

The Dickens Fellowship, North East England

The Occasional **BLEATER**

Volume 23

January 2012



Mr. Fezziwig's Ball

London (Chapman & Hall) 1846

Fezziwig's Ball by John Leech (1817-64)

DICKENS 2012



Happy Birthday !

Dear fellow Dickensians,

It's a great honour to be opening this edition of the *Bleater* as we begin to celebrate not only the bicentennial anniversary of Dickens' birth but also our own tenth anniversary. The former has, of course, received more than a little publicity and a flurry of new books and adaptations of the Inimitable's works (perhaps the next edition will include some views and reviews of these – hint, hint, Mr Editor!), and on 7th February we will be adding to the national and international celebrations when, in Gateshead Central Library, we will recreate some of the readings Dickens gave in Newcastle on his visits there during his reading tours, mingle, costumed, among the library visitors an interesting day in prospect, and no doubt there will be more goodies to enjoy and share as this special year progresses!

In March, we hope former members of the North East branch will join present members at a celebratory lunch to mark the birth of the branch ten years ago. Our book for the year is *The Old Curiosity Shop*, chosen because it was the first book that the branch tackled: as those of us who go back ten years are the oldest and have the worst memories (this includes me), the discussion should be bright and new as ever!

At the outset, I said that it was an honour to be able to open this edition of the *Bleater*: that is especially so because it gives me the opportunity to say a big thank you, on behalf of the branch, to the two secretaries who have served us so well over these ten years: Herbert Savory, who persisted in his dream of starting a north east branch and went on encouraging folk to come along by sharing his great enthusiasm for Dickens; and Anne McLeod, our current secretary, who looks after us so well in her capable and friendly way, especially in this year when she is much besieged by requests for information and assistance. Thank you both: we might not say so often enough, but we do notice and deeply appreciate the work you have done and are doing, so well.

Looking back over the past ten years, as I was asked to do for another article, I am conscious that we have often, as the saying goes, 'boxed above our weight' in the things we have tackled, perhaps most notably in running the International Conference when we were - and are! – a relatively small group. Good thing we have a strong collective sense of humour! Will wisdom come with age? Somehow I doubt it . . . let's see what new things the next ten years bring!

Yours in fellowship, Ruth Crofton (Branch Chair)

Happy 10th Birthday!

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The Early Years of the North East Branch



- Founder Member, Hebert Savory looks back...

To me, it seems as if the north east branch has been in operation since time immemorial, not a mere decade! I recall, vividly, organising things in an attempt to form the branch; we hired a room in the Old Assembly Rooms in Newcastle (where Dickens himself had once performed) and the distinguished author Philip Collins came along to give a reading of *Dr Marigold*. In attendance we had Edward Preston and his wife, Elizabeth, and several members of the York branch had come up north to lend support but, as far as any new members were concerned, we had, sadly, none.

I then contacted the *Newcastle Evening Chronicle*, asking for some column space to advertise our cause. Happily they obliged and sent along a photographer and reporter. This, effectively, started the ball rolling – we even got three mentions on the local BBC evening news that featured Mike Neville at the time. We had, of a sort, struck gold, and members began to start coming along.

Eventually, we had sufficient numbers to inform the International Fellowship that we would be honoured if they would consider us for membership. After some deliberation they agreed to our membership and we received our official charter. It was one of the happiest days of my life to be presented with the Charter at the London Conference. To say that I was thrilled and honoured was an understatement! We have, fortunately, gone from strength to strength and long may it continue. I offer each and every one of us that is associated with the north east branch best wishes and success in all of our future endeavours. Happy Birthday!

- Founder Member, Ruth Crofton looks back...

It was at the 2001 Dickens International Fellowship Conference, in Rochester, that I first met Herbert Savory and Ron Teasdale; chatting towards the end of the conference, I said that I was moving from Leeds to Durham in August (I had just been 'called' to be minister of the United Reformed churches in Durham and Crook) and would be interested in helping with a local branch.

Not long after my move, I was alerted by a church member that a man was appearing on local television who was interested in Dickens – it was Herbert, of course, sitting amid his collection of Dickens material. Soon after that I heard from Herbert that he was calling a meeting at the Heritage Centre in Kibblesworth, a former mining village south of Gateshead, His happy idea was that he would be secretary and I the treasurer, but I declined, being truly hopeless at money; offering instead to take minutes, which I did. Ron was publicity man. A treasurer was found, and the first meeting of the 'unofficial' North East Branch of the Dickens Fellowship, as we called ourselves, was held in March 2002.

