

The Dickens Fellowship, North East England

*The Occasional* **BLEATER**

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## PART I:

*A McLeod will offer thanks for All on the occasion of the end of the year.*

Dear fellow Dickensians,

I would like to open with a vote of thanks to Mr Tony Williams for his very informative walk around Dickens London that he gave to our Branch, and other members of the Fellowship, this summer. My thanks also to all Branch members who took part in the October election of the Trustees to the Board of the Charles Dickens Museum, the results of which will be announced in the November minutes.

As most of you are aware, at the October meeting, *Barnaby Rudge* was voted as the next book of choice for Branch reading. Please believe me when I say it is merely a coincidence that this was not only my first choice but that I also happened to be responsible for handling the voting! I know a certain CR and JM were shocked and horrified that it was not Pickwick but all I can say is "better luck next time chaps". *Barnaby Rudge* is not a book that I know much about, or one that seems to be favoured by the media, so I look forward to receiving any background information that Branch members may provide.

As you will know from the Branch minutes and website, we have a busy couple of months ahead. We have a branch outing to Durham in November to see a performance of Scrooge and have our own events planned for a very busy December. We are offering sketches and readings at our local library by way of thanks for their continued support in offering us a free place to meet and rehearse and we have also been invited to take part in local events at Beamish Museum and St Mary's Heritage Centre.

As this is the last Newsletter of the year I would like to offer my thanks to our Editor, Chris Robson, for his sterling work throughout the year and for his own particular brand of humour that he brings to each publication, Carolyn Walker who has kept us all up to date with her monthly minutes, Ruth Crofton who has kept a keen eye on our coffers and Brian Johnson who has represented our Branch at numerous meetings in London. Well done all. My thanks also go to all Branch members for your enthusiasm and support offered throughout the year.

Best wishes for a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

Yours in Fellowship

Anne McLeod (Branch Secretary)

## PART II:

*B Zimmerman will report on the International Fellowship meeting in Philadelphia, USA.*

### **One Gal's Cleveland Conference Experience (not to be mistaken for the "Official Report!")**

My third International Dickens Conference began in the early morning hours of July 30<sup>th</sup> 2009 when I joined seven other Philadelphia Dickensians at 30th Street Station in downtown Philadelphia. Together, we boarded a large, roomy van in which to make the 450-mile journey to Cleveland, Ohio. By 7.00am, we were travelling west on Route 76 with our van full of luggage, and baskets filled with sandwiches and treats for the long ride.



The weather was perfect and we had clear sailing all the way, arriving at the University Circle of Case Western Reserve – the venue for the 2009 Conference - at 4.00pm. After registering and finding our rooms, we gathered for a dinner reception in the common area of Building 5 where we were welcomed by Beth Bliss of the Cleveland Branch and Terrance Egger, the Publisher of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*.

And so, the 103rd International Conference began. And what a grand conference it was; perhaps not the biggest, but certainly one of the friendliest. The menu that night included: Miniature Crab Cakes, Mushroom Vol au Vent, Mini-burgers and Chicken & Blue Cheese Ravioli as well as wine and beer, including one variety of the local beer by Great Lakes Brewery, Dortmund Gold Lager. There was also a gigantic cake and we sang and celebrated the Cleveland Branch's 25th birthday! Kathy Broz, the founder of the branch (she must have been a precocious child to do so at age 5 for she cannot be much older than 30!) did the honours of cutting the cake and lucky me, I got my favourite, a big corner piece!

The little rain shower we awoke to on Friday July 31<sup>st</sup> did not dampen our spirits and breakfast was served in the Leutner Commons, the first of many delicious meals we shared there. As usual at these events, there is no shortage of nourishment! At 9.00am, under sunny skies now, the group gathered outside Building 5 for a sightseeing tour of Cleveland on 'Lolly the Trolley'.

It was a two-hour in-depth tour that included 100 points of interest - Downtown, the Warehouse District, Millionaires' Row and the University Circle Parks to name but a few. Our guide was knowledgeable and informative as we passed historic buildings, statues, lovely public squares, and parks adorned with flowers in full bloom. Around noon we arrived at Cleveland's North Coast Inner Harbour, the mooring for the 1000-passenger cruise ship Goodtime III, the largest quadruple-deck luxury ship on the Great Lakes.

