

The Dickens Fellowship, North East England

*The Occasional* **BLEATER**

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PART I:  
*Dickens and McLeod (Gateshead Branch)...*

Dear fellow Dickensians,

It is a year since our Conference. How time flies. The 2009 Annual Conference of the Dickens Fellowship takes place from the 30<sup>th</sup> July until 5<sup>th</sup> August in Cleveland in the United States. We send our best wishes to our colleagues in the Cleveland Branch, and trust that they will enjoy hosting the Conference as much as we did!

As most of you will know, we have been very busy over the past few months. In May we were invited to take part in a widely advertised open day welcoming the people of the North East to come and talk to representatives from local Historical and Heritage groups in the magnificent setting of the converted 12 century church of St Mary. We were there to fly the flag for North East branch of the Dickens Fellowship.

We were allocated a spot in the corner of the room which afforded us a lovely view of the interior of the Church. We set up our stall aided by the splendid display stand supplied by Ruth and laid out our wares proclaiming to all the presence of our branch in the North East. The local tour guides expressed interest in the leaflet Ruth had created on Dickens in Newcastle and they were particularly keen to include reference in their walks to the Blue Plaque dedicated to Dickens attendance at the theatre in Nelson Street. We also took the opportunity to encourage people to attend our evening of Dickensian entertainment the following Friday in the same venue.

Friday evenings entertainment was packed full of contributions from our Branch members. Chris Robson opened proceedings with a humorous and detailed background on the Life and Times of Dickens which was ably followed by Chris Mcloughin and Evelyn Timperley's splendid readings from a passage from Mr Pickwick which was warmly received by the very attentive audience. Our newest member Michaela read *The Goblins who stole a Sexton*, from *Pickwick Papers*, a piece that was particularly relevant given the setting of the old church amongst the centuries-old headstones. Several other Mr Pickwick sketches followed, starring, amongst others, Herbert, Yvonne, Lynn and Carolyn, and the evening was rounded off by a well received, informative and light hearted talk from Ruth on Charles Dickens and his links to the North East. Following the success of these two events we have been invited to take part in another event on Saturday 5th December.

Early in July our Branch was honoured by an invitation to a Tea Party hosted by the Mayor of Gateshead, Councillor John Eagle, which was held to celebrate contributions to the Community made by the Voluntary and Heritage Sector over the past year. Michaela and I were proud to attend on your behalf and took the opportunity to mingle with some delightful people with such diverse interests as Campanology, Victorian music and local hospital radio. This was a timely recognition of the increased awareness of our Branch activities and our collective and individual promotion of Mr Charles John Huffman Dickens within the North East. So to you all I say, please take a bow.

Yours in Fellowship

Anne McLeod (Branch Secretary)

PART II:  
*Dickens and Bleater (Publishers)...*

**From *The Tattlesnivel Bleater* to *The Occasional Bleater!***

*Upon reaching the end of Our Mutual Friend, our Branch was asked by Anne McLeod to consider the prospect of discussing some of Mr Dickens' less well-known pieces as an interim measure before choosing a new book for our collective reading. The Branch accepted the proposal with unanimity, and Anne herself chose the first of our readings – a little-known, almost inconsequential, piece of sarcasm and mockery written by Mr Dickens for an early edition of All the Year Round. Below we reproduce a brief extract from the piece, prefaced by some dictionary definitions of the etymology of 'The Tattlesnivel Bleater.'*

**tattle** (*Verb*) to gossip or chatter (*Noun*) gossip or chatter [Middle Dutch *tatelen*]  
**snivel** (*verb*) 1. to cry and sniff in a self-pitying way, 2. to say (something) tearfully, whine, 3. to have a runny nose, n the act of snivelling, Middle English *snivelen*  
**bleat** (*Verb*) 1. (of a sheep, goat, or calf) to utter its plaintive cry 2. to whine  
(*Noun*) 1. the characteristic cry of sheep, goats, and calves 2. a weak complaint or whine [Old English *bl tan*]

(*All The Year Round*: Sat, May 28, 1859).

**THE TATTLESNIVEL BLEATER**

The pen is taken in hand on the present occasion, by a private individual (not wholly unaccustomed to literary composition), for the exposure of a conspiracy of a most frightful nature; a conspiracy which, like the deadly Upas-tree of Java, on which the individual produced a poem in his earlier youth (not wholly devoid of length), which was so flatteringly received (in circles not wholly unaccustomed to form critical opinions), that he was recommended to publish it, and would certainly have carried out the suggestion, but for private considerations (not wholly unconnected with expense).