Normally a new branch would have to wait for more than a year before being eligible for consideration for affiliation to the international fellowship, but we had a decent number of members, and due to Herbert being so well known in the Fellowship, we were granted our charter at the International Conference in London in July 2002. In retrospect, it might have been wise to wait, as we immediately ran into the doldrums: our numbers plummeted so that we had as few as three at meetings and, horror from my point of view, the treasurer left and I ended up with that post (I gave in!).

Then the Heritage Centre upped its fees and told us we had to meet in the woodworking room – perching on high stools at workbenches was not conducive to literary discussion! - and so within a year of the granting of the charter, Herbert found himself, reluctantly, suggesting that we may have to close. An attempt to try meeting in each other's homes proved hopeless (a trip to Ron and Beryl Teasdale's house in Tynemouth involved, by the time I'd detoured to pick up Herbert, a 67 mile round trip!) but suddenly everything brightened up!

Lynn Hitchen heard of us and came along with some friends. Lynn had a connection, through a book group, with Gateshead libraries, so she chatted with Chris Myhill, a librarian at Low Fell Library, and came back with an offer that we could meet there - for free! Low Fell is a suburb to the south of Gateshead, on the course of the traditional Great North Road into Newcastle. Lynn also found Christine Bolton as a member, through an original intention to seek a supplier of Victorian sweets for a Dickensian evening!

From that point, we were on the up, and certainly the move to Low Fell library was absolutely critical to our success, being a central, appropriate location and giving us much encouragement. In late 2004, at our new home in the library, we put on the first of our 'Dickensian Evenings': the meeting room was packed out and the library staff had laid on refreshments, including roast chestnuts, in the main library. I gave two short talks on Dickens' life, and we performed the Pickwick & Bardell sketch, the first adaptation I produced, and a sketch from *Great Expectations*.

The following year, emboldened, we set up the evening in the main library, to allow more space; we had a sketch from *Nicholas Nickleby* (worth resurrecting, I think) and - from our book for the year, *A Tale of Two Cities* - we rather over-reached ourselves by performing a complicated piece, although Carolyn Walker wielding a vicious carving knife as Madame Defarge was truly magnificent! Sadly, financial restraints have now left the library staff at Low Fell unable to give us practical help, but their continued encouragement is really appreciated and the branch continue to meet at the library.

In October 2006, we asked Ted Shaw to visit the Branch to speak persuasively of his much-maligned ancestor, William Shaw of 'Dotheboys Hall'. A photograph taken that evening shows some current and former members:



L-R , around Ted Shaw - Carolyn Walker, Jill Spearman, Ruth Crofton, Harry Holden, Lynn Hitchen, Herbert Savory, Yvonne Kennedy, Gordon Stridiron, Michael & Mali Seawold

From the outset, the branch celebrated Dickens' birthday and anniversary of his death with a lunch, and went out and about – to Barnard Castle and Bowes, of course, and to the theatre. One visit to the Gala theatre in Durham led to great things: before the performance (of *A Christmas Carol*) we had a meal at the church in Durham where I was minister, one of the members, Judy Banister, cooking a Victorian-style meal. Enthused by this, she suggested that it might be interesting to lay on a real Victorian meal sometime.

Not long after, Paul Schlike, on becoming President of the International Fellowship, wrote to the branches seeking invitations to meetings; with our small numbers we hesitated to offer, but a Dickensian evening with dinner and entertainment, our numbers augmented by guests – that was a different prospect!

The result was a fabulous evening, with authentic and delicious Victorian fare (steak and kidney pudding and appropriate vegetables and an amazing array of sweets – blancmange, spotted dick and more and more . . . Mrs Beeton be blessed!), entertainment of readings, lighthearted community singing and an illustrated talk by Paul Schlike on Victorian entertainment.



L-R Herbert Savory, Ruth Crofton (back view), Paul Schlike, Ron Teasdale, Gordon Stridiron

Of course, there was also the International Conference in Durham. It was at the Bristol conference in 2003 that I, carefully observing the main organiser, was convinced that we too could run a conference – I had organised weekends for churches, and I realised that this was the same, writ large. On the way home I suggested it to Herbert and Ron, and we started to think about it . . . and you know the result. Enough has been said about the conference in the past, so I merely record it here as a significant step in our history!

