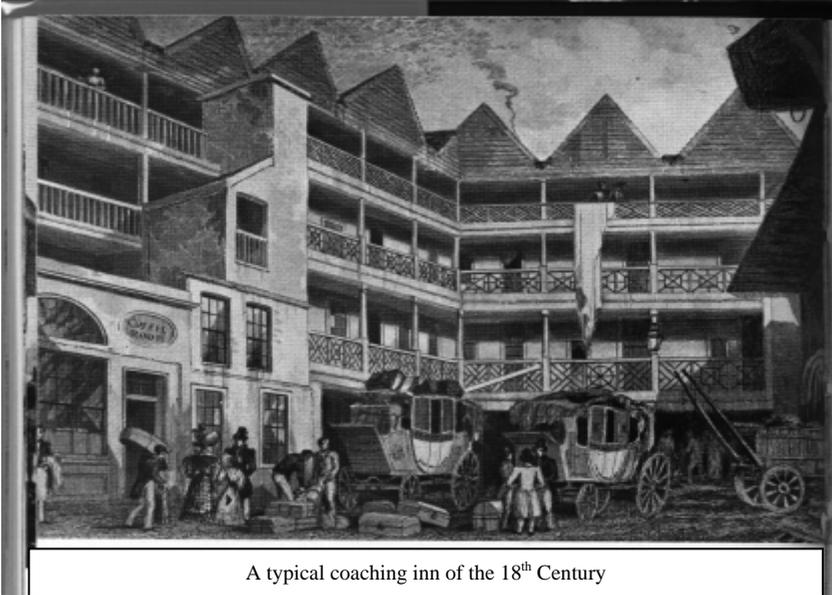
If you were asked to 'sell' Dickens to those who've not yet read any of his works, how would you go about it?

Get them to listen to Gerald Dickens' CD of his *A Christmas Carol* adaptation, then some good, dramatised readings on tape/CD to get them hooked, then the characters, then the individual books. Tell them that they need to set aside a chunk of time to read and appreciate what they are reading – good stuff is deserving of personal time.

PART VI:

Dickens, the stage-coach and the joys of travelling...

The North East Branch have recently taken to performing an adaptation of 'Boots at the Holly Tree Inn' whenever the opportunity may arise. As background to the story, one of the Branch members unearthed some details about coaching transport and the inns of the period...



“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.” Thus Charles Dickens writes, as the narrator in *The Holly Tree*, his Christmas Story of 1855. He spoke from experience: Dickens was a great traveller, and his novels have frequent references to coaches and inns, but of particular interest to the north-east Branch is his journey to research the Yorkshire schools in 1838.

In the January of that year, Charles Dickens and his illustrator, Hablot Browne (whose name Dickens took on this journey in the interests of anonymity) set out for Yorkshire by the “Express” which was actually the slow coach, and by the time they reached Greta Bridge, had been travelling for 29 hours, at an average speed of 8 ½ miles an hour, with an overnight stop at Grantham. He had Nicholas Nickleby take the same route north to take up his appointment at Dotheboys Hall.

Dickens described their arrival at Greta Bridge thus, in a letter to his wife, dated Thursday 1st February: “As we came further north, the snow grew deeper. At about eight o’clock it began to fall heavily and as we crossed the wild heath hereabout, there was no vestige of a track. At eleven we reached a bare place with a house standing alone in the midst of a dreary moor, which the guard informed us was Greta Bridge.”

The stop was a regular one - the coach turned off the Great North Road at Scotch Corner to travel west along the route of what is now the A66 – and the inn was one of very many that lay alongside the trunk roads to provide overnight accommodation as well as being stopping-places for a change of horses and opportunity for passengers to stretch their legs, have a drink or bite to eat. As with modern-day stops at motorway service areas, time was limited and facilities variable.

Former coaching inns can often be recognised by the high archway (or the line of the arch still visible where it has been bricked up) through which the coach was driven into the inn yard. At Greta Bridge, the coaching inn is now a private residence, whose history can be observed from its design; it lies a short distance before the Morritt Arms. There is a temptation and a common mistake to assume that the Morritt Arms, being an old building, was the coaching inn, but this is not so.

