

The Dickens Fellowship, North East England

The Occasional **BLEATER**

Volume 21

March 2011



Pickwick – at last !

Dear fellow Dickensians,

I have sadly just heard that the Christchurch Conference has been cancelled. Thankfully, no one from the branch has come to any harm but it must be so distressing to witness first hand the devastation and destruction that an earthquake has had on your home city. I know you will all join me in wishing our friends in Christchurch well. Knowing the dogged determination of the Kiwis, I daresay that it won't be long before they are asking for another opportunity to host a Conference and to show us round their newly rebuilt city. Take care my friends

Now for the Newsletter. Judging from your Emails it has been missed but our editor, Chris Robson, has been very busy indeed revamping the layout and content and has dug deep into his pile of Dickens goodies to select only the best for your delectation. For my part, I will take the opportunity to look over the past year, reflect on what we have achieved as a branch, and look forward to the year ahead.

*Last year we took part in several Local History events in Gateshead and Sunderland to mixed attendances. All agreed that this was due to the lack of publicity by the event organisers and it may be that we need to advertise our contribution more. Herbert and Ruth have continued to champion Dickens, Herbert through his many contacts in local poetry groups and Ruth through her talks in local clubs and historical societies. Brian, Christine and Margaret have attended several mini Conferences and many of you attended the wonderful Eastbourne Conference in the summer. Some of the branch **gorged** themselves, yes I say **gorged** themselves, on little sandwiches and fancy cakes at the Mayor's Tea party under the guise of "Networking" last summer. Michela managed to convince the local council to give us a grant of £750.00 and the spending has already begun with the purchase of a lovely black Victorian skirt for Carolyn.*

Looking forward we have another Local history event planned for May, several members will be attending the mini conference in Canterbury and we plan to go to Barnard Castle to view a replica of Dickens home in Doughty Street and a visit to Frederick Dickens' grave in Darlington. We will be taking another trip to London in August to take part in a walk led by Tony Williams and Anthony Burton on the Theatre in the Victorian East End which ends with tea at Hoxton Hall, one of the last surviving Victorian Music Halls.

On a personal note, there has been a lot of serious illness in the branch over the past year or so, both home and abroad, and although some have turned the corner there are some that are still battling. To those in remission and those still battling I say to you all, remember, your friends are there for you.

*Yours in Fellowship
Anne McLeod (Branch Secretary)*

MISCELLANY

(thanks to Chris McLoughlin)

It's Retirement for Dickens !

Whilst in Manchester recently on my way to the airport to visit family in Canada, I happened to catch a local BBC TV news items that 'Dickens was retiring'.

Our 'Page 3 pin-up' !



Dickens, an Irish Thoroughbred cross, now needs to retire from working life as arthritis has caused intermittent lameness.

Much as I thought this story may be somewhat belated, it transpired that 'Dickens' was a police horse in the service of Greater Manchester Police force. It also transpired that all the horses in the stables had been named after Dickens characters, plus the stable tabby cat 'Boots'! Checking the Website for the GMP, it seems that it has long been a tradition to use the names of Dickens' characters to apply to their working horses.

<http://www.gmp.police.uk/mainsite/pages/70e0100cd30144ba802578340056b5e4.htm>

Current horse names include: Antonio, Artful Dodger, Badger, Beadle, Barkis, Benson, Britain, Boz, Chuzzlewit, Cicero, Countess, Darney, Dickens, Dombey, Ebenezer, Fagin, Fairfax, Fittzmarhsall, Harrison, Marley, Nemo, Nickleby, Oliver, Pip, Priday, Redburn, Sawyer, Saxby, Scrooge, Snodgrass, Steerforth, Trooper and Weller!

It would make for a good questionnaire for any one to name the particular work from which the names have been selected; the Website gives chapter and verse for each selection.

Tong

Whilst looking on Google for background to the journey of Nell and her Grandfather in The Old Curiosity Shop I was intrigued to read that Dickens had used the village of Tong in Shropshire as his inspiration for the place in which Nell and her Grandfather

find rest and sanctuary in the novel. The village lies to the west of Wolverhampton and is near Junction 3 on the M54.



The village has the church of St Bartholomew outside of which is the supposed grave of Little Nell. It is thought that Dickens visited Tong Churchyard when visiting his grandmother who worked at Tong Castle. The Castle was a Gothic creation that was damaged by fire in 1911 and never restored to be eventually demolished in 1954 with the building of major roads in the area.