And now? Writing this as one of the two founder members still in the branch, I have had a strange sensation recently of being a memory keeper for the branch. Over the years, people came along, some to stay and to make a contribution to the life of the branch through their own gifts, great or small, and others came and left, for many reasons. I can't remember them all, but I can remember many of them; can remember events unrecorded and the ups and downs.

As someone originally trained as a historian, I have an innate appreciation of the past, but I also believe that for anything to truly live it must adapt and change, and the Dickens fellowship is no exception. In terms of change, I think that in our most recent 'productions' we have found a format that suits us, but we also need to keep it fresh, with new ideas and material.



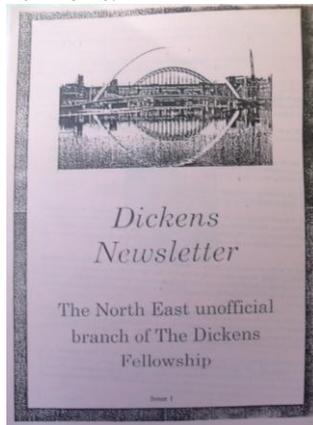
Some of the Branch at the Durham Conference: 2008

The reflections on each year's chosen novel are something else I think we have right, but we may need to think of bringing in a speaker occasionally to give us new ideas and draw in new people. In terms of the branch, we have a good fellowship, but do need to keep bringing in new members. I say this conscious that it is the cry of all voluntary groups in this day and age, but as new people have joined they have brought their own strengths and gifts and outlook – and often their own friends to swell the ranks! Like all groups, we are at our best when people are able to play to their strengths – and often the quiet strengths can be so important in binding a group together – and open to new ideas and to sharing the load when the going is a bit tough. And, on the principle of people playing to their strengths; as one who has been playing to their weakness in one of my roles in the branch, if someone would like to be treasurer

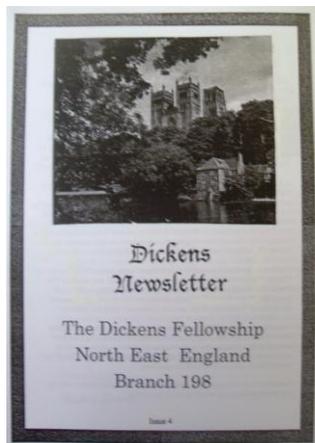
Happy 10th Birthday!

- Ten years of the the north east branch newsletter, a brief retrospective...

A newsletter of sorts is always a key element in all voluntary groups, but given the literary association of Dickens it is perhaps even more appropriate in a branch of the Fellowship. In January 2002, founder member Ron Teasdale edited a 12-page newsletter that celebrated the formation of the 'unofficial' north east branch. Typed and photocopied, A5-size, loose-leaved and printed on pink-ish paper, the newsletter carried an interesting mixture of quotes, news and comment and reflections on some of Dickens' works.



By the time that 'issue 4' was published, early in 2005, the branch had been accepted into the International Fellowship, Herbert Savory had taken part in the unveiling of a blue plaque on the facade of the former Music Hall in Nelson St, Newcastle – where Dickens had performed – and the newsletter had a new look and new editor, Gordon Stridiron.



Now extended to sixteen pages, it carried a more mixed layout and imaginative design, although it still relied on photocopying to produce multiple issues. Branch member Gordon Stridiron continued his editorship until the end of 2006 – overseeing six volumes of the newsletter – until personal time-constraints meant that he was obliged to stand down.

He was replaced by the current editor in time for volume 10, in September 2006. There was something of a new-look, although it continued to be a sixteen-page A5 format, and it continued to enjoy the somewhat unimaginatively title of 'Newsletter'. Volume 10 saw the first in a series of Question-and-Answer sections, where Branch members were asked to talk about the path of their own association with Dickens and the north-east Branch. Answers could sometimes be revealing! **Susan Hudson** revealed that her favourite position for reading Dickens was in a wide, padded armchair by the window, with a tray of tea and a cat for company - a footstool, a rug and a hot-water bottle were also occasionally necessary.



