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# London Particular

The Dickens Fellowship Newsletter

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**HONORARY GENERAL SECRETARY** Paul Graham, current HGS of the Fellowship, is looking to stand down at the AGM during the Conference in London in July 2020. Anyone wishing to be considered for the role should let the editor know via the email address below and further information will be provided. It is possible that the duties might be shared between two people.

**FIRST MEETING OF 2020** Our first speaker is author Peter Fiennes on **Tues 21 Jan** at Lumen. His latest book, *Footnotes: A Journey Round Britain in the Company of Great Writers*, was published by Oneworld Books in 2019. Peter will be talking about his travels following Wilkie Collins to Cornwall, and Collins and Dickens to Cumberland and Doncaster on their *Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices*.

**MEMBERSHIP RENEWALS** A renewal form for 2020 is enclosed. Members are invited to complete and return it asap with subscription fee to the Membership Secretary, Dickens Fellowship, 48 Doughty Street, London WC1N 2LX. Fees are unchanged. Those who have already elected to pay by Standing Order need not complete a form unless details have changed.

**2020 CONFERENCE** The Fellowship Conference will take place **15 – 20 July**. It will be non-residential. If any members in the London area would be willing to offer spare accommodation to visiting members from overseas, please let the editor know at the address below.

Carrara branch is staging its own conference from **23 – 25 January** to commemorate the 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Dickens's visit to the town. Further details will shortly appear on the Fellowship website.

**BOOK LAUNCH** *Reading Dickens Differently*. The second meeting of 2020 will be on **Tues 18 Feb**, when Jane King's talk will be entitled: *Received A Blank Child: Dickens and the Foundling Hospital*. This talk will be followed, at about 19.30, by a book launch. *Reading Dickens Differently* is a collection of essays by contemporary Dickens scholars, edited by Leon Litvack and Nathalie Vanfasse. The book will be published by Wiley in December and members will be able to order it from the publisher on the night if they wish.

**Jacob's Island and the Dickens Estate** (*Membership Secretary Allan Clack's article cont'd from last issue*) The fact that such places existed, and that people lived their doomed squalid lives there, was documented by social reformers. It took more than campaigning writers and concerned observers to eradicate places like Jacob's Island. It took a disaster and the wave of middle-class fear it created, i.e. the cholera epidemic of 1846/9, which killed more than 80,000 people in England and Wales. 2,000 were thought to have died in a week in the autumn of 1849.

Henry Mayhew, campaigning journalist who wrote the famous *London Labour and the London Poor*, calculated that more than half of the 1848 deaths occurred in London south of the Thames – right through Lambeth, Southwark and Bermondsey, but in Jacob's Island especially, which he called 'the very capital of cholera'. To his horror, he saw that the ditch from which the householders so precariously hauled up their water, was also their sewer. Did they really drink this water? They had no choice, they told him. (*To be cont'd*).

**How to chill spines** 'His glance happened to rest upon a disused bell that hung in the room...It was with great astonishment and a strange, inexplicable dread, that as he looked, he saw this bell begin to swing'. Susan Hill, author of the terrifying play, 'The Woman in Black', read 'A Christmas Carol' at the age of 9 and 'became hooked on ghost stories. Dickens was my master', she says, 'the writer who creates atmosphere like no other. Think how ghostly is Miss Havisham's

wedding room, frozen in time, though it contains no actual ghost'. 'The Woman in Black' has been running for 30 years at the Fortune Theatre. I saw it a long time ago and it certainly frightened me!

**A Tudor Fagin?** DF member Linda Shannon tells us she has just read a book of Tudor folk tales which contains a report from 1585 of a London school of pickpockets. It seems a certain gentleman had fallen on hard times (!) and had set up an alehouse where he also trained young boys to be 'foists' (pickpockets) and 'nippers' (cut-purse thieves). The gentleman would hang up a purse with hawk bells about it and "he that could take out a counter without any noise was allowed to be a public foister; and he that could take a piece of silver out of the purse without the noise of any bells was adjudged a judicial nipper". This is from a letter cited in *Tudor Economic Documents* by Tawney, R.H. and Powers, E. (Longmans, Green & Co., 1951). Linda wonders if Dickens could have known about this and modelled Fagin's school on it?