And this is where my interest was aroused at this information. I know that in 1912 a Wolverhampton Builder acquired beams, panelling, doors, window fittings, windows etc. from the fire damaged Castle to build himself a house in Wolverhampton, which is not too far away. He named the house "Tong Cottage" and it stands in Penn Road, Wolverhampton. For a number of years it was owned by my wife's cousin and I stayed at the house on a number of occasions! I was totally unaware of the Dickens connection with the building fixtures and fittings! A small world indeed.

The Old Curiosity Shop

The Northumberland Theatre Company autumn production of the *The Old Curiosity Shop* was staged at Bishop Auckland Town Hall in early September 2010. The venue would have suited Charles Dickens, as the Town Hall is a Gothic-style building dating from 1862, with the show taking place in the high roofed Council Chamber and now named the 'Eden Theatre.'

As with adaptations, lifting the novel from page to stage would have taken around 70 actors and 7 hours (to quote from the programme notes), but the company managed to tell the story in two hours using 6 actors playing 16 major characters.

Little Nell and Daniel Quilp for example, were played by the same actress – just talent and a hat were used for the transformation! The set design was really clever. Although on a small stage, the set looked like a giant bunk-bed, but it was used for everything from the Punch and Judy show, a Gambling Den, Dick Swivellers lodgings, Mr Brass's offices even the labyrinth of London when Quilp was taking flight.

With the prose of Dickens and clever acting the whole adaptation really came to life - or death for Quilp and Little Nell; Quilp's lifeless body floating down the Thames was another clever piece of stage craft.



The programme notes by the 'author' of the adaption, Stewart Howson, made interesting reading regarding the problems of adapting Dickens. He stated that 'you can't just string the events of the narrative together and call it a play.....its more than that you have to capture not just the events but the inner life of the book, its style, its images, motifs and its spirit.' I thought the production did that and I look forward to seeing another NTC Dickens production, we must keep an eye on their website (they are based in Alnwick).

That said 'Dick Swiveller' thanked us all for attending, and in his farewell address, one of several during the night, he appealed for us all to write to our MPs and plead for Arts Council funding not to be cut. I agreed with him, it would be a great loss if productions like this were lost in the anticipated cutbacks.

Harrogate

I also visited Harrogate a few weeks ago and took the waters – as you do – at the Pump Room Museum. One of the information boards quoted from Charles Dickens following his visit in 1855 when he wrote of the town. *'The queerest place with the strangest people in it, leading the oddest lives'*



Eatenswill

Mentioning the Government at the beginning of this note, they are also proposing the 'biggest shake up of our democracy' since the Great Reform Act of 1832. Charles Dickens would have been aware of all that with his Parliamentary work. I have just been reading an article in "History Today" on the Act and the reforms of 1832 and Dickens pops up in relation to one of the rotten boroughs which managed to survive the initial reforms. This was Sudbury in Suffolk, described as scandalously venal, before being disenfranchised in 1844, apparently this Borough was the inspiration for Dickens for the Eatenswill election described in Pickwick Papers!



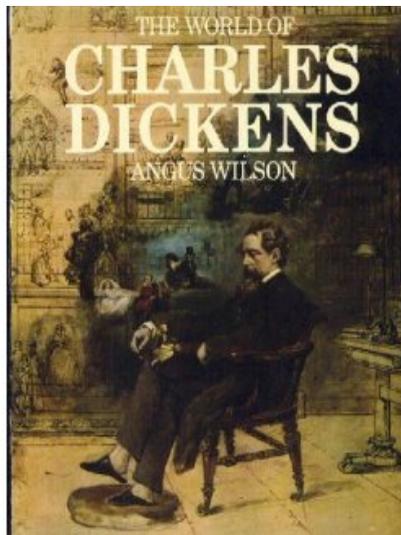
CURRENT READING

The Pickwick Papers: critical opinion

The Pickwick Papers is to be the next reading book of choice for the members of the North East branch. The contrast between *Pickwick* and the last, most recent book of choice, *Our Mutual Friend*, could not be more greatly defined. From his last complete work, an often dark tale, closely plotted and carefully structured, now the Branch are to move onto perhaps his least planned work, a loose collection of barely-connected tales and episodes.

One question that often arises when a new book is chosen, is how does the book sit within the modern critical approach to Dickens, what do the commentators and biographers have to say about this particular work?