Volume 11 was the first to enjoy the luxury of staples along the fold, and the first to be printed by the Campbell Printshop in Durham – marking a significant improvement in production quality. The Q&A section continued, with **Carolyn Walker** revealing a secret admiration for Dirk Bogarde's cheekbones and the sight of Colin Firth as Jane Austen's Darcy! In volume 12, **Herbert Savory** revealed that one of the roots of his fascination with Dickens lay in accidentally catching sight of a dramatised representation of the author while watching the children's television show *Blue Peter*.

In volume 13, **Brian Johnson** – a Londoner by birth – offered the fascinating anecdote that he had attended a primary school that celebrated a centenary anniversary in the 1950's, having been built and opened while Dickens was in his forties, it had, he wrote, 'changed little since Dickens' times, although the classroom coal-fires had been replaced with radiators, but a fund had to be started when I was there to provide fuel to heat the pipes.'

Jill Spearmin, in volume 14, announced to the world that she was an amateur 'twitcher' and that she spoke Norwegian, while in volume 15 the current branch secretary **Anne McLeod**, revealed that she was born on the Isle of Skye, had a soft-spot for Beatrix Potter, and had emigrated to South Africa as a two-year old with her family.

Volume 16, the 'Conference Special Edition' featured **Ruth Crofton** in the Q&A, appropriately given that she was one of the principal organisers of the Durham gathering. Ruth told readers that she read almost everywhere – except while sitting in an armchair! – that she enjoyed moving home (and had done eleven times) and had once taken part in a 'fire-walk.'

Volume 17 featured a marvellous report in the Durham Conference from north-east branch (distant) member, **Barbara Zimmerman** of Philadelphia in America, whilst 79-year old **Clare Fitzgerald**, in the Q&A, offered a sprightly set of responses that gave evidence of a contented woman who was leading a truly fulfilling life: 'I live in Somerville, Massachusetts, a city about six miles northwest of Boston. I was born in Boston - the youngest of nine children, but the first one to be born in a hospital. I was brought home from the hospital to the house in which I still live! Most people seem to find that quite amazing! It goes without saying that it was a big house for this lively Irish family – there was always something going on, but honestly despite 'minor' upheavals like the depression years and the Second World War, the house was always brimming with people and Fun!'

Margaret Webb featured in volume 18, and revealed that she makes an annual visit to Nigeria, as part of her commitment to the Nigeria Health Care project charity, is another cat-lover, and is someone who, as a child, spent hours reading in the kitchen at home, 'much to the irritation of my mother.'

By the time of volume 19, a full seven years since the first edition, a new title had finally been announced, replacing the somewhat unimaginative 'newsletter'. The origins of the new title 'The Occasional Bleater' were described thusly:

Upon reaching the end of Our Mutual Friend, our Branch was asked by Anne McLeod to consider the prospect of discussing some of Mr Dickens' less well-known pieces as an interim measure before choosing a new book for our collective reading. The Branch accepted the proposal with unanimity, and Anne herself chose the first of our readings – a little-known, almost inconsequential, piece of sarcasm and mockery written by Mr Dickens for an early edition of All the Year Round.

It was called *The Tattlesnival Bleater*, and was seized upon as an appropriate idea for a new title – thus *The Occasional Bleater* was born.

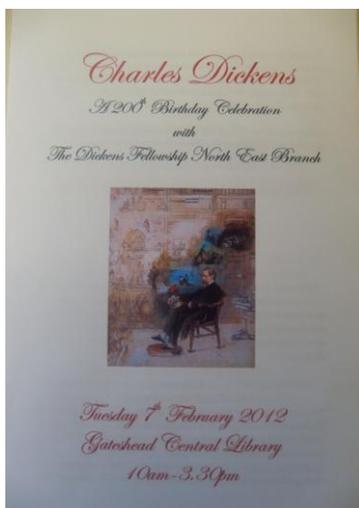
Barbara Zimmerman was the subject of the Q&A, and revealed that she owed some of her fascination for Dickens to Oprah Winfrey, that she had worked as a registered Nurse for 30-years, that she worked as a 'docent' in a local museum, that she (another one) loved cats and that she was 'teaching myself to play the piano, a gift from my husband after my mother's passing. It has filled many pleasurable hours and, as an added bonus, relieved the arthritis that used to plague my hands! One-half hour a day is the dosage. I should be ready for my recital in another 25 or so years!'

