

Mr. Dick's Kite

No. 93

Spring 2014



“There! There’s the teapot, ready on the hob!” said Dot; as briskly busy as a child at play at keeping house. “And there’s the cold knuckle of ham; and there’s the butter; and there’s the crusty loaf and all! Here’s a clothes-basket for the small parcels, John, if you’ve got any there - where are you, John? Don’t let the child fall under the grate, Tilly, whatever you do!”

THE CRICKET ON THE HEARTH, CHIRP THE FIRST

From Our Post-Bag

Let me wish you a belated Happy New Year and peace, good health and happiness for 2014 to all readers of *Mr Dick's Kite*.

Christmas time brings cards and news from Dickensian friends from overseas and the UK, which my father and I look forward to receiving. We feel we would like to share some of the news with our readers.

From *Madame Janine Watrin in Condette, France* we received an account of the truly international service offered at St Nicholas' church in Boulogne during the recent Dickens Conference where, she says, "the Lord's Prayer was read in English, French and in Esperanto; the text from the Bible was read by a gentleman from New Zealand, and the reading from *A Tale of Two Cities* by a gentleman from the Netherlands."

In *Christchurch New Zealand*, we heard from the Oakley family. Elaine and Bob Oakley have been great Dickensians and their children and now their grandchildren, regularly take part in meetings of the Christchurch Dickens Fellowship. The Branch members enliven their meetings by dressing up as characters from the current book being studied,

and re-enacting whole chapters!

Bob and Elaine's son Peter is now the new Branch Secretary and he wrote to tell us that "there was nine inches of rain followed by frost at the Mid-Winter Wassail and a small turnout of only sixteen members who braved the weather. My wife Suzanne made Cedric's (Dickens) rum punch, and attributed the recipe to Mrs Gamp since we are doing '*Martin Chuzzlewit*' this year."

A card from *Rose-Marie Morrison in Adelaide* informed us that she is to be a great grandma for the third time! Congratulations!!

Also I understand that Rose-Marie has been awarded the title of "Australian Dickensian Extraordinaire", as she has been a member of the Adelaide Dickens Fellowship for 55 years, making her the longest active member of any Australian Dickens society. Well done Rose-Marie!

From the UK, we received greetings and a copy of the Parish Newsletter from our previous Vicar, the *Rev Wynne Jones*, now working in Oxford. He has always been very interested in the works of Dickens and used appropriate quotes from *A Christmas Carol* to show how joyful

it is to give to others rather than being miserly and selfish, and what wonderful rewards it brings.

A card with a note in it from *Edward Preston in St Leonards on Sea* says “Am I the only one to notice that you had slipped one of my old Latin tutors in your list of NAMES (see *Kite No. 92*) Hillard and Botting? – together with the Kennedy primer brings back good memories”

**This was my father’s little joke*

Edward goes on to say “it was good to receive the Kite”

As he has no computer access we are

producing a ‘hard copy’ for him.

If any Branch Secretaries have ideas for competitions with a Dickensian motif, which we could run in the Kite, then I would be very pleased to hear from them. Likewise, we would be interested in any snippets of information or articles with a Dickensian theme.

Please send to:

alan.s.watts@btinternet.com

Please note that this is our new contact address and my father and I look forward to hearing from you.

Can I remind Branch Secretaries that they should notify us of anyone unable to get access to an on-line version of the Kite, and we can put them on the mailing list.

Michael Allen Writes

I’ve just received the latest issue of *Mr Dick’s Kite*, which I always enjoy reading.

I’d like to correct one small point. In the item in Issue 90. “The most discussed artefact in Dickens”, *the Kite* suggests, quite rightly in my opinion, that Dickens got the idea of the upturned boat in *David Copperfield* from his grandmother. However, the idea came not from any time she may have spent at Tong Castle, which, though possible, is not proven, but from her time with the

Crewe family at Crewe Hall. The rear of Crewe Hall looked out over a rather splendid lake, and in his book *Barthomley*, published in 1856, Edward Hinchcliffe, a relative of the Crewes, wrote, describing life at the time Mrs Dickens was there,

“...that at the head of the lake was a boat house –so called because a boat, turned upside down, formed its roof...”