On board the crew served a delicious lunch including:

*Breast of Chicken w/Apricot Sauce*

*Thin Slices Round of Beef, au jus*

*Au Gratin Potatoes*

*Whole Green Bean & Carrot Medley*

*Mixed Greens Salad*

*Rolls w/Butter*

*Coffee/Tea*

*Cookies for Dessert*

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After lunch, we lounged on the decks as we glided down the Cuyahoga River (also known as the 'Crooked River') and passed the site where Charles Dickens disembarked in 1842. We sailed out onto Lake Erie, the second smallest of the five Great Lakes, but still so vast it seemed as though we were in the middle of the ocean.

Back at our lodging at Village 115, we freshened up for dinner before the ten-minute jaunt to the Cleveland Cinematheque at the Institute of Art to see a showing of Roman Polanski's *Oliver Twist*. I saw this film once before, but I believe I enjoyed it far more in the company of my fellow Dickensians. Buzzing with conversation stimulated by the film, it was a short walk to L'Albatros, where we sat in an outside candle-lit patio enjoying the lovely night and having a taste of another of the Great Lakes Brewery's offerings, Edmund Fitzgerald Porter, named for the tragic shipwreck in Lake Superior.

Saturday, August 1<sup>st</sup> was sunny and mild and the Annual General Meeting was convened at 9.00am in Wade Commons across the street from our dorms. Chairing the meeting was Michael Rogers doing his usual excellent job at keeping the agenda moving forward in a timely fashion. After the formal opening and welcome came the Roll Call of Branches and I was proud of the strong showing from my home branch Philadelphia, and very, very pleased to stand for my adopted branch in the North East of England! I only wish my new friends could have been standing alongside of me.

Following the roll call, the minutes from the last AGM held in Durham, 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2008 were read and approved. Then came the Honorary Editor's report by Malcolm Andrews; the Honorary Treasurer's report read by Michael Rogers; the Joint Honorary Secretaries' Report by Lee Ault and Joan Dicks; and then the Election of Officers for 2009-10. Our current Honorary President, Leonee Ormond passed on the beautiful Dickens Medallion to our new President, Grahame Smith, who expressed his gratitude at the honour. The election was followed by a report from the Dickens House Museum by the Chairman of the Trustees, David Wootton, who seems very motivated and excited about the years leading up to 2012, which was the next topic of discussion.

Interestingly, during the talk about future conferences, Boulogne, France was put forward as a possibility for 2013, which caused thrills and chills in my little circle! We all agreed to meet in 2010 in Eastbourne, UK. And so ended the 2009 AGM.

After a break, we were treated to a most noteworthy lecture titled "Dickens and Insularity" by Malcolm Andrews, editor of *The Dickensian*. His readings from Dickens were brilliant and the crowd chortled in delight at his interpretation of Dickens' humour (especially in the character of Podsnap!)

After a short stroll past the modern architectural marvel The Peter B. Lewis Building, we arrived at the Kelvin Smith Library for a look of their Dickens' holdings and a preview of Tony Williams' wonderful film, *Charles Dickens' London*. The DVDs sold like the proverbial "hotcakes" and made quite a few of us yearn for London. We were back at the dorm in plenty of time to enjoy coffee, tea and snacks that seemed to appear magically while we were out. Then everyone donned their formal attire and strolled down Bellflower Road past the impressive buildings of Case Western Reserve University to the Thwing Centre Ballroom where the festivities began at 6:30pm.

We sipped cocktails from the open bar and sampled lovely hors d'oeuvres, including a luscious Baked Brie in Brioche Pastry, while being serenaded beautifully by two lovely young women - Noel Bliss (Beth's daughter) on cello and Corrie Anne Riberdy on the violin. Clevelander Paul Seidel welcomed the delegates, and the toast to the Fellowship Worldwide was made by Malcolm Andrews with a response by Lee Ault. The toast to the Cleveland Branch was made by Mike Quinn, President of the Friends of Dickens, NYC with a response by Charla Coatoam. Kathy Broz then read Michael Slater's toast, in absentia, to the Memory of Arthur Adrian, the scholar, mentor and friend to the Cleveland branch in its early years, to whom the conference was dedicated.

Following a salad of mixed greens and California wines, actor Roger Jerome gave the Toast to the Immortal Memory of Charles Dickens, after which the main course of Roasted Tarragon Chicken or Artichoke Pasta Pinwheel with potatoes, vegetables and roll was served. The toast to the New President of the Fellowship was made by Leonee Ormond, the Immediate Past President, and the response was by our new President, Grahame Smith.