By the time of volume 20, we had reached the last of the (current!) Q&A, and **Chris McLoughlin** was the willing respondent. Acknowledging that the roots of his Dickens fascination lay in the great black-and-film versions of the 1940's, he also revealed that he was born and bred in West Hartlepool, had spent 38 years as a Ships Agent and Shipbroker, was County Secretary for the local Rugby Football Union and that he will 'read anywhere 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!'

Grateful thanks are given for all those branch members who kindly gave their time to answer the questions – offering clear evidence that the Dickens fellowship embraces a wide and wonderful diversity of people and characters from all over the world!

Happy 200th Birthday!

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In, perhaps, the most ambitious venture attempted by the north-east branch – with the notable exception of the 2008 International Conference – Gateshead Central Library will play host to our own local celebration of the Dickens bicentenary on Tuesday 7th February.

The indefatigable Ruth Crofton has, with great skill and imagination, put together a programme of readings and sketches that reflect those performed by Dickens himself during his visits to the north-east of England between 1858 and 1867.

The day will start with a visit from local school children. On the ground floor, branch members will mingle with visitors to the library, whilst, upstairs in the Wailes Room, a day-long series of readings has been prepared. It will start with a reading from *The Pickwick Papers* – Bob Sawyer's Party – that Dickens performed at Newcastle Town Hall in September 1858. At noon, there will be a talk and a communal reading from *A Christmas Carol* – a popular reading that Dickens performed in both 1858 and 1867 in Darlington, Durham, Sunderland and Newcastle.

The afternoon will start with a reading from *The Seven Poor Travellers*, the 1854 Christmas edition of *Household Words*, followed by another reading from *Pickwick* – the classic Bardell and Pickwick scene that Dickens performed in the 1858 Newcastle visit. The ensemble will close the day with a group reading of *Boots at the Holly-Tree Inn*. The next edition of *the Bleater* will carry a full report on the proceedings.

In the most recently published biography of Dickens – *Charles Dickens; A Life* by Claire Tomalin, - the frontispiece states quite boldly that the great Victorian writer was a republican. It is therefore with a mixture of nice irony and enormous honour that the north east Branch was delighted to discover that our Chairperson, Ruth Crofton, had been invited, as part of our links to the International Fellowship, to attend a Buckingham Palace reception, held to mark the bicentenary of the birth of Charles Dickens.



This is not Ruth Crofton

Arranged for February, Ruth has been sent detailed instructions for arriving and some guidance on matters of dress and protocol. Hats and gloves are not required, for example, and, Ruth is told, that 'guests often ask if it is appropriate to write a letter of thanks to The Queen after an event. There is no need to do so, but if a guest wishes to write, they should address the letter to the Master of the Household, asking him to convey their thanks to Her Majesty. All such letters are seen by The Queen.'



<http://www.dickens2012.org/>

Dickens 2012 is a website dedicated to celebrate the bicentenary of the birth of Charles Dickens. Supported by a number of diverse groups, including, among others, the BBC, the British Library, the Dickens Museum and the Dickens Fellowship, the stated aim is as follows:

Dickens 2012 is an international celebration of the life and work of Charles Dickens to mark the bicentenary of his birth, which falls on 7 February 2012. Institutions and organisations from all over the world are partners of Dickens 2012 and work together to deliver a programme of events and activities to commemorate this very special anniversary.

Although a writer from the Victorian era, Dickens's work transcends his time, language and culture. He remains a massive contemporary influence throughout the world and his writings continue to inspire film, TV, art, literature, artists and academia. Dickens 2012 sees a rich and diverse programme of events taking place in the run up and throughout the whole of 2012

For admirers of Dickens, the website is a marvellous treasure-trove of information and activities – ranging from film and theatre, to exhibitions and festivals – that stretch across much of 2012.

Current Reading

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Current Reading

In a fitting acknowledgement of the north east branch's ten-year anniversary, the next book chosen for current reading is *The Old Curiosity Shop* – this had been the first novel to be read collectively by the branch back in 2002, but with only two of the original founders still in regular attendance, for most of the current branch this will be forging new ground. Future editions of the *Bleater* will give more consideration to the book, but as way of a taster, the following comments from GK Chesterton may offer a useful starting point for group discussion:



The second story, somewhat insecurely wedged into the framework of *Master Humphrey's Clock*, was *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), as the opening and some of the references in the story still vaguely attest.

