

BROADSTAIRS DICKENS FELLOWSHIP NEWSLETTER MARCH 2021

NSPCC/DICKENS FELLOWSHIP BROADSTAIRS

We are delighted to announce that the reading of A Christmas Carol performed by the Dickens Declaimers from Broadstairs raised a total of £1400 for the NSPCC over the Christmas period. The NSPCC have issued this certificate and we, like the charity, are delighted with the result. A big thank you to everyone out there who donated. It's much appreciated.



**The Mystery of Charles Dickens by
A.N. Wilson
Published by Atlantic Books
(Paperback edition out in June 2021, £9.99)**

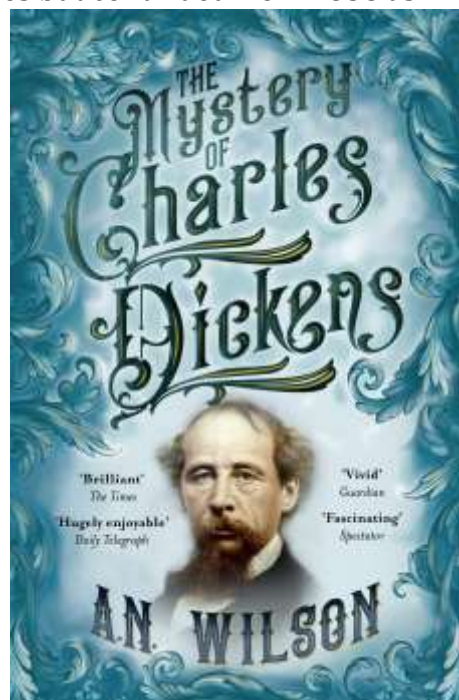
BOOK REVIEWS

A.N.Wilson asserts that Dickens “was a man of masks, who probably never revealed himself to anyone; quite conceivably, he did not reveal himself to himself.” So he undertakes to find the hidden mysteries behind these masks, the events in his life that have formed the man and the writer. One such which was unacknowledged by Dickens at the time (though well-known to us nowadays) was his childhood work at Warren’s Blacking Factory after his fantasist father had been condemned to the Marshalsea for debt. This dreadful experience of abandonment and poverty marked him for life and appeared in his novels in the

guise of David Copperfield and Oliver Twist. He blamed his mother more than his father, channelling her into so many of his foolish women characters, whereas his feckless father becomes the affectionate and resilient Micawber. This flawed relationship with his mother probably soured his relationship with his wife, Catherine. It is part of the solution to the mystery of how a man so imbued with pity for humanity could be so cruel to his wife. He punished her as if she were his mother.

Another mystery is the paradox of Dickens' charitable work. He did huge amounts for charity, including the establishment of Urania House with Miss Burdett Coutts, but his books portray do-gooders like Mrs Jellaby with ridicule. He presses for reform in his books, yet he cruelly puts aside his wife and even enquires about putting her into an asylum to get rid of her. His public readings started as a means of making money for charities but continued from 1858 as

professional paid events. He always had the spectre of his childhood poverty and the workhouse in his mind and he drove himself to the edge of illness with these performances. Particularly taxing was his portrayal of the brutal murder of Nancy and it is illuminating to read that he went on 'performing' this in his garden even after the reading tours had stopped. Was it a release for him from his marital unhappiness, even to the extent of sublimating his murderous feelings for Catherine? Having to keep his relationship with his mistress Ellen Ternan a secret added to his having to divide himself. The mystery of his 'divided self' is embodied in the character of John Jasper in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, where the seemingly loving Jasper may well have murdered the beloved Edwin. Jasper, an opium addict, mirrors Dickens, who is by now addicted to laudanum.



Towards the end of the book, Wilson reveals graphic details of his own sexual violation in Public School. He found solace in reading Dickens. He can understand how childhood trauma can affect adult life, and how Dickens could have assuaged his own pain by transferring it to his characters, and indeed how we can make sense of our experiences by looking at his. As he says, Dickens has a "profound understanding of the inner child who remains with all of us until we die." Having stripped away the mysteries surrounding Dickens' life and last days, we find ourselves face to face with the essential human being, naked with all his flaws.

Val Whitehouse

Charles Dickens has one thing in common with all good writers: he writes about things he experiences. In Dickens's case A.N. Wilson draws on these life-changing occurrences to explain the popularity of the novels.