The Summer Fruit English Trifle served for dessert was so delicious that no conversation could be heard in the room for the brief time it took us to gobble it up! After the banquet, and still in a festive mood, a group of us continued the celebration at a rustic tavern on nearby Juniper Road named The Barking Spider where, still dressed in our formal attire, we sat outdoors at picnic tables and shared several pitchers of Great Lakes Offering Number 3-- Commodore Perry IPA ...a dark and tasty brew. (There were two other varieties, which sadly, we never got to imbibe!)

Sunday was another gorgeous day, and the services at the Church of the Covenant were dedicated to the Fellowship. Then, enjoying some free time, we explored the impressive Cleveland Art Museum, currently under renovation, and had lunch in the café there. The 1.30pm lecture on "I found it a pretty town": The Western Reserve in Dickens's Time" was given by Judy Cetina. (The "Connecticut Western Reserve" was land claimed by the state of Connecticut in the Northwest Territory in what is now north-eastern Ohio.) Perhaps it is appropriate to mention here that Cleveland still IS a pretty town and a lovely city to visit. According to the schedule, our afternoon was free for more museums and cultural entertainment, but we Philadelphians opted for The Rock 'n Roll Hall of Fame! IT ROCKED! Jimi Hendrix's ruffled shirt, Eric Clapton's guitar, Elvis Presley's Lincoln, and so much Beatles memorabilia that I felt like a 14 year old Beatlemaniac again! And that was just the first floor (there's six)! If you ever get the chance...GO!



Meanwhile, back at the campus, another delicious dinner was awaiting us followed by the premier performance of Roger Jerome's *Dickens in Ohio*, which was thoroughly enjoyed by everyone. His transformation into the Inimitable was quite remarkable. Mr. Jerome is not only a talented actor, but also an educator who has taught in many schools and colleges in both the US and the UK.

Later, we attended a wine and cheese party in the suite of two of our fellow Philadelphians whose hospitality was truly Dickensian. There, we watched a slideshow of the 2008 Conference in Durham, reliving and reminiscing about the good times we had there last summer. Remember?

Up early, and famished for breakfast, I arrived at the cafeteria with some other like-minded souls ten minutes before the doors opened. Once inside, we fortified ourselves for a full morning of thought-provoking lectures starting with Gary Colledge, Cleveland Fellowship member, pastor, teacher, and currently adjunct professor of Theology and Biblical Studies at Walsh University, who spoke on "Revisiting Dickens' *The Life of Our Lord*". Next we heard from Donald Rosenberg, "Dickens and Music. Great Expectations Meets Hard Times." Mr. Rosenberg is a music critic at the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* and the author of *The Cleveland Orchestra Story "Second to None"*. And last, but certainly not least, came Mark Dawidziak, another very talented member of the Cleveland Branch, television critic at the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, the author of several books including *Mark My Words: Mark Twain on Writing* and the play *The Reports of My Death Are Greatly Exaggerated*. His presentation of "Mark Twain and Charles Dickens: Separated at Birth?" was brilliant and his lively presentation style kept us all engaged.

Between lectures we sipped coffee and tea, nibbled on sweet treats and browsed in the "Charles Dickens Victorian Emporium" set up in the break room by a local bookstore (AKA "Jane Austen Books", the name changed in honour of our affair). Thanks to them, many Dickensians are returning home with suitcases much heavier than when they arrived—filled with great books to add to their libraries.

The afternoon was sunny and warm without a cloud in the sky as we went en masse to the local bus stop, tickets in hand and boarded the "Health Line" bus for the trip downtown for a visit to the Cleveland Public Library on Superior Avenue. I noticed quizzical looks from some obviously local passengers at the multi-national group of enthusiastic Dickensians that filled the bus! Upon arriving downtown, we were guided to the Pickwick & Frolic restaurant located on a charming pedestrian walkway lined with shops, restaurants and oh, such beautiful flowers! We sat outdoors for our lunch and I was fortunate to be at the table where our kind friend from Germany picked up the entire tab!

After lunch we continued on to the library where Kathy Broz, the previously mentioned founder of the Cleveland Dickens Fellowship, works as a librarian. The exhibit: "The Inimitable Boz; Charles Dickens An Exploration of His Life, His Works, His Times" was absolutely amazing and put together to coincide with the Cleveland Conference. (It will be on display until February 2010 should you get to Cleveland). The work and effort put into this exhibit was extraordinary and it extended to three floors! We were also amazed to find a reception room lined with tray after tray of delectable sweets and savouries and a huge cake decorated with Dickens' image! Despite the fact that we had just had lunch, our Dickensians, in true Dickensian fashion, rallied and launched into the goodies with zest and vigour! I have no idea where I put it, but I once again was able to get the 'corner' piece of cake with loads of icing. (Thankfully these conferences are only once a year.) I cannot say enough about the wonderful efforts of the staff at the Cleveland Public Library and I am sure they will be receiving many letters of admiration and appreciation in the days to come.