In the past forty years there have been three major critical biographies of Dickens. In 1970, to mark the centenary of his death, Angus Wilson was the biographer for a lavishly illustrated publication from Secker & Warburg, entitled 'The World of Charles Dickens.'



Wilson open his review of *Pickwick* with a candid assessment, it '...is one of

those books so world-famous, in a few parts so bad, and in all parts so unlike what adult readers...expect to read, that an honest critic must surely approach its reputation with scepticism.' But, he suggests, 'any sensitive, fair-minded person...who re-reads it with care, will at the end have seen that is an exceptional book, a truly wonderful book.'

In considering the balance within the work between design and improvisation, Wilson suggests that Dickens had already tentatively planned a three-volume novel, as he sought to model himself on one of his great literary heroes, Walter Scott. Accepting the commission to write the book from Chapman and Hall, Dickens, suggests Wilson, felt he was lending himself to a cheap form of publication, more journalism than literature.

However, Wilson than suggests that despite his misgivings, Dickens found this type of serial publication more suited to his talents and imagination, and it is a method that, in itself, actually encourages improvisation over design, '...the demands for copy, the pressure of reader response, the inevitable temptation to alter one's scheme because of comment or criticism'. He accepted the offer by Chapman and Hall to supply the text to accompany Seymour's drawings in February 1836, the first number was published on 31st March, not surprisingly, claims Wilson, '...the early part of *Pickwick* is journalistic and episodically jerky.'

Dickens' control over the work was accentuated by the suicide of Seymour, but Wilson acknowledges that Dickens continued to remain true to the 'sporting' and 'country' premise of the book, even though his knowledge of such activities was clearly limited '...considering how small his knowledge was of England outside London, it is remarkable how, by variation of scene and, above all, by his extraordinary power of conveying the sense of travelling, he does succeed...the result...is always genuinely full of the joy of living, of carefree, happy tranquillity.'

The device within *The Pickwick Papers* of four men on tour, claims Wilson, 'cut out all the social concerns for the poor and submerged that Dickens's childhood had given him, all the obsessions with crime and evil.' Whilst some of the '...ill-written melodramatic stories that are interpolated mainly into the first half' provide some sombre notes, Wilson is anxious to highlight that the book remains one of contrasts – it is not all light comedy, and he points to the darker themes around Mr Pickwick and the Fleet prison for proof. Even Mr Jingle, the light relief of the opening chapters, '...represents much of the dark truth of London (with his greasy, splitting clothes and the wretched little brown paper parcel with which he must face the world).'

Wilson summarises his analysis of *Pickwick* by acknowledging the sheer intensity

of workload that Dickens took on himself at this time 'with the eleventh number of *Pickwick*, Dickens began the publication of...*Oliver Twist*. Before *Oliver Twist* was complete the serialisation of his third novel, *Nicholas Nickleby*, had started. But...he was also playing hard: an immensely gregarious man, with an extraordinary gift for...keeping alive, like some brilliant juggler...the most diverse intimacies at the same time.'

In 1990, Peter Ackroyd, a prolific biographer, wrote an imaginative, colourful portrait of the man in a book entitled 'Dickens'. He opens his appreciation of *Pickwick* by commenting upon the aptness of the very first sentence of the book "The first ray of light which illumines the gloom, and converts into a dazzling brilliancy that obscurity..." is, says Ackroyd, almost a metaphor for the arrival of Dickens himself. He began the book, says Ackroyd, in '...high spirits even as it marked the onset of a journey of which he did not know the end.'

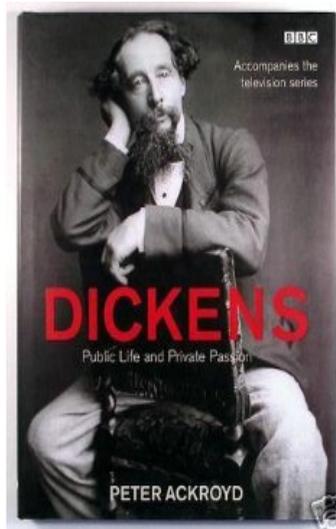
The sheer vivacity of the writing is wonderful, '...he was working quickly and with great energy – trying to plan out each chapter in advance as he went along...but all the time being caught up in the processes of his own invention, finding in this new work a bright glass in which other aspects of his genius began to manifest themselves.'