The individual who undertakes the exposure of the gigantic conspiracy now to be laid bare in all its hideous deformity, is an inhabitant of the town of Tattlesnivel--a lowly inhabitant, it may be, but one who, as an Englishman and a man, will ne'er abase his eye before the gaudy and the mocking throng.

Tattlesnivel stoops to demand no championship from her sons. On an occasion in History, our bluff British monarch, our Eighth Royal Harry, almost

went there. And long ere the periodical in which this exposure will appear, had sprung into being, Tattlesnivel had unfurled that standard which yet waves upon her battlements.

The standard alluded to, is THE TATTLESNIVEL BLEATER, containing the latest intelligence, and state of markets, down to the hour of going to press, and presenting a favourable local medium for advertisers, on a graduated scale of charges, considerably diminishing in proportion to the guaranteed number of insertions.

It were bootless to expatiate on the host of talent engaged in formidable phalanx to do fealty to the Bleater. Suffice it to select, for present purposes, one of the most gifted and (but for the wide and deep ramifications of an un-English conspiracy) most rising, of the men who are bold Albion's pride. It were needless, after this preamble, to point the finger more directly at the LONDON CORRESPONDENT OF THE TATTLESNIVEL BLEATER.

On the weekly letters of that Correspondent, on the flexibility of their English, on the boldness of their grammar, on the originality of their quotations (never to be found as they are printed, in any book existing), on the priority of their information, on their intimate acquaintance with the secret thoughts and unexecuted intentions of men, it would ill become the humble Tattlesnivellian who traces these words, to dwell. They are graven in the memory; they are on the Bleater's file. Let them be referred to.

But from the infamous, the dark, the subtle conspiracy which spreads its baleful roots throughout the land, and of which the Bleater's London Correspondent is the one sole subject, it is the purpose of the lowly Tattlesnivellian who undertakes this revelation, to tear the veil. Nor will he shrink from his self-imposed labour, Herculean though it be.

The conspiracy begins in the very Palace of the Sovereign Lady of our Ocean Isle. Leal and loyal as it is the proud vaunt of the Bleater's readers, one and all, to be, the inhabitant who pens this exposure does not personally impeach, either her Majesty the queen, or the illustrious Prince Consort. But, some silken-clad smoothers, some purple parasites, some fawners in frippery, some greedy and begartered ones in gorgeous garments, he does impeach--ay, and wrathfully! Is it asked on what grounds? They shall be stated.

The Bleater's London Correspondent, in the prosecution of his important inquiries, goes down to Windsor, sends in his card, has a confidential interview with her Majesty and the illustrious Prince Consort. For a time, the restraints of Royalty are thrown aside in the cheerful conversation of the Bleater's London Correspondent, in his fund of information, in his flow of anecdote, in the atmosphere of his genius; her Majesty brightens, the illustrious Prince Consort thaws, the cares of State and the conflicts of Party are forgotten, lunch is proposed. Over that unassuming and domestic table, her Majesty communicates to the Bleater's London Correspondent that it is her intention to send his Royal Highness the

Prince of Wales to inspect the top of the Great Pyramid--thinking it likely to improve his acquaintance with the views of the people. Her Majesty further communicates that she has made up her royal mind (and that the Prince Consort has made up his illustrious mind) to the bestowal of the vacant Garter, let us say on Mr. Roebuck. The younger Royal children having been introduced at the request of the Bleater's London Correspondent, and having been by him closely observed to present the usual external indications of good health, the happy knot is severed, with a sigh the Royal bow is once more strung to its full tension, the Bleater's London Correspondent returns to London, writes his letter, and tells the Tattlesnivell Bleater what he knows.

All Tattlesnivell reads it, and knows that he knows it. But, DOES his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales ultimately go to the top of the Great Pyramid? DOES Mr. Roebuck ultimately get the Garter? No. Are the younger Royal children even ultimately found to be well? On the contrary, they have--and on that very day had-- the measles. Why is this? BECAUSE THE CONSPIRATORS AGAINST THE BLEATER'S LONDON CORRESPONDENT HAVE STEPPED IN WITH THEIR DARK MACHINATIONS. Because her Majesty and the Prince Consort are artfully induced to change their minds, from north to south, from east to west, immediately after it is known to the conspirators that they have put themselves in communication with the Bleater's London Correspondent. It is now indignantly demanded, by whom are they so tampered with? It is now indignantly demanded, who took the responsibility of concealing the indisposition of those Royal children from their Royal and illustrious parents, and of bringing them down from their beds, disguised, expressly to confound the London Correspondent of the Tattlesnivell Bleater? Who are those persons, it is again asked? Let not rank and favour protect them. Let the traitors be exhibited in the face of day!