In Chapter Two, *The Mystery of Childhood*, this is amply described when Wilson alludes to the part of Dickens's life spent apart from his family whilst working at the blacking factory. Many instances are given in *Oliver Twist* but the one Wilson uses to great effect is the reply Ralph Nickleby gives to Nicholas's mother who is appalled at her son having to go off on his own without his breakfast to Dotheboys Hall to earn his living. "Mighty fine certainly", said Ralph with great testiness. "When I first went to business, ma'am, I took a penny loaf and a ha'porth of milk for my breakfast as I walked to the city every morning, what do you say to that? Breakfast! Pshaw!" This scene encapsulates Dickens's own reminiscences of his childhood and is known to us, although not to his reading public at the time, that this is a true depiction of his early childhood. Here Wilson emphasises Dickens's use of his own memories in his novels to give the reader an insight into his life, something which would more likely be found in a separate biography for most writers.



A.N. Wilson (Photo: Sam Ardley)

In Chapter Five, *The Mystery of Public Readings*, Wilson asserts that when delivering a reading in America a member of the audience was "disappointed by them, because what he heard in the performance was not the Dickens he knew or the Dickensian characters he recognized..." Wilson offers Nabokov's suggestion that Dickens's 'voice' in his novels is the overriding ingredient that makes his readers bow to his enchantment, no matter what the subject. Despite our resistance to the obvious, as readers we are swept away by the narration, which in anyone else's hands would not result in the tears or laughter the piece demands. His readings are delivered with a 'frantic energy' and Wilson goes on to say that no theatre version or film could ever capture the 'voice' which he claims is the greater part of the reader's experience. That member of the American audience received something quite different emanating from the stage to that which he had discovered whilst reading Dickens in the usual manner.

One cannot underestimate the effect of Dickens's physical actions in portraying a scene for his audience and Wilson reflects that it is difficult to imagine any of Dickens's contemporaries – Thackeray, Trollope or Eliot doing anything similar with their own novels. The enchanter mesmerized his audience and succeeded in doing so at great cost to his own health.

In other chapters Wilson brings to the fore the author, the man himself, and concludes that Dickens understood the child within each of us; that in his novels he did more than any politician or newspaper reporter could hope to achieve; and that, as Wilson observes, "the default position of a sane person is to find life funny, rather than the reverse."

A brilliant book which sets Dickens before us, warts and all, his failed marriage, his affair with Ellen Ternan, the inevitable ravages of overwork, laudanum and frustration at the tardiness in bringing about social change. Wilson states that Dickens's portrayal of Dotheboys School under Wackford Squeers was something he could identify with when reflecting upon his own childhood and asserts that many people then and now recognized the 'katharsis through tears, but not through tears alone: that was what Dickens offered – offers – me, and millions upon millions of readers." Whilst there is much of Dickens revealed in this book there is equally much of Wilson, making it a thoroughly absorbing read.

Chris Ewer

Here our reviewers put some questions to A.N. Wilson:

Q. *The Mystery of Charles Dickens* brings out the differences between his personal and public persona. Does this mean that whilst you are an admirer of his books and writing, you are not an admirer of Dickens as a person?

A.N.W.: I feel very fond of Charles Dickens as a man. His is only an extreme example of the fact that we are all mixtures of good and bad. In his case, the mixture was highly creative, and he would not have been able, perhaps, to have written about Mr Daniel Quilp or the bullying Mr Murdstone or the furious murderous jealousy of Bradley Headstone had there not been some strange things happening inside his own soul. I only half believe, incidentally, in the sort of book, such as my own, which attempts to read an author's work in terms of their biography. The NOVELS are the great thing, not the life!

Q. How do we account for the continued popularity of Dickens's novels given that these days we know more about his private life, particularly concerning his treatment of Catherine and his subsequent adultery etc?

A.N.W.: Following on from that, how he treated his wife, or whether he had inconsistent views about prisons - both being kind and wishing to help the poor while also supporting pointless punishments in gaols - none of this matters. What we continue to respond to is Dickens's perception of life and human character. He speaks to the inner child in everyone. He also draws out, as so very few great writers do (Shakespeare excepted) that life, as well as being deep and tragic is also an hilarious experience, a panto.

Q. You mention the fact that Dickens is found re-enacting the death of Nancy months after the reading tours had finished. In being forced to bring them to a close, as it was feared they were killing him, could it not also be the case that this re-enactment in his garden displays his need of them. How much was giving up the tours his idea and how much other people's?