Travelling back to University Circle via the bus we went directly to dinner, (Yes, there was yet ANOTHER meal waiting for us and we ate it!) before taking our seats for Cleveland's own Mark Dawidziak and company in the Largely Literary Theatre's presentation of *Twain by Three*. The Largely Literary Theatre Company was founded in 2002 and its mission is to promote literacy, literature, and live theatre. Mr. Dawidziak made a very convincing Mark Twain and told me as the years go by he requires less and less makeup for the role! Kudos to this very talented group. Back at the dorm another Dickensian party broke out with yet another table full of food and wine! We mingled around the table, spilling into the lounge and even outdoors to the patio enjoying the lovely summer evening, the company, and camaraderie--truly good Dickensian Fellowship!

The last full day arrived much too soon. After breakfast, the lectures at Wade Commons opened with Robert Finn of the Cleveland Branch, retired music critic of the Cleveland Plain Dealer and past chairman of the Cleveland Dickens Fellowship. His talk "Background Check: the Rich Lode of Minor Characters in *Bleak House*" was particularly interesting to me, as *Bleak House* is my favourite Dickens' novel. Next up was Brian Murray, professor at Loyola College in Maryland and author of *The Bedside, Bathtub, & Armchair Companion to Dickens*, (not his choice of titles says he) the conference being its "coming out" event. His talk was " 'A Body Without a Head': Dickens, Macready and the United States." And finally, one of the most entertaining of the lectures by Kirsten Parkinson, "What do you play, boy?" Card Games in *Great Expectations*." Kirsten passed out decks of playing cards and taught us all to play "Beggars My Neighbour"! (And just how DID Estella manage to win every hand?)

After a group photo we scattered for lunch on our own and I accompanied some Clevelanders to a wonderful Mexican Restaurant, Mi Pueblo, hidden just around the corner from the dorm and accessible via a somewhat Dickensian route. We enjoyed the delicious ethnic fare while listening to Mexican music in the background.



The afternoon offered many different choices of activities for the delegates: impromptu break-out and open-microphone sessions, previews of DVDs, and short tours of Dunham Tavern Museum, Lakeview Cemetery, Western Reserve Historical Society and Crawford Auto Museum. Everyone took their choice of the various venues. I sheepishly admit I opted for a brief nap to fortify myself for the gala evening ahead, starting with a pre-dinner wine and cheese get-together, where we all raised our glasses for yet another toast to “The Fellowship! Hear, Hear!”

Our last dinner was exceptionally yummy, a delicious blend of chicken and prosciutto served with risotto; then on to the last night’s entertainment presented by yet another talented Cleveland Branch member Joe McCormick, a musician and professional puppeteer for over 30 years. During his puppet show program, An Appalachian Hee-Haw, he played the dulcimer and had the whole group singing along. After the lively show (who could ever forget the dancing wooden dolls?), the Cleveland Branch Conference Team was called to the fore and given a heartfelt THANK-YOU by Lee Ault and a huge round of applause from the room. I saw some eyes damp with gratitude in that group! And no one wanted the evening to end. So off we went for one last night of celebration and fellowship under the light of the full moon, our sights set on Eastbourne in 2010. My countdown clock says less than a year to go.

One last breakfast... “Goodbye, Adieu, Auf Wiedersehen, Adios! ” and I joined my fellow travellers for the long ride home...all of us glowing from the wonderful experience we had shared. As the skyline of my city appeared I reflected on how lucky I was to be a Philadelphian and a Dickensian.

Barbara Zimmerman,  
Philadelphia Branch and North East England Branch

## PART III:

### *M Yates will report on a Branch excursion South, to London, England*

#### **The Dickens Fellowship North East England Branch head for London – A Brief Sketch**

Members and their guests assembled on 14<sup>th</sup> August from the North East/Yorkshire to make our way by train to London. Arriving about lunchtime we made our way to the centrally located Royal National Hotel, Russell Square.