The public reception of this story very sharply illustrates what has been said about the double character of his success. On the one side was his true success as a craftsman carving figures of a certain type, generally gargoyles and grotesques. On the other side was his inferior success as a jack-of-all-trades tending only too much to be a cheapjack. As a matter of fact, *The Old Curiosity Shop* contains some of the most attractive and imaginative humour in all his humorous work; there is nothing better anywhere than Mr. Swiveller's imitation of the brigand or Mr. Brass's funeral oration over the dwarf. But in general gossip and association, everything else in the story is swallowed up in the lachrymose subject of Little Nell.

There can be no doubt that this unfortunate female had a most unfortunate effect on Dickens's whole conception of his literary function. He was flattered because silly people wrote him letters imploring him not to let Little Nell die; and forgot how many sensible people there were, only hoping that the Marchioness would live for ever. Little Nell was better dead, but she was an unconscionable long time dying; and we cannot altogether acquit Dickens of keeping her lingering in agony as an exhibition of his power. It tended to fix him in that unfortunate attitude, of something between a showman and a magician, which explains almost all the real mistakes of his life. (GK Chesterton)

Letters to the Editor

Letters to the Editor

Sir - In volume 21, you suggested that the answers to the quiz were) Mr Herbert Savory, b) A banana, c) The Poundland shop in Burradon, North Tyneside. Surely the correct answer to b) should have been a cucumber? Mr K. from Lemington

Dear Mr K. - We stand corrected and have sent a copy of this correspondence to the Press Complaints Commission. The matter of damages is under consideration by our solicitors, Messrs Tort, Mesne and Incamera, and we refuse to comment further as the matter is clearly subjudice at present

Sir - Karl Marx was a contemporary of Dickens and I wondered if you felt that there was any value in applying Marx's theory of alienation (or Entfremdung in German), as particularly expressed in the Manuscripts of 1844. As I'm sure you are aware, this refers to the separation of things that naturally belong together, or to put antagonism between things that are properly in harmony. In the concept's most important use, it refers to the social alienation of people from aspects of their 'human nature' (or Gattungswesen, usually translated as 'species-essence' or 'species-being'). Marx obviously believed that alienation is a systematic result of capitalism. Surely this should be a working starting point for discussion with the work of Dickens on one of the Branch monthly meetings? Mrs M. from Newburn.

Dear Mrs M. - Of course, this is very interesting, but unfortunately we still haven't quite got round to discussing the approach of Masashiro Hori, and his Collocational Analysis as mentioned in volume 21. Oh, what fun we should have discussing these...

Sir - This Dickens chap, was he prone to use puns in his books? Mr O. from Pennywell.

Dear Mr O. - It's not something for which he's particularly famous, but I do know that he would never, when dining out with friends, eat eight legs of venison for his main course as he considered it too dear...

Sir - Was it really a cucumber, and I thought it was in Dudley, not Burradon? Mr Q. from Rainton.

Dear Mr Q - Look, everyone knows that the boundary between Dudley and Burradon is sometimes difficult to define, and besides, as we've already indicated, this whole matter is subject to an Appeal at the European Court of Human Rights, so please ask something else...

Sir - No need to be touchy, is there? Mr Q. from Rainton.

Dear Mr Q - I'm not being touchy, but look what happened to the News of the World. Besides, if you got something to say, why not step outside...

Sir - Who's the man in the hat on page 3? Mr S. from Tow Law.

Dear Mr S - This is a model from one of the agencies used regularly by respectable publications such as this. We can say with some certainty that it's clearly not the real Herbert Savory wearing a top hat while still dressed in his long johns, looking as if he's just got out of bed and still unaware of what day of the week it might be. As if we would ever publish a picture like that with the intention of poking fun at one of our founder members...

The Dickens Fellowship, North East England

Hon. Founder Member:	Herbert Savory
Hon. Secretary:	Anne McLeod
Hon. Chair and Treasurer:	Rev'd Ruth Crofton

Membership subscriptions are: £15.00 per annum

The branch meets at Low Fell Library, Gateshead, at 7.00pm on the first Monday of each month (except Bank Holidays, when we meet on the second Monday of the month). New and prospective members are most welcome.

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Published by The Dickens Fellowship North East England
Printed by The Campbell Printshop, Waddington Street Centre, Durham