A.N.W.: His abandonment of the tours did indeed deprive him of something on which he fed. At the same time, he was being worn out by the excitement of the enactment of his work. His tours and their tragic aftermath were a parable of his entire life, which was a creative ball of fire.

Q. Could you elaborate on your feelings for Dickens regarding his differing views on rescuing fallen women against his somewhat reactionary views on the treatment of prisoners?

A.N.W.: He wanted to rescue fallen women for good and admirable reasons and like most Victorian men (most men?) he had a sentimental view of women, thinking they were purer, higher beings than themselves, and – if only they could be set on the path of righteousness, ie taught good housekeeping, they could find happiness, ie get married! I think his attitude to male prisoners was actually very divided – see above.

Q. Dickens's portrayal of women has constantly been criticized as unrealistic. Which female characters do you think are the most successful and why?

A.N.W.: He liked little child-women, such as Little Dorrit and Little Nell. Such women do exist! What those who have not read Dickens, or appreciated Dickens, fail to grasp is that his picture of human character is in fact often very realistic. The terrifying Mrs Clennam or Mrs Jo Gargery - they are completely real. The only Dickens woman a sane man would want to have married would have been Bella Wilfer. I am actually very much in love with her. Long before Freud, Dickens could see that the deepest relationship many men experience with a woman is not with their wives but with their daughters.

Our thanks to A.N.Wilson for this Q & A Session

**Talk by Professor John Mullan about his book
'The Artful Dickens. The Tricks and Ploys of the Great Novelist'
Wednesday 13th January, 2021**

John Mullan, Professor of English at University College London, and who has recently published a book on *The Artful Dickens*, gave us a fascinating insight into Dickens' skill that has been so often overlooked by those who see him merely as a "popular author."

To begin with, he showed us how Dickens was able to see things through the eyes of his characters in a way that needed no explanation. Thus Pip, in *Great Expectations*, can tell that the people in the room, people who have not yet spoken and whom he has just met, are "toadies and humbugs," in the way that a child can instinctively know these things. Or the way that David Copperfield describes falling drunkenly down stairs just as a drunk would, so that we do not need to be told that he was drunk.

Even more interesting was his analysis of Dickens's use of the present tense to create suspense. As Professor Mullan pointed out, whereas someone using the past tense knows how things will turn out, the use of the present tense leaves us guessing. This combined with his "as ifs" allow Dickens to bring in strange and fantastic images, as at the beginning of *Bleak House*:

'London. Michaelmas term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill.'

In *Great Expectations* he creates horror tinged with absurdity, again as a child would see it, when Pip sees: *'a gibbet, with some chains hanging on it which had once held a pirate. The man was limping on towards this latter as if he were the pirate come to life, and come down, and going back to hook himself up again.'*

Dickens liked the freedom his *as ifs* gave him. There are 266 of them in *Great Expectations*.



John Mullan

Professor Mullan saw *Dombey and Son* as pivotal, in that it is the first of Dickens' novels to use the present tense throughout a chapter. *Our Mutual Friend* and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* both have different chapters in the Past and Present tenses. In *Bleak House*, they alternate. As one of the participants said afterwards "I shall read Dickens from now on with new eyes, alert for the world seen through the eyes of his characters, for his fantastic *as ifs*, for his chapters in the present tense and for his conscious use of *chichés*." That will go for all of us who listened to Professor Mullan's talk.

A very interesting, thought-provoking evening.

David Longley

Knox's Knitted Novelties

At the present time with lockdowns and the like, many of us have turned to unexpected ways of passing the long hours indoors. Pam Knox, a Vice President of the Broadstairs branch, has come up with a very novel idea, which won't fail to bring a smile to your face. These figures have been crocheted by Pam and feature the characters in Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. My favourite has to be Marley with his chains! Great stuff – keep them coming Pam!



Great Expectations **Some interesting facts about the much-loved film and its Kent connections**

1947 saw the release of a big screen adaptation of *Great Expectations*. The director was David Lean. David Lean was already a celebrated director before he took on *Great Expectations*, with *In Which We Serve*, *Blithe Spirit* and *Brief Encounter* as early successes. After *Great Expectations* he went on to have a long catalogue of successful films including *Oliver Twist*, *Lawrence of Arabia*, *The Bridge Over the River Kwai* and *Doctor Zhivago*. He assembled a stellar cast for *Great Expectations* with John Mills as Pip, Alec Guinness as Herbert Pocket, Bernard Miles as Joe Gargery and Jean Simmons as the young Estella.