After appropriate refreshment (!) we went to 48 Doughty St, London, a ten-minute walk away. Dickens lived at the address between 1837-1839 and rented it on the back of the success of the *Pickwick Papers* and it is the only surviving London house associated with Dickens. When Dickens lived there it was '...in a smart private road, closed off by gates at each end, attended by porters in mulberry coloured livery, with gold-laced hats and buttons decorated with the Doughty arms'. Nothing so elegant when we arrived! However the house, on four floors, contains the world's most important Dickens' collection. It opened as a museum in 1925 and welcomes visitors from all over the world.

Dickens's published works or worked upon while at Doughty Street: The end of *Pickwick Papers*, *Oliver Twist*, *Sketches of Young Gentlemen*, *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, *The Lamplighter*, *Barnaby Rudge*. The house evokes the life and drama of Dickens's life through period-style rooms and other exhibits such as Mary's Hogarth's room at the time of her death, a room dedicated to the research and writing of a *Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens' Study, and an iron grill in a wooden frame-from the Marshalea Goal.

After some our party retired to the hotel, some of the more energetic ones took in a visit to the British Museum – a five-minute walk away. Two of our members (Anne and Michela) were slightly confused over the hotel rooms. They returned from reception to collect Rita, forgot her room number, knocked on various doors and were surprised when no one answered. They then realised it was their own doors they were knocking at!

After an evening meal at the hotel (free on the first night) the group, with their way led by Rita, headed to the Royal Academy on the number 10 bus (a certain person - Christine's sister - developed an attachment to this bus, every time she saw a number 10 she thought it was the same bus all the time!) On the way we passed Trafalgar Square and began our game of Fourth Plinth-spotting, this was one of the cultural delights of the weekend (!)

At the Royal Academy some of the group visited JW Waterhouse: The Modern Pre-Raphaelite exhibition while others took in beverages on the terrace. All the excitement must have taken its toll as we got lost on the way back to the hotel and almost ended up at a private party!

On Saturday the group (apart from one rebel -Michela who went to see the Henry VIII exhibition at the British Library) took a scenic boat tour of the Thames to Greenwich from Westminster Pier. All met up at 1.00pm at Holborn Station for the highlight of the trip, Dickens Walk by Tony Williams which covered the Covent Garden area of London. Tony particularly welcomed the large contingent from the North East and was pleased so many could make it. Tony gave out a map of current day Covent Garden and also a copy of Greenwood's map of London 1830 so we could see the area when Dickens lived there.

Tony led us from Holborn to The Old Curiosity Shop, Lincoln's Inn and the offices of John Forster, his friend from the North East and the site of the offices of *All The Year Round*. A highlight was a tour of the Royal Opera House which actually formed part of the market in Dickens's day. The third floor balcony had stunning views overlooking Covent Garden and the city of London. The Royal Opera House is the third theatre on the site, both the previous ones were destroyed by fire. The first Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, was one of only two theatres (the other being the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane) to be allowed to perform drama in London and there was a keen rivalry between the two.

The theatre was destroyed by fire in 1808. Dickens would have known the second theatre, opened in 1809. He was offered an audition for his first acting role there, however, he went down with a cold, missed the appointment and turned to journalism and the rest, as they say, is history. Other highlights of the tour were seeing the last remaining part of the wall of the Marshalsea Prison, the site of Warren's Blacking Warehouse in Chandos Place. In addition, Rules Restaurant- the oldest restaurant in London where Dickens met his fellow literary friends, Temple House (setting for the present day television series *Spooks* - so I have been led to believe!).

We also saw the site of the first Peabody houses in the centre of London and opposite is a small picturesque park with a fountain and seating area. So different from Dickens' day as this used to be a cemetery overflowing with bodies - and accompanying stench - and was the inspiration for the cemetery scenes in *Bleak House*. We finished our tour at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane where *Oliver!* The musical is actually playing at the moment. 'Ah you will all be going there tonight no doubt' -Tony said. Actually no, we had all booked other shows!

After the walk and thanking Tony most profusely we headed to lunch with other Branch members Brian Johnstone and Ronnie Teasdale. It was nice to catch up with other members of the Fellowship and discuss issues and I know they appreciated their time spent with us.

Back to our 'betrayal' of Dickens- members then went to see either *Les Miserables*, *Phantom of the Opera* or *The Jersey Boys*. Most members settled for ice cream in the interval however, the hedonists among us (Anne, Michela and Rita) spared no expense and had champagne in the interval. All groups had a great night and met up again in the hotel to enjoy a nightcap!