It was his journalistic background, suggests Ackroyd, which allowed him to work so quickly – *Pickwick* was an extension of his story-telling and sketch-writing '...that is why he could begin it without trepidation, and with the assurance which allowed him to invent rapidly and easily.' The creation of Jingle was evidence of so many talents to follow '...as soon as he thought of him, he *saw* him...and as soon as he talks Dickens hears him; he is, as it were, simply listening to the character and transcribing what he says.' This is Ackroyd anticipating the later reading career of Dickens, where, as he is described by so many commentators, Dickens almost seemed to become his characters on the stage, his gift for mimicry taken to a higher level. 'As he writes', says Ackroyd, 'Dickens rarely pauses to correct; his handwriting is large and firm, springing from him with extraordinary ease.'

The opening chapters are not just humorous, says Ackroyd, they almost possess a kind of joy '...it is the joy of the young Dickens able for the first time to write and invent upon a large scale.'

In seeking to place *Pickwick* in a historical context, Ackroyd acknowledges that the idea of shilling monthly parts was not a new one. Books such as *Pilgrims Progress* had been published in such a format, and writers such as Marryat and Galt had had their work published in this way, but '...what was unfamiliar about Dickens's venture was the idea of *new* story being marketed in this way, and within a matter of months it became clear exactly what it was that Dickens had initiated.'

March 1836 saw the completion of the second part of the book, after Dickens had over-wrote the first part (for the first and last time in his writing career), and the publication of the work as a monthly edition. Bound in green papers, it had 32 pages of print and four engravings by Seymour, priced at one shilling and 'edited by Boz.'



It was a time of huge leaps for the young Dickens '...buoyed up by his exhilaration at a labour completed he now went on to the next event of his life, his marriage...there was a sense in which these extraordinary months in the life of the young writer were like a series of hurdles, over which he leapt as he went along.'

Even the suicide of Seymour failed to halt the remorseless progress of the young

Dickens. Chapman and Hall commissioned RW Buss to replace Seymour, but Ackroyd writes of how the young artist was unsuited to the medium of steel engraving, and Dickens had the self-confidence to take matters into his own hands. He agreed with the publishers that he should write an extra half a sheet (or eight pages) and that the number of illustrations be reduced. As Ackroyd writes, 'in other words, he was able to take command of the project and to proceed with it in a manner unhampered by the demands of...a too-powerful illustrator.' Even so early in the book, Dickens had sufficient confidence in his own ability '...it is possible to see both those intuitive and managerial qualities which hastened the progress of Dickens's career.'

It was Dickens who chose the man to replace Buss, the illustrator who is perhaps so closely associated with Dickens – Hablot Knight Browne, or 'Phiz'. A little younger than Dickens, he had been working with him on a small pamphlet, and although possessed of little more experience than Buss, he had qualities that attracted him to the author, claims Ackroyd '...steadiness, perseverance and, above all, pliability...Browne was a quiet, unassuming, unobtrusive and almost painfully shy man...it seems that Dickens was attracted to just this type of character...because these qualities of self-effacement and shyness were precisely the ones...he felt most lacking in himself.'

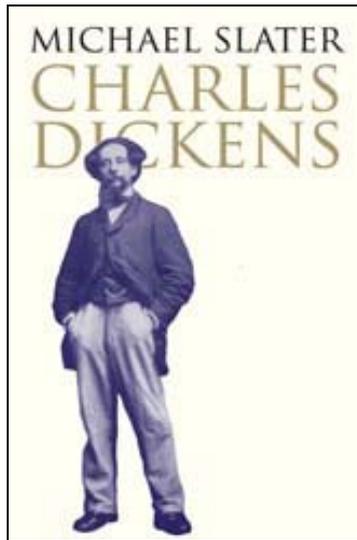
Along with Angus Wilson, Ackroyd is at pains to point out the huge workload that the young Dickens quickly took upon himself – at one point, claims Ackroyd, he '...had committed himself to the eventual publication of five books while still heavily engaged upon his first novel.' In seeking to explain this willingness to take on such burdens, Ackroyd suggests that some of it stemmed from the basic insecurity of the author, of a childhood blighted by the Marshalsea and the Blacking factory, but also that it reflected the inherent self-belief of the man and knowledge of his own talents. Ackroyd writes, '...in starting *The Pickwick Papers* he had come across an inexhaustible well of creativity within himself...he simply wanted to *work*, to exhaust himself.'

