

NEWSLETTER

SPECIAL BICENTENARY EDITION

APRIL 2012



As President of the Bristol and Clifton Dickens Society, I was invited to represent our members at two prestigious events in London to celebrate the life of Charles Dickens. There have been many celebrations all over the world, and in our society we had a wonderful party at Lionel's house on the actual day of the anniversary of Dickens's birth, Tuesday 7th February 2012. It was very well attended, and once again Liz made a wonderful birthday cake.

There were readings on 6th February at Red Maids Junior

School - which was having a Dickens week - and we watched a dramatic concert involving children of all ages: very exciting. On the morning of the 7th our group read in the Central Library, and Lionel appeared on television; and on the Saturday I spoke about our society on Radio Bristol. It was a very busy week.

The following week, on Monday February 13th I went with my daughter, Sarah, to London where we stayed at a very special hotel for two nights. It was an amazing privilege to have been asked to attend the Guildhall in the Livery Hall in the evening for a talk by Claire Tomalin about her book, 'Charles Dickens - A Life'. This was followed by a reception in the Crypts where an orchestra played while we were offered drinks and canapes. It was good to meet so many people and to see the Lord Mayor of London and all his retinue in full regalia.

In the evening of the following day I took a taxi to Buckingham Palace. I had heard that there would be 300 guests and that people were coming from all over the world. As you would expect, I was nervous as I was on my own. However, once inside and going up the staircase, I saw people from other branches. Everyone had felt as I had. It was such a relief to meet old friends. The atmosphere was very happy.

We congregated in the Picture Gallery where there were a number of tables exhibiting items about Dickens from the Royal Collection. Here we were plied with drinks and delicious canapes. Soon we were asked to hand in our glasses and progress to the Blue Drawing room where we were announced and met with handshakes by the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh. Everyone was welcomed and we were able to say a few words. It was something I never thought I would do. We then chatted to people and there were many celebrities whom I recognised.

The next day was the Changing of the Guard at Buckingham Palace - but being rather tired after all the excitement, I did not go down with Sarah!

Home again in the afternoon. It was good to reflect on a wonderful celebration and to be very happy that the Bristol and Clifton Dickens Society is so vibrant and that so many of us are reading Dickens and keeping his memory green in the present day.

Sally Draper Fry

Under this Roof



The programme for Doors Open Day on the tenth of September 2011 featured some new venues, open to the public for the first time. One of these was the Julian Trust Night Shelter in Little Bishop Street, St. Paul's. This seemed to me a very interesting opportunity for a visit. No doubt we are fortunate to be able to see many places of outstanding architectural interest and beauty in our city, but it can be refreshing to take a change from your majestic staircases, Victorian tiled floors and ornately moulded plasterwork ceilings.

On walking into the Night Shelter, the visitor enters a great bare hall, with plain walls painted cream. Running the full length of the room are rows of beds, of the traditional hospital bed type, neatly covered with plain blue counterpanes. None of your grand style here! The place is nevertheless a historic building, having once been the St. Paul's Sugar House. The street where it is situated was first known, in the nineteenth century, as Victoria Street, a little row of just four houses.

The cream walls were, in fact, not quite bare, for a display of news-cuttings from the local press told of Meg Grimes, the founder of the Shelter, who died suddenly in May 2011, aged sixty-five. The most moving aspect of this display was the tributes from some of the many whose lives she had

touched. All spoke of her attentive listening, her respect towards each person and her great kindness, combined with a firm, no nonsense approach. Many had thought of her as a personal friend; their love and respect for her was very evident, their sense of bereavement very real.

Such were one's first impressions of this place of refuge. A warm welcome was given by the volunteers, and those visiting could take a little time to reflect, and read notices, savouring the atmosphere as we enjoyed good, strong cups of tea and some nice cake. In due course we assembled together to begin a guided tour.