We don’t know if Dickens ever visited Crewe Hall, so I suspect it

most likely that his grandmother described it to him.

It is worth correcting these small points because otherwise incorrect versions get repeated, cited with the authority of *Mr Dick's Kite*.

ED: "Thank you Michael for your extremely interesting piece on the boathouse. It is always good to hear from our readers on topics such as this and we welcome further pieces"
Send to alan.s.watts@btinternet.com

An Actor's Life for Me

Charles Mathews 1776 -1835

Nicholas Nickleby affords us a comical, though undoubtedly fairly truthful impression, of what the theatre was like in the early Victorian days. Dickens was an avid theatregoer and spent much of his time, and a great amount of his pocket-money at the theatre box-office, watching contemporary performances. In one of his letters he confesses to having visited the theatre almost nightly and certainly always when Charles Mathews was on the bill.

Mathews held an unrivalled place with his unique vein of light eccentric comedy which was extremely popular. He gave one-man shows known as "*At Homes*" with comic songs and impersonations of eccentric characters, which after 1817 were almost annual events and he appeared at some of London's finest theatres. He devised humorous sketches based



on life situations such as "*The Youthful Days of Mr Mathews*"; "*Mr Mathews's Irritations*" and "*Mail Coach*" and these allowed him to create an extremely varied group of characters. He was a genius at mimicry and was considered among the leading comedians of his day.

In a letter to Forster in 1844 Dickens wrote that when he was about twenty, and knew three or four successive years of Mathews's "*At Homes*" from sitting in the pit to hear them, he wrote to George Bartley, Manager of the Covent Garden Theatre, and told him how young he was, and exactly what he thought

he could do; and that he believed he had a strong perception of character and oddity, and a natural power of reproducing in his own person what he observed in others. Bartley wrote to him, almost immediately, to say they were getting up *'The Hunchback'* but that he would write to him again, in a fortnight. Punctual to the time, another letter came, with an appointment to do anything of Mathews's he pleased, before him and Charles Kemble, on a certain day at the theatre. His sister Fanny was in on the secret and was to go with him to play the songs; but he was laid up, when the day came, with a terribly bad cold and an inflammation of the face. He wrote to say so, and added that he would resume his application next season (*Pilgrim Edition Letters*

of CD 1820-1839)

He did not apply again.

"I made a great splash in the gallery soon afterwards; the Chronicle opened to me; I had a distinction in the little world of the newspaper, which made me like it; began to write; didn't want money; had never thought of the stage, but as means of getting it; gradually left off turning my thoughts that way; and never resumed the idea."

(Forster *'Life of Charles Dickens'*)

Although of course, Dickens was always an actor at heart, and it is acknowledged that he had the ability to be not less successful as an actor than as a writer.

Obsessions with Collections

Collecting various objects is probably a universal failing. One of us collects postage stamps, while another has a vast collection of old photographs.

One of Dickens's closest friends was the Reverend Chauncy Hare Townshend, whose collections included ceramics and pottery; paintings, engravings and prints; fossils; stuffed animals and birds, as well as coins, gems and minerals. His collection was eclectic.

Townshend was a very great admirer of Charles Dickens. They were introduced through their shared interest in mesmerism, or as they called it 'animal magnetism' and became close friends. As a result of this common interest, Dickens gave Townshend the original manuscript of *Great Expectations*, while Townshend dedicated his volume of poetry to Dickens. Dickens based two of his characters on Townshend,

Cousin Feenix with his “wilful legs” in *Dombey and Son*, and the slightly hypochondriacal Mr Twemlow in *Our Mutual Friend*.