**How to save money this Christmas** This time last year a new term appeared - "Scrooging". It describes the act of 'dumping your partner in December to avoid having to buy them (sic) a Christmas present' (*Daily Telegraph* 12/18). I'm quite sure CD would have disapproved strongly of this... well, almost sure...

**Rags to riches** DF member Jill Smith says she "recently visited Angels Costumiers in Hendon (main shop Shaftesbury Ave) and was surprised to see on their tribute wall a letter from Charles Dickens. Apparently, he used to visit the company and look at the costumes, in particular that of Mrs Gamp". The business, founded in 1840, still provides costumes for films, plays etc. It all started when Daniel Angel, a penniless immigrant tailor, probably from Frankfurt, settled in Seven Dials in 1813. A real rags-to-riches story.

**Dickens & Christmas** DF member Iain Tench sent in an article by Dr Kathryn Hughes from the *Guardian*, part of which I used in the last edition of LP. Dr Hughes quotes the 'young daughter of a London costermonger who is reported to have said on hearing of CD's death: "Mr Dickens dead? Then will Father Christmas die too?"' The article continues, "It's 176 years since *A Christmas Carol* was published, the 28,000-word novella that laid down the template for how we celebrate Christmas. Prince Albert and his imported fir tree of 1841 helped of course and so did Henry Cole and his Christmas cards of 1843; also, a London sweet-maker named Tom Smith who came up with crackers in 1847. But it was CD who pulled it all together and made it visible in story.

'Christmas was always a time which in our house was looked forward to with eagerness and delight', recalled his elder daughter Mamie. Younger brother Henry added, 'My father was always at his best, a splendid host, bright and jolly as a boy and throwing his heart and soul into everything'. Guests would be offered a turkey dinner followed by a dazzling display of magic tricks courtesy of Boz himself. However, Dickensian Christmases were often skating on thin ice – Dr Hughes alludes to Pip's horrible Christmas Day in *Great Expectations*, Scrooge's sad vision of himself as a boy abandoned at school over the festive season – and, in *Edwin Drood*, the young hero disappears, presumed murdered, on Christmas Eve. One might add *Pickwick Papers* – I always thought it sad that the fun and jollity of Christmas at Dingley Dell was overshadowed by Mr Pickwick's impending trial for breach of promise of marriage.

**Result of DF July pub meeting** at the Rugby Tavern near Doughty Street. Members might be interested to learn that, following, a series of presentations on the subject: *Which is the greatest Victorian novel that Dickens didn't write?*, the winner was declared to be **Jane Eyre** (Charlotte Bronte), other nominees being: *No Name* (Wilkie Collins), *Paul Clifford* (Bulwer-Lytton), *Middlemarch* (George Eliot), *Vanity Fair* (Thackeray) and *The Way We Live Now* (Trollope). As always, the afternoon was very sociable and amusing and included refreshments at the bar at judicious intervals!

**Don't work too hard!** It seems that some modern bosses are impressed by employees who work (or pretend to) an 80-hour week (article in the 'I' newspaper by Pilita Clark, 2.9.19). Ms Clark cited Dominic Cummings, Downing Street adviser, urging his minions to work non-stop for Brexit. Not everyone favours such methods, however. A study has found that Charles Darwin used to 'amble into his study at about 8 am and work a good hour and a half before taking a break to read his post. He then did another 90 minutes before noon; and then, after a walk and an afternoon nap, another briefish stint before dinner. The prolific Charles Dickens wrote from 9 am to 2 pm (with a break for lunch)'. A lesson for us all...

**"It's as true as taxes is. And nothing's truer than them", said Mr Barkis (DC). It's also true that I would welcome some more contributions from you, to be sent, please, to: Alison Gowans, "Danesdyke", 27A Ashcombe Road, Carshalton, Surrey SM5 3ET, or by email – [aligowans17@outlook.com](mailto:aligowans17@outlook.com)**