We started our tour in the dormitory, as already described, passing from there into a clothing store. Here it was explained that the donated women's clothes tended to come in larger sizes, and styles more suited to older women, whereas the biggest demand was for younger, more fashionable clothes: many of the homeless women who have need of shelter make an effort to dress with care and imagination. We were shown also the laundry, this of course being an indispensable facility, where clothes can be washed and dried overnight. On from there to a small room resembling an outsized airing cupboard, with shelves floor to ceiling storing towels and

blankets, many of these made from hand knitted squares in bright colours. One further storage area was for foods: here were supplies of such basic necessities as tea bags, pasta, rice and everyday tinned foods such as baked beans and soups. We heard that stocks were much depleted, but it was hoped they would soon be replenished by more donations, many from churches who would be celebrating harvest festivals.

Lastly we saw the kitchen, where about ninety hot meals are prepared each evening. We heard that the team of volunteers have got the kitchen routine off to a fine art, the result of long practice! We also heard that they have a lot of fun. Many of the volunteers have worked there since the shelter first opened in 1986. We were told that if more could be found to join the team, more beds could be provided, and that there is an increasing need for them: the fact remains that the work is done with dedication and with a real love of the people who come in under that roof on a cold winter's night. We were moved to hear of the gratitude and innate courtesy of the vast majority of them, a notion that would have been dear to the heart of Dickens, who described several such people. I feel proud that our Society supports the Julian Trust.

Lorna Hughes

Dostoevsky and Dickens

Saturday 24th March...



Dostoevsky

There has been some dispute in the press and among scholars about the truth of the claim in both Claire Tomalin's and Michael Slater's biographies of Dickens that Dickens and Dostoevsky met in 1862, with articles entitled, for instance, 'When Dickens Met Dostoevsky (Maybe)'.

The confusion seems to spring from an article in 'The Dickensian' in 2002, which cites a letter supposedly written in 1878, by Dostoevsky to S.D. Yanovsky, in which he claims to have met Dickens, and that Dickens told him :

'all the good simple people in his novels, Little Nell, even the holy simpletons like Barnaby Rudge (this must surely be very much Dostoevsky's description of Barnaby rather than Dickens's, one feels - Michael Slater), are what he wanted to have been, and his villains were what he was (or rather what he found in himself) ...'

It is claimed that this comes from a 'translation' from a letter of which there is no Russian original. Sarah J. Young, a lecturer in Russian at the UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies, asserts that the source of the letter is dubious. If this letter did exist, it is inconceivable that it would not have been included in the 'Complete Works' (1988). 'One can only conclude that the letter isn't genuine, which is rather sad, because the idea of the two men meeting is so wonderful,' she avers.

Keep your eyes and ears open for further developments on this subject in the press and on the radio/TV.



At 6.08 am my telephone rang, and a voice - I still don't know whose - said "Dickens's Countryside. Radio 4. Now." Without more ado I put the phone down and the radio on, and listened to Open Country, an exploration of the importance of the Kent landscape to Charles Dickens. Cooling and the thirteen child lozenges, The Hulks, the flat land. The dangerous marshes - "a sea of grass" and hugely changeable with the changing weather conditions - spectacularly hazardous. Cobham Hall Estate, a red-brick mansion dating back to pre-Elizabethan times: owned by the Earls of Darnley - Dickens knew the sixth Earl after he bought Gads Hill. The house is now, like Gads Hill, a girls' school. One of the speakers was born there, lived there until she was five (1955), later went back there as a schoolgirl, and still lives in the village. The Leather Bottle Inn at Cobham. And two Gads Hill schoolgirls were interviewed. One said that being there made them think of Dickens's amazing personality and gave them inspiration to believe that they can accomplish what they want if they try hard enough.

Morse had managed to complete two complete days' furlough, had re-read 'Bleak House' ...

chapter 60 - 'The Jewel that was Ours' - Colin Dexter

Dickens at the Lion, a Charles Dickens' bi-centenary celebration, was a perfect weekend, with staff - and Shrewsbury Town Guides, who attended each day - dressing in Victorian costume: and fires were lit in the two fire places in the magnificent 18th century ballroom, for the first time in 50 years!