After Townshend’s death in 1868, his property was sold for charitable purposes, and later, much of it was acquired by a London museum. Selected items, including the manuscript, went to the Wisbech and Fenland Museum.

In his will Townshend made a request which Dickens was not expecting:

“I appoint my friend Charles Dickens, of Gad’s Hill Place, in the County of Kent, Esquire, my literary executor; and beg of him to publish without alteration as much of my notes and reflections as may make known my opinions on religious matters, they being such as I verily believe would be conducive to the happiness of mankind”

and while welcoming this gift, Dickens must also have regarded it as somewhat of a curse, like Cassandra’s gift of prophecy.



Nevertheless, he did collect the writings, some of which were difficult to gather together, being dispersed between London and Lausanne, and published them in 1869 under the title *Religious Opinions by the late Reverend Chauncy Hare Townshend*.

Throughout Dickens’s correspondence at the close of his life, when he was attempting to fulfill Townshend’s request, there runs an unmistakable vein of irritation. One gets the feeling that Dickens’s patience was running out and that at any moment he might tear up the last few letters he’d been asked to consult and act upon.

ASW

Writing by Ear

It is obvious that Dickens wrote with his ears. I do not mean that he used those “indispensable side-intelligences” which adorned the

side of his head, to wield his quill pen, but what I am hinting at is that many people are quite unaware that writers need to do more than write!

They need to listen attentively to what they are writing. In my official work before I retired I used to compile books on careers and I came across several examples of how people in reasonably responsible positions failed to realise this simple truth. I remember finding a piece describing what might happen to a young shoplifter if he were a second time offender. The sentence read something like this:

“if he were caught again of course, it would have meant the Courts”

When I pointed out to the writer the awkwardness of this, he asked me what was wrong with the sentence, and I don't think he ever realised that men like Charles Dickens did not write by pen only but by their ears, as they read and listened to the sound of the words.

Everyone knows that Dickens as a boy worked in a blacking warehouse and that this was a traumatic experience which he never properly got over. He wrote in *David Copperfield* that he felt

“what I had learned, and thought, and delighted in, and raised my fancy and my emulation up by, would pass away from me, little by little, never to be brought back any more”

DAVID COPPERFIELD CHAPX1

The very length of this sentence is unusual. This is a man pouring out his soul to his readers through the character of a small orphaned boy, to readers who had no idea how personal this statement and these memories were to Dickens. There is agony in the sound of the words, and the tempo is that of a child sobbing. Can you not hear in the background the altercation between Charles's parents when the episode at the blacking warehouse came to a conclusion? Dickens wrote

“I do not speak resentfully or angrily except to say that my mother was warm for me to be sent back”

Sent back! Two harsh sounding words which sound like a slap.

ASW

Dickens the Unsentimental

One of the charges frequently laid against Dickens is that of sentimentality. It is so persistent that

it comes as something of a shock to be reminded of the fact that he could be remarkably unsentimental and

clear eyed when he chose. Pamela Hansford Johnson's 1962 novel: *An Error of Judgement* was reissued by Capuchin Classics in 2008. In it an adolescent youth commits a senseless and horrible murder. Conventional wisdom decreed that he would be filled with remorse: conventional wisdom was wrong:

'The remorse of the murderer is a literary invention, with Dostoyevsky as the worst misleader. It is an error Dickens never made - see

Fagin, see Jonas Chuzzlewit. Terror for themselves, yes; but of conscience, no trace. Study Jonas carefully. Did he care for the tender flaky, crayfish flesh of Tigg, stamped into the leaf-mould of the forest? Jonas cared only for himself and his own danger, was afraid of nothing but to be found out.'

This passage is a helpful reminder that the caricature of Dickens as Mr Popular Sentiment is just that - a caricature.

Barnaby Rudge on Stage

The first attempt to stage *Barnaby Rudge* was just after the novel was published in 1841. A 3 Act melodrama was produced ending with the confession and death of Rudge senior, and the Gordon Riots off-stage.

