

London Particular

The Dickens Fellowship Newsletter

News from the Dickens Fellowship Hon Gen Secs: The Charterhouse meetings continue. We had readings from Nicholas Nickleby by Mansel David in April, which was very popular with the audience. *The Dickensian* (Spring issue) went out on 7 May and should have been received by now. The Summer edition (a special Dickens Museum Anniversary issue) will go out in August. A summer ramble in Dickensian London is planned for August; details will appear on the website soon.

Annual Wreath Laying 2025 The annual wreath laying at Dickens's tomb in Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey took place on 9 June and was extremely well attended. The oration was given by our President, Lucinda Dickens Hawksley, a great-great-great granddaughter of Charles Dickens, and the service was conducted by The Reverend David Stanton, Canon in Residence at the Abbey. Two wreaths were laid: one by Sienna Spalding and Laurence Howe, pupils of Gad's Hill School, and the second, on behalf of the Fellowship, by Lucinda Dickens Hawksley assisted by Eddie Dickens (11) and Elliott Dickens (8), both great-great-great-great grandsons of The Inimitable. In fact, several descendants of Dickens were present, spanning three generations. Pictures of this event can be found online at <https://www.dickensfellowship.org/index.php/announcements/415-anniversary-wreath-laying-2025>

Volcanic eruptions News of a minor eruption of Mount Etna on Sicily recently reminded me of CD's own encounter with forces of nature as eruptive and energetic as he could be himself! In *Pictures from Italy* he describes how he, Catherine and her sister Georgina, accompanied by an army of guides and attendants, make their way up Mount Vesuvius one night. 'There is something in the fire and roar, that generates

an irresistible desire to get nearer to it. Two of us, accompanied by the head guide, climb to the brim of the flaming crater and try to look in. Meanwhile, the thirty [other attendants] yell that it is a dangerous proceeding, and call to us to come back; frightening the rest of the party out of their wits. What with the trembling of the thin crust of ground, that seems about to open underneath our feet and plunge us in the burning gulf below; and what with the flashing of the fire in our faces and the shower of red-hot ashes that is raining down, and the choking smoke and sulphur; we may well feel giddy and irrational, like drunken men. But we contrive to climb up to the brim, and look down, for a moment, into the Hell of boiling fire below. Then we all three come rolling down; blackened, and singed, and scorched, and hot, and giddy: and each with his dress alight in half-a-dozen places.' The ladies were carried part of the way up in litters, but had to walk down, which was far more difficult and dangerous – each had attendants hanging onto her skirts behind to prevent her from plunging down the steep icy slopes. 'My ladies' clothes were so torn off their backs that they would not have been decent, if there could have been any thought of such things at such time...'

Social demands A journalist in *The Times* last year wrote about the tedium and anxiety resulting from having to sit down and respond properly to endless emails. She quoted CD, who, in a letter to Maria Winter in 1855, complained bitterly about all the demands on his time. "It is only half an hour" – "it is only an afternoon" – "it is only an evening" – people say to me over and over again," he wrote, adding that even five minutes was bad enough. But it was not only the time spent that bothered him, but "that the mere consciousness of an engagement will sometimes worry a whole day".

Cleveland Street Workhouse Sathnam Sanghera (*Times* 21 April) deplored the fact that there are "too many luxury flats" in London. "A factory building goes empty and it is turned into luxury flats. A bus station is closed down and it becomes luxury flats. And last week I came

across the most awkward example yet: a rare surviving example of a Georgian workhouse, which Dickens probably used as the setting for *Oliver Twist*, has been developed into, you've guessed, luxury flats. Surely it would have been better to dedicate the development to affordable housing? And it's tasteless that the developers are now using the literary history in marketing material ("Quintessential luxury London living with a twist"), in order to sell flats and houses priced from £1.2m to £4.35m. Apparently, "all residents will benefit from a concierge service and a stunning courtyard garden", which is a lot more than poor Oliver, beaten, exploited and denied second helpings of gruel, could have imagined."

Children's playgrounds Following the publication of "Designed for Play" by Jon Winder, this month's "History" magazine tells us that in January 1858, CD delivered a speech at the London Tavern in Bishopsgate Street that he hoped would transform the lives of children across the capital. He made an impassioned plea on behalf of the Playground and Recreation Society, a recently formed organisation aiming to provide "playgrounds for poor children in populous places". On his way to the London Tavern, he said: *'The first thing I saw, when I went out of my own door, was a policeman hiding among the lilac trees apparently lying in wait for some burglar or murderer. After observing him with great dread and anxiety for a minute or two, I was much relieved to find that the object of his vigilance was nothing worse than a hoop, which he presently took into custody, and carried off to the station-house.'*

'Now, my way happened to lie through three of the leading squares. In the first square I encountered a company of seven little boys, each boy carrying a boy much larger than himself, an old pickle-bottle, and a very home-made fishing rod; with which impediments they were fagging up to Hampstead ponds, where I should judge that the party would scarcely arrive in time to tumble in before dark. I found the dignity of the second square, which is a highly genteel one, very much impaired by its having the game of hop-scotch chalked all over its pavement; and here too I found my own personal dignity suffered some little detriment through my becoming, without my own consent, the centre-point or pivot of a dodging game between two boys who evaded each other around me, and lunged at each other before me and made no more account of me than if I were a sort of moving post or pillar.... In the third square I arrived in time to dry the tears and relieve the distresses of two diminutive little creatures, the prey of a third, a

size larger, who, in default of having anything else to play with, had taken off their caps, and thrown them down an area.

'And so I arrived in the course of time at Lincoln's Inn Fields, where I positively seemed to find myself in an enemy's country; prodigious and awful spikes being stuck into the posts of that neighbourhood for the impalement of the youth of London; and three distinct rushes taking place while I was there on the part of an officer in a gold-laced hat, and armed with a drawn cane, who drove before him a flying cloud of boys and girls, and pursued them with horrible menaces. Thus I happily arrived at last in the haven where you now behold me, meditating very much upon the great need there is, in London and in all large towns, of places for the children to play in; and considering with what a determined self-assertion nature declares that play they must, and play they will, somewhere or other, under whatsoever circumstances of difficulty'.

'I venture to assert', he added, 'that there can be no physical health without play; and there can be no efficient and satisfactory work without play; that there can be no sound and wholesome thought without play'. [Would CD have approved of children solitarily poring over computer games in their own homes? I doubt it. Ed.] Despite his backing, by 1860 the Playground Society had collapsed, a situation not rectified until after his death.

On this day *The Times's* "On this day" (Mon 9 June) reports: "In 1870 Charles Dickens died aged 58. Contrary to his wishes, he was laid to rest in Poets' Corner at Westminster Abbey. *The Times* report the next day said: 'How many a phase of cruelty and wrong his pen exposed, and how often he stirred others to try at least to lessen the amount of evil and of suffering which must be ever abroad in the world, will never be known. There was always a lesson beneath his mirth'".

'Take that', said Mr F's Aunt, shivering with hostility. 'That' was the crust of a piece of toast. Clennam accepted the boon with a look of gratitude, and held it in his hand. Mr F's Aunt exclaimed 'He has a proud stomach, this chap! He's too proud a chap to eat it! Give him a meal of chaff!' (*Little Dorrit*). I'm not too proud to accept contributions/comments, please, to be sent to 'Danesdyke', 27A Ashcombe Road, Carshalton, Surrey SM5 3ET or by email: aligowans17@outlook.com.