On Friday evening, at 8 o'clock, the presenter exclaimed 'Mr. Dickens is Coming!' and extended his hand to Gerald Dickens who strode down the central aisle to begin the evening's entertainment - a light-hearted and varied look at the life and character of Charles Dickens, including scenes from his work, diary extracts and observations from those who knew and worked with him. It was splendid, and contained an astonishing amount of information, describing Dickens' passion for all things theatrical, his constant striving for perfection - he would rehearse a reading up to 300 times and when arriving at a venue, check each aspect of staging, lighting and acoustics by having someone move through every part of it to ensure he could adjust his voice so that everyone would hear. The evening was conducted with Gerald's own enthusiasm and his ability to change in half a second from one character to another. In describing how Dickens's family life, his professional life and acute observations of people he met and streets he walked, had influenced his writing and creation of characters, Gerald moved through scenes with David Copperfield - The Micawbers, and Uriah Heep at a tremendous gallop, and with Scrooge and his nephew - A Christmas Carol was a central theme of the weekend.

Gerald said so often Dickens's characters were based on someone he knew, and in a question time, was asked whether, as Dickens's characters seemed so often to be caricatures, could they ever have been real people? Gerald felt this confirmed they were, as a good caricature embodied the essence of a person, and really that was what Dickens was presenting to his readers. Gerald managed, in his asides, to give glimpses of how he approached performing Dickens's work. After an interval where he mixed and talked with the audience, he read from the first part of A Christmas Carol.

Saturday gave us Sikes and Nancy. Gerald explained that most of Dickens's readings were safe, well known, and often comic passages, but he had, for years, wanted to introduce a reading on Sikes and Nancy. He performed it first for his family, and friends, who advised against making it a public reading, fearing audiences would be horrified and stay away from his readings. When an actress gave Dickens the answer he wanted 'How could you not perform it? It must be done.' he did it, to great acclaim. He judged his success by how many fainting women were carried out. Clifton won - with some 20 carried out of his reading here. Performance of this piece was exhausting: he might lie on a sofa for half an hour afterwards to recover and found a dozen oysters and champagne were the best restoratives. After his own performance, Gerald looked as if he would welcome a dozen oysters and champagne too.



Charles Dickens once said of The Lion...
"...we have the strangest little rooms, the ceilings of which I can touch with my hand. The windows bulge out over the street, as if they were little stern windows in a ship and a door opens out of the sitting room onto a little open gallery with plants in it where one leans over a queer old rail and looks all down hill and slantwise at the crookedest old black and yellow houses..."

Shrewsbury was the location for filming A Christmas Carol in 1984, with George C. Scott as Scrooge. It was an enormous event for the town, with 485 local people being involved. Most of the crew and cast stayed at The Lion, and auditions for Tiny Tim and other youngsters were held there. Local historian David Trumper gave an excellent illustrated talk on its making - how shop fronts and houses were transformed, local firms helped in construction, and costumes. Tons of artificial snow were used (at £200 ton, to be swept up and thrown away afterwards) and the mist machine must have been on for the whole month they were there. As a token towards economy, the hundreds of pork pies displayed had no filling in them. Such attention to detail!

Afterwards, town guides took parties to locations used in the film. For authenticity, a backdrop of St. Paul's Cathedral was set behind Bob Cratchit's cottage. By the time we watched the film in the afternoon, London and Shrewsbury were so entwined in my mind, that when Bob Cratchit left Scrooge's office on Christmas Eve, I was concerned as to how he was going to get back to Shrewsbury and his cottage for Christmas Day.

The film crew left Scrooge's grave stone in St. Chad's Churchyard. But with no note of explanation. Perhaps some tourists will look at it in bewilderment, wondering why Scrooge was buried in Shrewsbury and not London, and anyway, he wasn't a real person..... was he?

Margaret Wright

The bi-centenary celebrations really started at the end of 2011. Appropriate, really, since Dickens was born so early in 1812.

December 8th: for us, where the fun started with Malcolm Andrews' superb rendition of "A Christmas Carol", read from a copy of Dickens's own 'reading version', which was signed by Cedric Dickens.

December 9th: Radio 3's "The Verb" - Malcolm was in a discussion on Dickens in Performance and chose excerpts, read by Charles Dance.

December 11th: A celebratory "Songs of Praise" with a number of familiar faces and voices - including those of Thelma Groves, Tony Williams, Gerald Dickens and Lucinda Dickens-Hawksley.