For several years I worked on a script faithful to Dickens, balancing comedy and drama in his 'streaky bacon' style. The result? 4-plus hours! How could one tell the full story in a conventional two and a half hour setting on a normal stage at Portsmouth's Kings Theatre? It had to rely on Brechtian theories of illusion and reality, trusting a modern audience to respond to the

clues.

Though our actors of all ages were not professionals, rehearsals led to insights into class, mood and feeling, and to much enthusiasm for the text.



To match Dickens's great narrative, Act 2 developed into four movements of choreographed physical theatre which culminated in Langdale's Gin Factory.

Although the main action covers 1775-1780, it has four 'back-stories' around 1748, relating to the early lives of the fictional characters drawn into the Riots. John Willet tells of Hugh,

"whose mother was hung when he was a little boy, with six others.... was then turned loose, and had to mind the cows and frighten the birds for a few pence....got by degrees to mind horses....has

Sherlock

With the renewed popularity of the character of Sherlock Holmes, as personified by Benedict Cumberbatch in the television series "*Sherlock*", it might interest readers to know that the late Mr John Greaves who was the Honorary Secretary of the Dickens Fellowship from 1948 to 1976, became an authority on Holmes due to the following circumstances. He worked for the Abbey National Building Society from 1921 to 1956. Their offices were in Abbey House situated in Baker Street and they received many letters addressed to the fictional detective. In a spirit of

never lived in any way but like the animals he has lived among, and has to be treated as such accordingly"

But can one call Hugh a villain when his last thought is for the care of his dog?

Because Barnaby is autistic, the moment when Hugh reveals his love for Barnaby and his remorse at taking him away from his mother, became heart-stopping in rehearsal. Barnaby had followed him unconscious of danger and blind to the feelings of his tragic, loving mother.

Eileen Norris, Portsmouth

kindness Mr Greaves took on the role of 'secretary' and it fell to him to answer all the enquiries regarding the great detective which were directed to Abbey House.

John Greaves whole life was devoted to Charles Dickens and his books. One of his colleagues wrote:

"He must have known them all by heart for he was never at a loss".

He was also a celebrated amateur actor who delighted in portraying roles such as Fagin, Micawber or Bill Sikes and he gave recitations and talks on Dickens at various venues

around the country.

Once he retired, his daily life was almost entirely absorbed with his duties as Honorary Secretary. According to those who knew him, as Secretary he was;

“genial, efficient and knowledgeable; always at

hand when needed, usually anticipating the requirement; we are all a little better for having known him”

He passed away in a manner he would have found very fitting – while attending a meeting in Dickens’s house at Doughty Street.

Burning Question solved

An article in the *Wall Street Journal* interestingly throws some light on the topic of ‘spontaneous combustion’ while investigating a Confederate plot in 1864 regarding incendiary devices. These were supposed to self ignite when exposed to air, but as they were left in cupboards and locked rooms without the necessary oxygen, they luckily died out of their own accord.

The article asks the question posed by many Victorians “Could a man really self-ignite”?

Charles Dickens, as we know, turned the wretched Mr Krook into a pile of ash, in *Bleak House*

“a smouldering suffocating vapour in the room, and a dark greasy coating on the walls and ceiling.”

– but he was castigated for this, and accused of sensationalism. He was

forced to defend himself pointing to evidence of several known cases as proof that this event could happen. He also defied his critics to come up with a scientific explanation. They were unable to do so.

But the article states, in 2012 Brian Ford a research biologist at Cambridge University, set up an experiment using belly pork soaked in a highly flammable acetone. The purpose was to mimic a dangerous condition called ketosis, when the liver produces toxic levels of ketones containing acetone.

According to Professor Ford, the tiniest spark was sufficient. The pork mannequin burned to ash within half an hour.

“The remains – a pile of smoking cinders with protruding limbs – were exactly like the photographs of human victims”