The film was shot in 1945 and used a number of locations including the North Kent marshes for the location of Joe Gargery's forge and where Magwitch first met Pip.

But how does this fit in with today? A few years ago, I inherited, from my Grandfather, a nice set of the complete works of Dickens, published in the 1930's. I was using these volumes to research a Dickens Fellowship quiz when, out of the *Great Expectations* volume, fell a number of newspaper cuttings. The cuttings were from 1945 and were about the filming of *Great Expectations* in Kent. The Dickens Fellowship received a couple of mentions, they had received a copy of the script and were happy with it (!) and then the Fellowship had bought a wooden plaque to put on Joe Gargery's forge.



There are also some cuttings about the steamer used for the abortive escape of Magwitch. Finally, the Mayor of Chatham at the time traded on his passing resemblance to Dickens on his visit to the set. (see picture above).

Andrew Stokes

Ken's Corner by Ken Nickoll

Charles Dickens had a 15-year love affair with the Duchess of Kent. "The Duchess of Kent?" I hear you gasp. "Queen Victoria's mother? That can't possibly be true. We would surely have heard about such a scandal."

Well hear me out. Dickens *did* have a long relationship with the Duchess of Kent but not the one you're thinking of. It was with a little paddle steamer named in honour of the German princess.

The steamboat plied its trade between London and Thanet between 1836 and 1852 – exactly the period in which Dickens spent most of his summers writing and relaxing in Broadstairs. He visited his favourite watering place on the Thanet coast 20 times, staying a total of around 700 days in rented holiday homes or the Albion Hotel.

There were several paddle steamers he could have used for the journey from London Bridge wharf to the Kent coast but the Duchess of Kent was his favourite and he travelled on her on numerous occasions.

Whilst others boats concluded their journey in Margate, the Duchess continued on to Ramsgate. As the ship passed Broadstairs her captain would signal to the village's boatmen that there were passengers wanting to be taken off. A boat would row out and collect Dickens, his family and their luggage and land them on the little pier. This saved them from having to hire coaches at either Margate or Ramsgate for the journey on to Broadstairs.

During his holiday in 1839, he wrote to a friend who was coming to stay with him with these instructions: "Take a Ramsgate boat from the London Bridge wharf at nine precisely. Say when you draw near here that you are for Broadstairs, and come ashore in the boat that will come along-side for you." And in a letter from Broadstairs in 1849, he told another friend: "I will come up tomorrow by the Duchess of Kent boat, which leaves Ramsgate at 10."

We have a description of what it was like aboard the paddle steamer from another holidaymaker who travelled from London to Ramsgate in 1837. Frederick Bengé wrote in his diary: "The name of our vessel was the Duchess of Kent. She provided a very fair breakfast, at a very fair price, and a ditto dinner. The first consisting of cold meat, coffee, tea and toast and the latter of beef and mutton, boiled and roast together with all the necessary etceteras and appendages . . . the drinkables were porter, ale, stout, wine and brandy (gin in the lower saloon)".

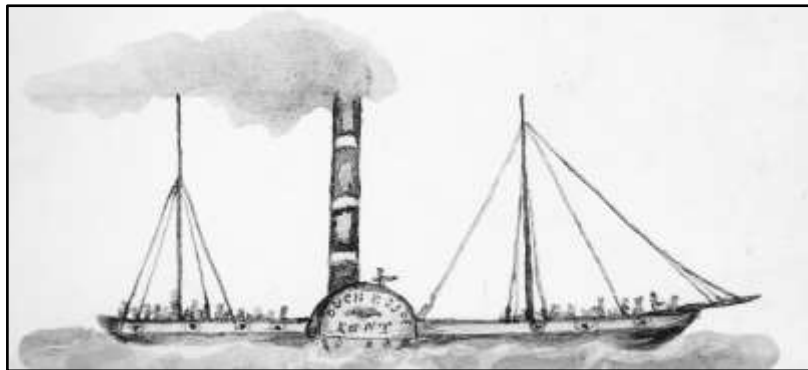
In 1852 Dickens was shocked by the news that the Duchess of Kent had been lost following a terrible collision with another paddle steamer in the Thames. Most of the passengers were rescued by passing boats with only a handful of lives lost. One newspaper reported: "The crash was frightful and the Duchess of Kent was nearly cut in two. Among the passengers were a large number of ladies with children who were seen clinging to various parts of the sinking ship."