December 12th-16th: "Book of the Week" choice was Claire Tomalin's new book: abridged, of course, to fit into the five fifteen minute slots, but a joy to listen to in the beautiful voice of Penelope Wilton.

December 14th: Lucinda Dickens-Hawksley spoke in Henleaze Library about her great great grandfather, while copies of her new book on him were on sale from a Durdham Downs Bookshop stall. Lucinda had been asked to write a non-academic but accessible biography, and this she has done, in association with The Charles Dickens Museum, London. It is a pictorial book, unsurprising since Lucinda's speciality is history of art, and contains pockets with removable facsimile documents from Dickens's personal archives. This means lifting the book with care so that nothing drops out. It is, however, a fine tome, and good for use with children.

December 19th -23rd: Radio 4 Xtra broadcast "The Writer's Dickens". Each night writers gave their personal responses to Dickens, and spoke about how they had been influenced by him.

December 26th - 30th: Radio 4's "Afternoon Drama" was Mike Walker's five part dramatisation of "A Tale of Two Cities" - thoroughly enjoyable.



December 26th - 30th: Radio 4 Xtra put on a dramatisation of "A House to Let"; a collaborative short story, written by Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, Elizabeth Gaskell and Adelaide Proctor, and published in Household Words. This was the Christmas Story of 1858. It was to have been written by Dickens and Collins, but Dickens decided to invite the two women to contribute chapters. Dickens and Collins wrote the first and last chapters, while Elizabeth Gaskell contributed "The Manchester Marriage" chapter and Adelaide Proctor "Three Evenings in the House". (We shall be

discussing this story in our Holiday Reading group in May.

There were several TV versions of novels, including the new "Great Expectations". One day I sat through three TV versions of Dickens's novels - "Nicholas Nickleby", "David Copperfield", and "A Tale of Two Cities".

The new year brought further radio dramatisations, some in hour-long instalments, others in 15 minute slots. Thanks to the BBC iPlayer, I managed to listen to them all. What a Dickensian feast we had!

Cheltenham Literature Festival always offers a wealth of interesting and challenging speakers and guests. In 2011 a talk by Claire Tomalin about her biography on Dickens proved to be no exception. It was presented in the form of an interview of Miss Tomalin by John Carey, Emeritus Merton Professor of English at Oxford University.

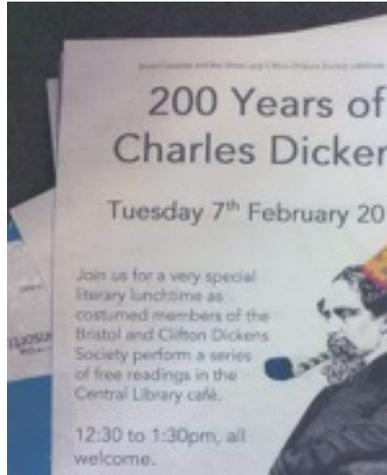
He was particularly interested in Dickens's early life, asking about her account of his grandparents, Elizabeth and William Dickens, who worked as servants of the Crewe family, dividing their time between Crewe Hall and Mayfair. Elizabeth was much younger William, and Dickens's father, John, was born after William died. It has been implied that William was not John's father, and as a consequence, felt he deserved a more elegant lifestyle than that of a servant. This may be why he was rather profligate with money, and ended up in The Marshalsea debtors' prison. He may have suffered delusions of grandeur, being only too aware of the lifestyle of the Crewes by whom he was favoured and recommended to George Canning, at the Navy Pay office. Was John Dickens's father a member of the Crewe family, or one of the many rich visitors to Crewe Hall? This interesting slant on Dickens's early life gave much food for thought.