Sunday -our last morning in London. The group split up (probably had enough of each other by then) and headed either for the bargains of Camden Market, the sophistication of Covent Garden or the excitement of the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square-only kidding we went to the National Gallery/National Portrait Gallery.

Lunchtime and time to leave and head back to the North East in time for tea. All agreed it was a great trip and would go again next year. We are already in touch with the London branch to organise some Dickens events.

## PART IV:

### *C McLoughlin will introduce himself to Members.*

*Chris McLoughlin came to the Dickens Fellowship via the Durham International Conference in 2008, and has become an active and always interesting contributor to the local Branch. In this interview, Chris offers some background on himself and his relationship with Mr Dickens.*

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

No I haven't read all of Dickens's works, although I am aware of and read a lot of the 'Best Sellers'. His *Household Words* work and others that we have touched upon in my year in membership, were unfamiliar to me and have been a bonus to my joining the Fellowship

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

I suppose my favourite would be *Christmas Carol* although *David Copperfield*, *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations* are close behind but with Dickens' work surely it must be possible to produce a joint favourites list comprising every title he ever published?

## **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 any one has actually remarked on my barminess! The reaction of many people is that I have utilised my retirement well to broaden an interest and have been very positive. Books, reading and writing have always featured in my life so this development is nothing new to any one who knows me.

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

As a child of the 40s and 50s, my introduction to the Dickens canon would come from Hollywood, Pinewood and Lime Grove for I recall seeing famed Dickens adaptations on the big or small screen particularly the 1940s version of *Oliver Twist* and *Expectations*, the 30s version of *Copperfield* and of course Alistair Sims "Scrooge" or *Christmas Carol*.

From that would stem my reading of, for some reason, *Barnaby Rudge*. This book has always stuck in my mind from childhood and we owned a copy of it as a child. I also recall attending a Boxing Day showing of "*Christmas Carol*" at the local Empire Theatre by the Rep Company resident in the theatre in the mid-fifties. By the way, did that comic series in the 50s "Classics Illustrated" ever print a Dickens story? I recall 'reading' *Crime & Punishment* in that series and I may have flicked through a Dickens story or two at that time!

Later it was the family watching the TV adaptations which continue today, I recall an excellent Quilp being played by Patrick Troughton, so I have always been aware of his work. Reading I suppose came mainly in adulthood.

## **And how did you become involved with the Dickens Fellowship?**

My involvement with the group came from spotting an advert in the North Echo announcing that Gerald Dickens was to give a reading of *Christmas Carol* on the 150th anniversary of Charles original visit to Durham City (as part of the 2008 Conference) so after getting Ruth's correct email address (yes, it was wrong in the paper!) I was kindly offered a ticket and "access all areas" for the Conference so I took it up and my membership followed.

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

I don't only read Dickens and I read fiction from time to time, I have quite an interest in History, particularly English history, and always have a pile of books that I am working through. Present reading includes *The Court of the Red Tsar* by Simon Sebag Montefiore, which I have started, following his equally excellent book *Young Stalin*. In the past I have read anything from Agatha Christie to Jack Higgins, to Conan Doyle to Dan Brown. As a young person my favourite form was the short story so O Henry, Maugham, Sillitoe and the like all featured. In addition, I have always admired and been impressed by poetry and have read many of the well known masters and have a mixed bag of anthologies and collections.

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

I read any where on trains, planes, bed, settee but my favourite would be a rocking chair in the window overlooking the back garden, which usually needs attention but the book is the winner!

**Do you have a preference for paperbacks or hardbacks?**

Hardbacks would have to get my vote they look, feel and smell how a book should be but no snobbery from me, paperbacks are fine

**Tell us something about yourself and your background?**

As to me, I was born and have lived all my life in **West** Hartlepool. The new 'Borough of Hartlepool' only dates from 1966 – thanks to Harold Wilson amalgamating the two towns! I spent 38 years as a Ships Agent and Shipbroker in Hartlepool and Middlesbrough, but with connections throughout the North East. Shipping was one world trade that was centred on London and Dickens work (and indeed Conan Doyle) all reflect that square mile of the City of London and the Greater Metropolis. Consequently, reading Dickens is reading of territory that is very familiar to me. With the demise of the Shipping trade I managed to find work with Hartlepool Borough Council and spent twelve years in Revenues and Benefits working on the Admin of the Fraud Team.