By coincidence an old Broadstairs friend of Dickens was aboard the Duchess and had a miraculous escape. George Hale, then aged 74, was the proprietor of the Broadstairs Assembly Rooms and Royal Kent Library (now the Charles Dickens bars and restaurant) to which Dickens had been a frequent visitor. Hale was an ill man and was unable to leave his seat on the deck. When the ship went down

he went down with it. The newspaper story continued: “A gentleman named Hale, brewer, of Broadstairs, who, being infirm, could not be reached, and, still remaining on his seat, went down with the vessel, which in a few minutes sunk, bow first, almost perpendicularly.”

Amazingly, after several long minutes, Hale reappeared on the surface after popping up like a cork. The report concluded: “Mr Hale, although unable to assist himself while on board the vessel, most extraordinary to relate, the moment he reached the water struck out and kept afloat until reached by one of the boats.” The trauma of the accident brought a further deterioration in Hales’ health. He was obliged to sell the Broadstairs Assembly Rooms and died in 1854.

Efforts to salvage the Duchess were unsuccessful and she was broken up for scrap. The loss of his favourite ship may be one of the reasons Dickens ceased taking his holidays in Broadstairs. After the sinking he only returned to the resort twice, in 1859 and 1861 for a total of seven days.



An 1837 painting of Dickens’ favourite paddle steamer, the Duchess of Kent



A drawing of the sinking of the Duchess in the Thames in 1852

Ken Nickoll

'Visualising Mrs. Gamp': a talk by Dr. Tony Williams. 3rd February, 2021

Dr. Williams seized upon the senses of his very large zoom audience. He had our heroine, Sarah Gamp, step down from among a teeming throng of characters, just one of the two thousand engendered by that 'powerful locomotive': Dickens's imagination. Thus introduced, wielding 'a species of gig umbrella', Sairey Gamp took possession of our eyes, ears and noses.

The image that first met the eye and ear was memorable: '... a fat old woman, this Mrs Gamp, with a husky voice and a moist eye, which she had a remarkable power of turning up, and only showing the white of it. Having very little neck, it cost her some trouble to look over herself, if one may say so, at those to whom she talked. She wore a very rusty black gown, rather the worse for snuff, and a shawl and bonnet to correspond.' To experience her voice, you were advised to take a comb and tissue paper and attempt to sing into it - but only after taking a large pinch of snuff. Mrs. Gamp had a singular style of pronunciation, bidding Mr. Pecksniff to: 'leave the bottle on the chimleypiece, and let me put my lips to it when I am so disposed.' Finally, our noses were engaged: 'it was difficult to enjoy her society without becoming conscious of a smell of spirits'. Her own nose was 'somewhat red and swollen' but always ready to sniff out new business, for 'she went to a lying-in or a laying-out with equal zest and relish,' always keeping an eye 'on the bride and the future'.



The character of Sarah Gamp part-originated in a real person: Dickens's friend, the philanthropist Angela Burdett Coutts, engaged a nurse for her sick companion Hannah Meredith and it was from accounts of this nurse that Mrs. Gamp acquired the habit of drawing her nose along the top of a fire fender and her love of cucumbers. She also provided Dickens with a vehicle for his preface polemics on the lack of good nursing care and sanitary provision in poor people's houses. The war in the Crimea was to inspire Florence Nightingale to transform a profession that, under the 'Mrs Prig School of Nursing' had Sarah Gamp 'administer the patient's medicine by the simple process of clutching his windpipe to make him gasp, and immediately pouring it down his throat.'

The Sarah Gamp who in 1843 stepped off the page of Part 8 (chapter 19) of *Martin Chuzzlewit* was first drawn by Hablôt Browne, whose pseudonym Phiz (punned from physiognomy) mirrored Dickens's early pen name of Boz. Sairey's

'fizzog' and whole persona, with that of Mrs. Prig, was marvellously conveyed by Hablôt Browne in his illustration of this pair of scandalous nurses, every detail, down to the gig umbrella by the 'chimleypiece' and precisely faithful to Dickens's text – as he demanded of all his illustrators. Phiz illustrations featured her in an issue of Dickens' character postage stamps in which Mr. Micawber carried the highest value: recognition at last!