Dickens's mother, Elizabeth Barrow, also came under scrutiny. She, too, enjoyed a lavish lifestyle. Her father Charles, had to flee the country, when it was discovered that he had been defrauding the Navy Pay Office. He went to Ireland, and then to The Isle of Man, where he ended his days. Despite her father's criminal activities, Elizabeth named her first son after him. One of Charles' cousins became Lord Mayor of Bristol. All can be found in Claire Tomalin's biography, which promises to be a fascinating read. EF

Wiltshire Women's Institute

On Friday 23rd March a group of ten of us (including Jim Cemlyn-Jones, son of Pat and Morys) went over to Westbury, Wiltshire to do some outreadings for the Wiltshire Women's Institutes, who were celebrating their bi-centenary. We did some short readings in the morning, followed by a talk by Tony Williams in which he focused, unsurprisingly, on Dickens's attitudes to women. At lunch time we were out in the sun looking out over Westbury White Horse. And in the afternoon we did our version of "The Tuggses of Ramsgate". Our efforts were appreciated as not only were we applauded on stage, but when we walked through the hall to sit at the back to listen to Tony's second contribution, we were spontaneously clapped a second time. The afternoon ended with a sing-song of songs from Lionel Bart's "Oliver".

To make all this happen, Pat Cemlyn-Jones negotiated with The Women's Institute and Eve Fitt directed the readings.



Bristol Central Library

As Sally mentioned in her lead article...

"On the morning of the 7th our group read in the Central Library..."

... This proved to be another highly successful event - with a large and receptive audience giving both the performers, and the audience, a lot of enjoyment.



Readers at The Wiltshire Women's Institute

Staying at The Lion Hotel, Shrewsbury

I was lucky enough to join my sister Frankie, at the Dickens in Shrewsbury weekend at the Lion Hotel. The event was doubly enjoyable because Terry and Margret Wright were also there. Owner Howard Astbury showed Frankie and me the rooms in which Dickens stayed - they were in the very oldest part of the hotel and hugely atmospheric. Any member wishing to stay there should mention their membership of The Bristol and Clifton Dickens Society and should be offered an advantageous booking rate. The whole ambience of the place - rooms, staff, service, were first class. Sadly the hotel is for sale - new owners will have a tough job before them if they are to attain the personability (my word!) that made our stay such a pleasure.

Don Hill



Frankie visiting Dickens's suite with owner Howard Astbury

'HARD TIMES' AND 'WHAT THE DICKENS'

The Tobacco Factory

The Old Vic Theatre School staged an excellent production of 'Hard Times' at the Tobacco Factory in December. Despite their youth, the cast portrayed the older and more staid characters extremely well, the characters of Bounderby and Mrs Sparsit being exceptionally good. Inevitably a long book has to be condensed to be presented as a stage play, and this can often lead to a thin, 'bare-bones' plot. The talented Theatre School overcame this by using the whole cast, acting as a chorus, to fill in sections of the story, thus preventing the pace from slowing down, and keeping the action moving smoothly along. The action took place on a minimalist set, as the relatively small area had to be many scenes, from the village school to the Gradgrinds' sitting room, to Bounderby's house and the workplace of the townspeople. The circus was very well portrayed, adding colour to the proceedings. The production maintained the atmosphere of the northern town and its characters, giving us the bleakness and tragedy of their lives, as Dickens intended.

'Hard Times' is not often dramatised, which is a pity. As this production showed, the only novel of Dickens not set in London, can still show Dickens' concern with poor conditions and the plight of the working classes. Well done to the excellent cast!

The second part of the evening then cheered us all up. Some of the actors from 'Hard Times' presented forty five minutes of songs and recitations called 'What the Dickens'. There were songs and playlets based on Dickens' work, with witty twists, and slightly irreverent allusions, which delighted the audience, rounding off a very entertaining evening. EF

EXHIBITIONS - PAST PRESENT AND FUTURE

The exhibition "**Dickens and London**" is still on at The Museum of London. This building I didn't know. It is easily walkable from St Paul's Cathedral - you go through "Little Britain" on your way. The museum, a modern building, came into being at roughly the same time as The Barbican development took place. It concentrates on things to do with London, hence the title of this exhibition - well worth a visit.

I was lucky, earlier in the year, to get to the - free - "**A Hankering After Ghosts**" exhibition at The British Library. It concentrated on anything connected with the supernatural, for example The Ghost Club - founded in 1836, whose members included at different times, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and W B Yeats: Mesmerism and animal magnetism - a supposed magnetic fluid believed to be present in all human beings, which could be manipulated by the mesmerist: The Terrific Register, a penny weekly which included stories of murder, ghosts cannibalism: and so on...