Although now retired I have been asked back on several occasions with Security work and Elections so am now part-time semi-retired. I am deeply involved in running Rugby Union Football in the ancient County of Durham ('twixt Tyne & Tees) where I act as County Secretary and hold a variety of posts which keeps me active. June and I have been married for almost 42 years with three married children and six grandchildren who live in either Hartlepool, Caldby - on the Wirral (near Liverpool) and Calgary in Canada so we travel to keep in close touch.

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

Dickens stories suit the 21st Century, written almost to suit the tele-visual society we now live in. They have good characters, good stories are well told and of course presented in such a way is that they almost make for soap-opera stories, with dramatic endings to chapters. In addition, they have a ring of the modern day about them, the collapse of Murdles in Little Dorrit and the aftermath was echoed with the events this last year with the Lehman Brothers collapse.

**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 have heard the work of Dickens presented in every form on your list and my favourite would still be the radio adaptation of the books, although I did enjoy the Gerald Dickens evening and have found that the one-man show format perhaps to be my favourite form of delivery. Actors/directors interpret the works so well. In recent years I've attended the Julian Glover *Beowulf* reading and believe it or not a one-man show of *Under Milk Wood* by Dylan Thomas, with all 52-speaking parts by one person, I hadn't realised just how much wit humour was in the piece.

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

Currently just finished *Our Mutual Friend* with the Group, now awaiting *Barnaby Rudge* !

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

As I said earlier, Dickens is full of good characters, good stories and make for good yarns, plenty of goodies but aren't there some good (!) baddies in the books? Murdstone, Sykes, Fledgeby and the rest!

### PART V:

#### *C Bolton reports on a trip to Nottingham, England, in relation to Mr Dickens*

### **The Travel And Tourism Conference in Nottingham**

The 'Travel and Tourism' Conference was held on campus at Nottingham University - a very impressive venue. It was termed 'a mix of academics and enthusiasts' which indeed it was. My sister and I knew Brian and Tony Williams of course, and the intrepid French ladies attended. Many of those there came to ask after Herbert, and we found everyone's welcome warm and friendly.

On the Saturday we visited a knitting museum and a nineteenth century magistrates. The museum consisted of a terrace of tiny cottages, saved from demolition in the sixties to show, for posterity, the way of life of these knitters. The cottages had one room downstairs, one room upstairs, and a tiny attic bedroom, yet these housed entire families! If the breadwinner was fortunate enough to own or rent his own frame then he worked from home, with his wife and children helping by spinning yarn and embroidering. The frame, table and spinning wheel left precious little room for anything or anyone else, yet this work continued for 16 hours a day-by candlelight before dawn and after dusk.

A knitter entered into a 7 year apprenticeship to learn his trade, and could set his own frame according to the garment being made, and he also repaired the needles. For those who couldn't afford their own frame, there was a workshop opposite these cottages which housed so many frames that the operators had to sit bolt upright before his machine because there was no room to change position. This work provided a meagre existence, yet after the introduction of mechanised frames even this scant living was threatened.

Mechanisation triggered many knitters into vandalising the new machines, and this brought severe penalties. This led nicely onto our next visit to the Magistrates, which was a grand, stone built building, still in use up to the 1980's. The Staff were in costume, and played their roles with accuracy and enthusiasm. Upstairs the courtroom was typical of Victorian craftsmanship. It was elegant, ornate, and rather dark. This was in stark contrast to what lay beneath- the holding cells for the criminals. The wardens, or 'turnkeys', were not paid then, and made their living from bribing and corruption of the poor souls they imprisoned. Treatment was harsh and brutal, whatever the age or sex of the prisoner. Custody here was short term only until sentencing- hard labour, hanging or deportation.

This visit could have gone on for at least another hour, but the bus was waiting and we were hurried through the last part. I had just started to read about Elizabeth Fry and other campaigners for penal reform, and wondered what they would make of a prisoner's 'lot'?

The workhouse visit was the following day. The building looked like a huge mansion from the outside, with expansive grounds, but the inside was more austere. Men, women and children were separated on arrival, and those too old and weak were cared for.

We were assured that this particular workhouse was used as a shining example for others that were opening around the country. There were certainly no floggings or food deprivation, and this was probably because the staffing of workhouses by then was by more selective means than appointing a beadle.

Those who ran institutions were paid, and chosen from a more professional background. There was even a token gesture of providing education with a small room allocated as a classroom. We were surprised to learn that the top floor of the workhouse was used by Nottingham Council to house single mums and their children right up to the 1970's. After the evening meal each night there was entertainment. The Nottingham branch of the Fellowship did a number of readings which were cleverly done with a variety of wonderful accents. We were informed that this group regularly attends women's institutes, schools and social history group to perform such readings, and receive a fee for their efforts.