Phiz brought the exuberance of the characters to the first editions; subsequent illustrators interpreted Sairey differently. Fred Barnard (1846-96) (Punch, Illustrated London News) brought more realism to her portrayal but had to keep an eye on the Phiz originals, because Dickens's readers' expectations had been established. Barnard, however, had the advantage over Hablôt Browne of being able to read the whole text, in advance.

Sir John Tenniel (Punch magazine) known for his 'Alice' illustrations and his political cartoons, lampooned Lord Aberdeen as Mrs. Gamp, en route to a nursing post in the Crimea. 'Kyd', (Joseph Clayton Clarke, 1859 - 1900) painted her in watercolours and printed her on cigarette cards. In 1864 Millais featured her broolly in 'Little Mrs Gamp' and William Geldart depicted her in a set of prints. She had become collectible.

In the twentieth century the political cartoonists took charge of her: the Daily Mirror's 'Vicky' portrayed her, alongside Giles, Ronald Searle, Osbert Lancaster and Ardizzone, in R.J. Cruickshank's collection 'The Humour of Dickens'.

Sairey's dramatic persona was recognised twice in the silent movies (1912, 1914) and, much later, in performances by Angela Baddeley and Pauline Collins for BBC adaptations. But the most memorable interpretation of this bibulous old nurse came from Dickens himself, in twenty eight performances, with a letter opener to assist his rendition of Sairey drawing her nose along the fender. Dickens had to be mindful of his prurient public, which frequently considered Sarah Gamp improper: young girls were swiftly ushered from the room during his readings and his own prompt copy is heavily over-scored (copy in NYPL).

Dr. Williams closed his talk with an image of Mrs. Gamp as a Toby Jug and of the oft invoked but never seen Mrs Harris as a name on a tablet – just such a size as Sairey might have induced her patient to swallow!

Liane Blades

“In this life we want nothing but Facts sir, nothing but Facts”

(Thomas Gradgrind in 'Hard Times')

In this section we highlight true facts about Dickens himself, his circle, his works and the times he lived in.

When work began in 1829 building Trafalgar Square in London many shops and small roads were cleared away as was the Royal Mews, which eventually was housed behind Buckingham Palace. Between the Mews and Charing Cross was the Golden Cross Inn, a well-known coaching inn. It provided the scene in *David*

Copperfield when David meets Mr Peggotty and also as the starting point for the initial outing of the Pickwick Club in *Pickwick Papers*. The scene, described by Mr Pickwick, was thought to be based on a real occurrence at the Golden Cross Inn:

“Heads, heads –take care of your heads! Cried the loquacious stranger, as they came out under the low archway, which in those days formed the entrance to the coach yard. “Terrible place – dangerous work – other day – five children – mother – tall lady – eating sandwiches – forgot the arch – crash – knock – children look round – mother’s head off – sandwich in her hand – no mouth to put it in – head of a family off – shocking, shocking.”

From the Editor

Many of us agree that zoom meetings have certainly served to bring the branches of the Dickens Fellowship closer together. From the USA, the UK, and Europe, branches have been able to reach out to those who otherwise they would not have known and never contemplated chatting to - one of the only good things to come out of a pandemic!

Just how good zoom meetings are was firmly established on the evening of 6th February with Central’s Birthday Celebrations introduced by our President Ian Dickens with Gerald Dickens giving the results of the Reading Competition. It was a truly memorable event and for us here in Broadstairs doubly so as two of our entries were announced as winners: Val Whitehouse and Alan Root. (see picture).



Congratulations to each of them and to the other two winners, Jennifer Emerson from New York and Crispin Ridge from Birmingham. With readings from A Christmas Carol, *Pickwick Papers*, *David Copperfield* and *Our Mutual Friend* it was undoubtedly a true representation of the diversity of Dickens’s works and a fitting birthday tribute. With Gerald Dickens’s wonderful reading of “Mr Minns and his Cousin” it was a truly memorable event.

The next few months may be uncertain but zoom meetings will continue here at Broadstairs with speakers such as **Lucinda Hawksley**, **Jennifer Ide** from Gad’s Hill, **Ian Dickens** our President, and **Mark Dickens** amongst others. We hope you will join us and as always the email to contact for a link to these is info@broadstairsdickensfellowship.com A warm welcome awaits you here.

Chris Ewer
Editor,
March 2021