There is an exhibition "**Charles Dickens: 200 Years**", at the Cadbury Research Library, Muirhead Tower Atrium, University of Birmingham B15 2TT (tel: 0121 414 5839. E-mail special_collection@bham.ac.uk). This includes rare book and manuscript material.

An Innovative piece of sculpture, "**The Dog and Pot**", will be installed in Southwark during the course of this year. It will be situated on the corner of Blackfriars Road and Union Street. A "Dog and Pot" sign existed there between the end of the 18th century and 1931. Dickens passed it regularly as he walked home from his work in the Blacking Factory to his lodgings in Lant Street, Southwark.

On June 18th there will be a one-day conference and symposium at the Victoria and Albert Museum of Childhood, Cambridge Heath Road, Bethnal Green, E2 9PA: www.museumofchildhood.org.uk. 020 8983 5200.

A friend, who works there, sent this picture of the window display in the Waterstone's Bookshop in Harrogate.



Morse remembered when he'd first read 'Bleak House' (still to his mind, the greatest novel in the English language) he'd deliberately decelerated his reading as the final pages grew ever thinner beneath his fingers. Never had he wanted to hang on to a story so much.'

Chapter 14 - 'The Wench is Dead' - Colin Dexter

Sebastian Faulks

Of his mother, Faulks says: 'My mother knew all of Dickens backwards. Those characters were real people to her.'

And Dickens had a great influence on Faulks himself: 'After university (Cambridge) he spent a year in Bristol writing a novel. "From the age of about fourteen I had made up my mind. I was inspired by Dickens and D. H. Lawrence among others. I set my heart on being a novelist at that young age".

Miriam Margolyes

On "Desert Island Discs", having just announced that she was gay, Miriam Margolyes said: "I do have a man in my life, though - his name is Charles Dickens".

Excerpt from a letter from a Polish friend:

"As you mentioned 'A Christmas Carol' by Charles Dickens, I must admit it is my most favourite novel by him. In the English course within Poznan U3A we have been discussing, with a true delight, how the writer perfectly knew human characters, needs and weaknesses. We read in an article that he managed to awaken social conscience by the story of Tiny Tim, and inspire people to become more sensitive to disabled children, what was rather unpopular in the Victorian epoch. The descriptions of the four ghosts indicate on his great imagination and psychological knowledge." FS

FROM MICHAEL DARLING (Susan Ham's Brother)

"Fan the sinking flame of hilarity with the wing of friendship; and pass the rosy wine."

Dick Swiveller - The Old Curiosity Shop.

"Let us be merry. It is a poor heart that never rejoices,"

Mr Pecksniff - Martin Chuzzlewit.

Dear Lionel,

Although I am not able to be with you for the Dickens Birthday party on the 7th, I thought I would send you and the members of the Society my best wishes for a very happy day celebrating "the Immortal Memory". Susan keeps me in touch with the Society's activities and it looks as if



you are going to have a busy year. I couldn't resist sending you this card of Lincolnshire's very own Old Curiosity Shop (in Stamford, I believe) yes, it is an impostor, but probably one you don't know about.

After two hundred years Dickens' reputation is no longer in doubt. He towers over nineteenth century English literature and with the passing of the years we get to understand him more clearly for to quote Dickens in "The Seven Poor Travellers" 'Our whole life ... is a story more or less intelligible - generally less; but we shall read it by a calmer light when it is ended.'

Ann and I are going to London to visit Dickensian sights and the exhibition at the Museum of London at the beginning of March for a few days. We hope to take in some of the celebrations through the year (hopefully the Dinner at the Clifton Club?). I'm enclosing flyers for the Dickens events we've had here, including one I hoped to organise at the Watermill I'm working at.

Have a good day on 7th.

Regards - **Michael Darling**

Bristol & Clifton Dickens Society

(www.dickens-society.org)

Applications for membership (£15 per year) should be sent to
Liz Croucher at 38 Church Road, Easton-in-Gordano, Bristol BS20 0NB

COPY DATE FOR THE NEXT NEWSLETTER - 24th JULY 2012

Contact Frankie or Eve with your news

Frankie Sahni, 71 Maple Road, Horfield, BRISTOL BS7 8RE

Eve Fitt: 19 Berkeley Road, Bishopston, Bristol BS7 8HF