Another evening presented us with rare snippets from early Dickens' films, and these were very well received. It was evident from the enthusiastic applause that the show delighted us all. Obviously a lot of work had gone into the Conference, but the organisers would have been well pleased with the outcome, as it was a great success.

## PART VI:

### *An Honest Man laments.*

*The burden of responsibility often falls on those who least desire it, but Chatterbox is sad to report that he has been, once again, obliged to pick up the mantle of an untiring champion of natural justice and common decency. The regular order of a recent Branch meeting was sadly shattered by a shambolic descent into chaos and rowdiness as the powers-that-be once more flouted their contempt for the basic principles of democracy in the latest election for 'next-book-to-read.' Having clearly failed to heed Chatterbox's righteous indignation after the previous farce, the Branch's senior officials once more staged a sham contest, even though they already KNEW THE WINNER!*

*Mindful of the need to appear to be procedurally correct, voting slips were handed out to the assembled members towards the latter part of the Monday meeting - this in itself was a disturbing piece of manipulation as it is well-known that some of the more elderly members of the Branch are usually - by that stage of the proceedings - fast asleep. With curt instruction to write down the name of the book, in silence and in neat hand-writing, whispered exchanges could clearly be heard along the lines of 'what did you say I had to write', 'is this the thing that you gave me the chocolates for', 'are we picking our main course for the Christmas meal' and 'are you sure Dickens wrote that book'.*

*Even before voting slips were complete, it then transpired that selected anonymous members (HS) had been permitted to canvass other members in the run-up to the election, whilst others had been advised to 'keep shtum or else' and warned that any such advocacy would result in an investigation of personal expenses by the Parliamentary ombudsman - a threat sufficient to ensure silence from almost all members.*

*Cheerily for those who cherish freedom and democracy, this blatant attempt to appease the forces of order appeared to flounder upon the rock of British fair-play when the voting slips were tallied by the returning officer and it was announced that no single book had earned a clear majority of votes from those present. However, the cries of popular jubilation were soon stifled, as the returning officer then announced that she had also received votes, in a mysterious manner, 'via e-mail' from 'other members' and that - when these were added to the votes of those present - one book emerged victorious. That this book was Barnaby Rudge and that this book was well-known to be the favourite of a former Branch secretary was surely, asks Chatterbox, no coincidence? Had not the senior members of the Branch, in a manner reminiscent of an East European politburo, simply staged the election to perform a gratuitous thank-you for services rendered, a kind gesture for not standing in their way as they grabbed the reins of power? As the meeting ended amidst a flurry of voting slips and doctored minutes, with the mysterious 'e-mail votes' scuttled away from public view, the feelings of ordinary members could not be suppressed, as sad mutterings were heard along the lines of 'does that mean this Barnaby bloke is the new Secretary', 'thank goodness that's over, I'm dying for the loo', and 'mind, these meetings don't half go on a bit.' ....*

*The Branch's increasingly frequent ventures into the shady world of the performing arts are not without some theatrical appendages. A recent Branch meeting - ostensibly to read some works by Dickens and to consider the literary and historical context of the writing - resembled nothing more than a jumble sale (for those old enough to remember such things) when an anonymous member (RC) proceeded - in a Mary Poppins-like manner - to pull from her bag a seemingly endless stream of Victorian clothing that she had acquired from visiting an acquaintance living, it appeared, in the high Cumberland fells. This sudden and unannounced fashion show - for it had not appeared on the official meeting Agenda - was justified on the basis that these dusty relics could be used as costumes in future performances staged by the Branch. The clothing - some of which shockingly appeared to resemble undergarments - was displayed amidst much coo-ing and aah-ing from a number of other Branch members, keen to admire such things as 'stitching', 'linings' and 'cut and fit'. Worryingly, however, some of the most vocal coo-ing and aah-ing appeared to be coming from one particular anonymous member (HS) whose manly appearance, prominent tattoos and craggy features did not mark him out as a natural connoisseur of female fashions. His excited burblings attracted the attention of some of the more masculine members of the Branch - each of whom were displaying the time-honoured blokey-traditions of looking completely bored and disinterested by such frippery - but even their scoffing reminder that 'divvent be like that, it only encourages them' failed to quell the flames of passion that had clearly been ignited by the clothing....*

# 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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