Ackroyd's summary of *Pickwick* is perhaps best shown by a lengthy quotation:

'The writing of *The Pickwick Papers* in that sense also the education of Charles Dickens; education in public response, education in his powers of human observation, education in his talent for comic narrative. Just as he finds new meaning and new life in the figure of Mr Pickwick as he proceeds – Mr Pickwick soon ceases to be merely a humorous figure and becomes instead the embodiment of natural benevolence – so Dickens discovers new power and capacity within himself. And it is a young man's book, too, because it has no sense of an ending. All of his life up to that point is somewhere within these pages, and in that spirit *The Pickwick Papers* becomes an exercise in self-

definition as well as the telling of a story. That accounts for its charm, that instinctive, compulsive, exhilarating sense of discovery.'

More recently, in 2009, Michael Slater has written a marvellous book that takes as a starting point his journalism and wider writings as a framework to examine the life of Dickens. Slater looks back to the approach to Dickens by Chapman and Hall to write prose to accompany the illustrations of Seymour as something of an unwanted confirmation of the author as a man of limited literary ambition '...Dickens could hardly have regarded this a very prestigious proposal. Flushed with the success of *Sketches*, he was now looking towards the writing of his first novel *Gabriel Vardon*...intended to be the foundation-stone of his literary career. This novel, a historical one, naturally, was to appear in all the dignity of the guinea-and-a-half, three-volume format hallowed by Scott and required by the all-powerful circulating libraries.'



He was, suggests Slater, uncomfortable with the prospect, but was tempted by the generous terms, and possessed sufficient self-belief to be confident that it could act as a spur to his nascent career. With few pre-ordained notions of the shape of the book, Dickens let his imagination run free and found himself with the name and character of Pickwick, Seymour's framework of a club, and three companions '...all stock farce types.'

His facetious first chapter extends the farce – Pickwick is praised as an explorer,

despite the fact that ‘...his travels do not take him more than thirty miles from London.’ Alfred Jingle’s distinctive speech-pattern is drawn from Dickens’s observations of the actor Charles Mathews, and it is a trick that, suggests Slater, Dickens has already used previously (the Irish orator in ‘The Ladies Societies’ – one of Dickens’s *Sketches*).

The somewhat clumsy contrasts in the early chapters between the light-hearted farcical humour of the Pickwickians and the story of the ‘dismal’ strolling actor is, claims Slater, a deliberate device by Dickens as he seeks to develop the use of ‘contrast’ that is so typical of much of his later works. Slater points to the intense workload of the young Dickens – he is still a parliamentary reporter at the time – but claims that ‘...his writing and inventiveness in these early numbers of *Pickwick* show no sign of strain or fatigue.’

Slater is as cautious as the other two biographers in attributing a direct link between Dickens and the suicide of Seymour, but provides some insightful comments on some of the issues that may have added to the woes of the illustrator. Seymour, suggests Slater, ‘had money worries, and perhaps suffered from other anxieties to do with his illegitimacy and defective education. He had also a history of some mental instability...(but) it was becoming brutally clear that the project he had proposed to Chapman and Hall, and by which he had set such store, was passing out of his control. Also, with Dickens’s introduction of the grim “Stroller’s tale” the project was beginning to include subjects unsuitable for his particular talents, which lay very much within the field of comic caricature. Dickens’s request for him to rework the plate of “The Dying Clown” could well have been the final vexation that tipped him towards suicide.’

Like Angus Wilson, Slater suggests that the character of Sam Weller is crucial both to the book and to the career of Dickens, but he also suggests that the author was perhaps unaware, at the time, of the significance his invention ‘...there is no sign in Dickens’s surviving correspondence that he felt at this stage that Sam was the harbinger of any momentous development...the sparkling brilliance with which this character is presented no doubt partly results from Dickens’s relief at having got Pickwick back to London, the teeming streets of which provide, as he was well aware by now, the richest food for his imagination.’

Angus Wilson: ‘The World of Charles Dickens’ (Secker & Warburg 1970)

Peter Ackroyd: ‘Dickens: Public Life and Private Passion’ (Guild Publishing 1990)

Michael Slater: ‘Charles Dickens’ (Yale University Press 2009)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Sir - This Mr Dickens that you lot are reading. I thought he was dead? Mr A. from Birtley

Dear Mr A. - Is he? We'll check and get back to you in the next newsletter.

Sir - I am interested in your attitude towards the work of the Dickens scholar, Masashiro Hori, and his Collocational Analysis (MacMillan, 2004). In particular, his discussion of collocations in Dickens and in terms of their semantic prosodies and colligation. You will no doubt be aware that Professor Hori divides creative collocations into eight types - metaphorical, transferred, oxymoronic, disparate, unconventional, modified idiomatic, parodied and relexicalised collocations. Do you think this is the best approach? Mrs C. from Dawdon.

