
London Particular

The Dickens Fellowship Newsletter

ELECTION OF OFFICERS Members will be aware that the three officers of the Fellowship: Honorary General Secretary, Honorary Treasurer and Honorary Editor of the Dickensian, all have to stand for re-election at the AGM in Eastbourne on **Sat 27 July**. All three current incumbents have indicated that they will be standing for re-election. **Any member who wishes to stand for any of these posts should contact the Fellowship via the postbox@dickensfellowship.org e-mail or by post to the Charles Dickens Museum, 48 Doughty Street, London WC1N 2LX.**

ADDITIONAL MEETING Lise Lotte Frederiksen is the Secretary of the Danish branch of the Fellowship. She will be staying in London later in the year, conducting research into *Sketches by Boz* that she hopes will result in the publication of a book (as mentioned in the Spring issue of *The Dickensian*). We are delighted to report that on **Tues 22 October** Lise Lotte has agreed to give an illustrated talk to members on the results of her investigations to date. The talk will take place in the Boardroom of the Charles Dickens Museum at 6.30. The event is not listed on the membership card, so please note date, time and venue in your diary.

Jacob's Island and the Dickens Estate (*M'ship Secretary Allan Clack's article cont'd from last issue*) Dickens describes Jacob's Island in *Oliver Twist*: *'The filthiest, the strangest, the most extraordinary of the many localities that are hidden in London, wholly unknown even by name to the great mass of its inhabitants... A stranger looking across the ditch from one of its bridges will see the inhabitants lowering from their back doors and windows buckets, pails, domestic utensils of all kinds, in which to haul the water up... crazy wooden galleries with holes from which to look upon the slime beneath; windows broken and patched... every repulsive lineament of poverty, every loathsome indication of filth, rot and garbage; all these ornament the banks of*

Folly Ditch....' Many people, particularly the middle classes and those in authority, expressed disbelief that such a place could exist and felt that CD must be exaggerating. However, a few years after *OT* was published, an official history of London produced in 1841 described the Jacob's Island area of Bermondsey in exactly Dickens's words – in fact, it appears that the official guide used Dickens's description of the area. (*To be cont'd*).

Company for Magwitch Staying with *OT*... now and then a mystery character steps forward and demands a bit more attention. Very near the end of the book, Fagin's gang is augmented by a man called Kags. It's the scene where Toby Crackit, Tom Chitling and the man Kags are hiding at the Folly Ditch lair (see above) following the flight of Sikes. CD describes him as *'a robber of fifty years, whose nose had been almost beaten in, in some old scuffle, and whose face bore a frightful scar which might probably be traced to the same occasion. This man was a returned transport, and his name was Kags'*. In Kags's own words, he's: *'A friend that's arrived sooner than was expected from foreign parts, and is too modest to want to be presented to the Judges on his return'*. (So Magwitch is not the only returned transport in the *oeuvre*!) Apart from giving Sikes's dog a drink, Mr Kags doesn't do much. What's he there for?

Plus ça change... DF member Chris Davies has sent in the following, from *Dickens's Journalism* ed. Michael Slater. In 1852, CD wrote an article for *Household Words*, commenting on the parliamentary antics of Lord Derby's minority government (Free Trade being the issue of the day): *"The dozen noblemen and gentlemen whom our honourable friend supported, had "come in" expressly to do a certain thing. Now, four of the dozen said at a certain place, that they didn't mean to do that thing, and had never meant to do it; another four of the dozen said, at another certain place, that they did mean to do that thing, and had always meant to do it; two of the remaining four said, at two other certain places, that they meant to do half of that thing (but*

differed about which half), and to do a variety of nameless wonders instead of the other half; and one of the remaining two declared that the thing itself was dead and buried while the other half as strenuously protested that it was alive and kicking.' The twelve presented themselves, however, as an impregnable phalanx of unanimity."