Arriving cold and weary on this occasion, the travellers were cheered to discover waiting for them a hot supper, a bottle of mulled port and bedrooms each warmed by a fire “blazing half-way up the chimney.” The inn is mentioned in *Nicholas Nickleby*, when Nicholas and Squeers and the little boys are “all put down together at the George and New Inn, Greta Bridge and again in Dickens’ Christmas story of 1855, “The Holly Tree,” in which it becomes the Holly Tree Inn, on the road to Gretna Green. The story includes a rather sweet little tale, recounted by the Boots, of two seven-year old children who arrived at the inn meaning to go to Gretna Green to be married.

After only a night at Greta Bridge, Dickens continued to Barnard Castle by Post Chaise, and the next day visited Bowes where he found inspiration (fairly or not) for his book. Apparently they dined at the Unicorn in Bowes; yet another coaching inn.

In Barnard Castle, they stayed at the Kings Head, a fact commemorated by a plaque on the wall of this former inn. This establishment also appears in *Nicholas Nickleby* when Newman Noggs adds a p.s. to his note to Nicholas, “P.S. If you should go near Barnard Castle, there is a good ale at the Kings Head. Say you know me and I am sure they will not charge you for it.” It is to be wondered if the recommendation came from Dickens’ own experience?!

At Barnard Castle, Dickens also found inspiration for a short story collection, *Master Humphreys’ Clock* – but that’s another story for another day!

PART VII:

Dickens, and the less publicised sorry side of the Branch's activities...

*The hard-working volunteers at Bensham Grove were given a pre-Christmas surprise as the Branch Vice-President, who shall for reasons of decency, remain nameless turned on the style during the Branch's visit as part of their opening day. Having scrubbed up well and dusted down his Victorian costume, **HS** proceeded to charm all and sundry on a sunny December morning, shamelessly flirting with both volunteers and visitors, despite the best efforts of Chatterbox to bring some decorum to the occasion. **HS's** efforts to extract an extra biscuit or two from the scullery maids was a genuine success, it must be acknowledged in these straitened times, but left some observers expressing doubts that we'd ever be invited again....*

*The Branch's Christmas meal was a heartening model of political chicanery and in-fighting, despite the best efforts of those present to pretend otherwise. The 'secret' decision to spread our ensemble over two tables, and the manner with which the parties were 'accidentally' seated had Chatterbox and other seasoned court insiders nodding sagely, much in the manner with which politicians know their place by the seating arrangements at an annual seaside conference. Clearly the imminent confirmation of a new Branch secretary has acted as a catalyst for expressions of naked ambition, as members jostled for favours and to be recognised. **AM** cleverly appeared to be oblivious to the shenanigans, but was seen at one point making copious notes - on the pretence of taking orders for desserts - that were likely to have serious ramifications at the impending AGM....*

The AGM itself was indeed conducted under a veneer of democratic conventionality, with the usual array of 'votes' and 'nominations' and 'points of order'. However, neither Chatterbox nor very few of the massed ranks of Branch members were taken in by this sorry deception, as the politburo and their apparatchiks proceeded with singular aplomb to elect themselves and their cohorts to all appropriate 'cushy billets.'...

*The lunch-time meal to celebrate the anniversary of the birth of Dickens was a snowy affair, as winter storms raged around the windows of the surprisingly busy hostelry. With snow lying on the surrounding fields and roads, few could be forgiven for seeking to stoke their internal fires by enjoying a hearty meal, but surely there could be little justification for the decision by one or two nameless Branch members to order the speciality lunch-time mixed grill? As **TS** and **HS** tucked manfully into a steaming plateful of cooked flesh and the trimmings, like the good trenchermen they are, surely they could have paid some heed to the pale-faced and weak vegetarians among the guests, visibly blanching at the thought of the mass slaughter that was needed to prepare their dishes. Surely, thinks Chatterbox, a bowl of muesli, followed by vegetable dips with hummus would have been more discreet?...*

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.

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