Dear Mrs C. - Yes, well thank you, um-hum, that's interesting. I'll ask the NE Branch members and no doubt they'll all give it some thought and a lengthy discussion at our next meeting...

Sir - Charles Dickens, eh? Surely if he was alive today he'd be writing for Coronation Street or Eastenders? Mr E. from Fulwell.

Dear Mr E. - What an original notion! My only doubts are that if he were alive today, he'd be 199 years old. I'm a quarter of that age and struggle to remember what I had for breakfast. I can't even write a shopping list without the use of tippex and a colour co-ordinated pictorial guide to vegetables (laminated and available in large print), so I can't begin to imagine a 199-year old stringing together five half-hour scripts of heart-rending emotional conflict and real-life experiences every week, can you? Never mind that you'd also have to arrange things with his care-home?

Sir - Why are most of the people who read Dickens old themselves? Mr G. from Hartlepool

Dear Mr G - You may not be aware, but under the Educational Reform Act 1978, it was secretly made illegal in schools to teach children using books with more than two hundred pages or less than one illustration per three pages of type. This rarely-discussed piece of legislation was justified on the findings of research at the time into the health risks to the eyesight of children forced to read books without pictures. Incidentally, as proof of this research, I'm sure you've noticed that all of these older readers need spectacles, eh? This is the mark of the forgotten generation of young people brutally forced to read non-illustrated books in the post-war years. At the same time, the government secretly started to develop, in underground research bunkers, hand-held games consoles as a means of social control for disaffected adolescents. The outcome of these two secret conspiracies - both funded by the unelected bureaucrats of Brussels, but both denied by successive British governments - is what you see now, with the memory of Dickens kept alive only by those with one foot in the grave and all wearing glasses.

Sir - What were the answers to the quiz in the last newsletter? Mr F. from Gateshead

Dear Mr F. - The answers were: a) Mr Herbert Savory, b) A banana, c) The Poundland shop in Burradon, North Tyneside. Thirty-two people got all three answers correct.

Sir - When reading Dickens at work, as I do on my (very short) breaks (the boss is such an awful man, let me tell you...) should one be aware of any particular Health & Safety regulations?

Mrs H. from Ingoe

Dear Mrs H. - Of course. A reflective jacket should be worn at all times, at the very least, and care must always be taken if reading a hardback edition (adopt the statutory lifting position when moving such books around the office). It would also be advisable to carry an audible warning device in case someone approaches you. Ask the Company Health & Safety Officer to check the lum content of the paper of the book you are reading. Under the 2007 UK regulations, all word carrying materials (paper, as it used to be called) have a lum content that can be measured using lum detectors. The best modern offices will have such a device, but if in doubt please enter any public library and ask them to assess your lum levels. They will give you an appropriate response.

Sir - Why can't something more be done to engage modern-day young people with the work of Mr Dickens? Surely we can find a way? Mr J. from Killhope.

Dear Mr J - Something has been done. An author who rewrote Shakespeare's plays in text-speak has now translated Dickens into the language of the street. Gone is the polite deference of 'Please Sir, I want some more' and in its place is the book's title, Oi Mate, Gimme Some More, published by Authors Online. Martin Baum, who has 'translated' 16 Dickens novels into 'yoof speak' said: 'There are many people who love and understand great literature but many more who don't. My book is the bait to draw them in and get them interested in some wonderful stories.' Mr Baum sought guidance from his son Josh, 15, on how the youth of today speak. A Tale of Two Cities has become Da Tale of Two Turfs. Its opening sentence reads: 'It was da best of times and, not being funny or nuffing, but it was da worst of times, to be honest.' His version of Oliver Twist, renamed Oliva Twist, begins by describing the poverty-stricken London the orphan is born into. It reads: 'Oliva's life was so screwed after his muvva popped him out of da womb and then came over all dead. Even his own farva had legged it, da swine, which meant that not only was da poor kid up da creek without da paddle, but dere was no other choice but to dump him in da workhouse for unwanted nippas and it sucked.' He said: 'I was criticised by some people for my last book on Shakespeare, but many more congratulated me, and a prison education officer said how useful it had been. Some people see it as a joke but it isn't. I just want to break down barriers and it is better that children are reading something rather than nothing.'

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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