What! Even the fish slice? DF member Iain Tench sent in a recent article, *Dickens and Christmas*, by Kathryn Hughes in the *Guardian Review*. Dr Hughes describes the importance to CD of entertaining generally (not just at Christmas) and feels this represents CD's attempts to hide the 'psychic wound' inflicted on him by his childhood experiences, and to assert his adult domestic happiness to both friends and strangers. (Or of course, he might just have enjoyed entertaining...Ed.) She describes his dinner parties as 'a kind of theatrical performance' where people were expected to arrive punctually "at ¼ before 7 o'clock". There were monograms on everything, including the fish slice, a nosegay for ladies and a buttonhole for men beside each place setting and quantities of artificial flowers. Thackeray noted Mrs Dickens's penchant for pink satin and her husband's suspiciously ringleted hair. The couple, he noted, were "abominably coarse" and "vulgar"....

....**Mrs Dickens – Catherine or Charles?** Dr Hughes also mentions CD's active role in housekeeping (normally exclusively the wife's province). She says that documents, including some on display at Doughty Street, reveal that it was CD "who frets about ordering a hamper from *Fortnum & Mason* or who sacks a sulky cook". She quotes the American author Nathaniel Hawthorne who wondered out loud about Dickens "making bargains at butchers and bakers, and doing, as far as he could, whatever pertained to an English wife". (Hawthorne, author of *The Scarlet Letter*, never managed to meet CD, though he was US consul at Liverpool for several years in the 1850s, so I wonder how he knew about CD's domestic habits!)

Some comfort at the South Pole A copy of *David Copperfield* taken to the South Pole by Captain Scott is on show at the CDM ("**Global Dickens**" runs until 3 November). Scott's party had to wait in an ice cave they had dug for 7 months. It was pitch black most of the time, they had no change of clothes, nothing to eat but penguin or seal meat and they all contracted dysentery. They had a few books including *DC* and rationed themselves to a chapter a night, read aloud by the guttering flame of a seal blubber lamp, removing their frozen fingers from

their gloves for a few seconds to turn the pages. Reading aloud occupied the mind, prevented quarrels and maintained a strong social bond in those very claustrophobic circumstances. As Frankie Kubicki, the curator of the exhibition, says: 'His novels have so much description and so many distinct characters... he really can take you to a different place. It would have given the men a few minutes a day where they could escape their predicament'.

Winding up A friend sent me a recent *Guardian* article, written by John Mullan, which discusses the last season of *Game of Thrones* – and the problem of how to end a serial satisfactorily. 'No one exploited the serial form better than Dickens. He did not have to renew his narratives for series after series, like the creators of *Game of Thrones*, but he did have to work out how to hold his readers' interest for many months. In his early novels, he improvised, but from his seventh novel, *Dombey and Son*, onwards, he closely planned his books, foreseeing the endings with a clarity that a TV thriller screenwriter would surely admire. We know this because he left behind number plans for the later novels. "Pave the way" he wrote in his number plans for *Little Dorrit*; "lay the ground carefully" he instructed himself as he planned *Our Mutual Friend*.' Not like Trollope, who cheerfully admitted: 'I have never troubled myself much about the construction of plots'.

Van Gogh and Britain I recently went to this excellent exhibition at Tate Britain (mentioned in LP last year). Van Gogh came to England in 1873 and stayed about 3 years, working for Goupil & Co, pioneers in art reproduction, in Covent Garden. VG read Dickens and Shakespeare and studied and admired the Pre-Raphaelites, Constable and Turner; he also liked social realist works by artists such as Luke Fildes. He explored many areas in London and wrote to his brother Theo about 'Whitechapel, that extremely poor area which you'll have read about in Dickens'. His love of Dickens is a recurring motif throughout the exhibition – an added attraction for Dickensians! (Exhibition ends 11 Aug.)

As Mr Bumble explains to Mrs Corney, "The great principle of out-of-door relief is, to give the paupers exactly what they don't want; and then they get tired of coming". Your editor, however, definitely does want your contributions and hopes you won't tire of sending them, please, to: Alison Gowans, "Danesdyke", 27A Ashcombe Road, Carshalton, Surrey SM5 3ET, or by email – aligowans17@outlook.com