The Branch were very much in uncharted waters during our July meeting, in our journey into one of the less well-known pieces from the journalism of Dickens, and there was some concern that the normal lively discussion, prompted by studying his novels, may have been inhibited by the obscurity of the material. These fears, to the delight of the members present, were unfounded as the meeting proceeded to use *The Tattlesnivel Bleater* to prompt an enjoyable and diverse discussion as we explored many themes related to the work.

There was clear agreement that the piece was a good example of the manner in which Dickens was willing to use sarcasm and mockery to make a point. In this piece, he was clearly intending to pour scorn on the more pompous elements of provincial newspapers that may lay claim to provide their readers with 'exclusive' and 'inside' information on current affairs. Dickens, however, was not content to simply dismiss these efforts as spurious, but clearly enjoyed the task of extending the ridicule by suggesting that the subsequent discovery that the original 'exclusive' was mistaken was, in fact, some sort of deliberate conspiracy, designed to personally humiliate the unfortunate correspondent!

There was a short discussion about the issue that led to the founding of *All the Year Round* – and the abandonment of *Household Words* – that also touched upon the manner in which Mr Dickens subsequently bid for the rights, at auction, through a third-party, to own the material in *Household Words*. Bradbury and Evans, the publishers of *Household Words* – with whom Dickens was in dispute – had sought to deny Dickens rights to the material. A judge decided that the rights should be auctioned, an opportunity that Dickens could not resist. As Ackroyd describes it "at the auction Dickens, represented through the bidding of Arthur Smith and the diversionary tactics of Frederick Chapman, bought out his old journal for £3,550, a sum which he later recouped by selling the stock of stereotype plates to Chapman and Hall. He had won, as he had always insisted he would." (*Dickens*: Peter Ackroyd, 1990, p850). As sales of *All The Year Round* outstripped those of *Household Words*, this, according to Ackroyd, "confirmed Dickens, too, in his favourite belief, that he was, after all, right all the time." (*ibid*, p852)

The *Tattlesnivel* piece was also considered by the group in the context of changes in language and reading habits. Few modern publications, it was felt, would be willing to print such a challenging piece of writing, that to modern 'reading eyes' seems verbose, complicated, and – initially- somewhat difficult to understand. The modern world – it was suggested –with a somewhat shorter attention span, and less time in our frantic worlds, to read journalism at leisure, would be intolerant of this kind of writing.

There was also an enjoyment of some of the humour in the piece, the fictional name of an aspiring poet – Mr X. Ameter – was particularly well-received by those who had paid attention during English Literature lessons at school!

There were also other observations by the group that, to Dickens, this piece may well have been an inconsequential work of journalism – it has certainly seemed to attract little attention from Dickens scholars – and that it served as a good example of the type of writing that, in modern journalistic idiom, may be seen as something of a 'filler', thrown out by Dickens with little effort or preparation simply to provide sufficient material for publication.

One thing that the group did agree upon was the delightful fictional title of the publication that Dickens sought to lampoon, and such was the mutual admiration that it has led to a change in title of our own publication.

There have been a number of suggestions over recent years for an alternate title to the somewhat unimaginative '*Newsletter*' for our Branch magazine, but few seemed to strike the right chord (although 'The John Browdie Admiration Society' did have its advocates!). However, with a humble and generous nod in the direction of Dickens, and a minor and inconsequential piece of his journalism, this newsletter now proudly re-names itself *The Occasional Bleater!*

### PART III:

#### *Dickens and Gaskell (Builders and Renovators)...*

### **Grant for Cranford author's home**

The home of Cranford author Elizabeth Gaskell has been awarded a £262,000 grant for urgent repairs. The English Heritage cash will pay for structural work on the Grade II-listed house in Plymouth Grove, Manchester, considered a British literary shrine. Gaskell wrote most of her novels in the detached Regency-style Villa from 1850 until her death in 1865. Authors including Charles Dickens and Charlotte Bronte are known to have visited and stayed at the house.

Built in the 1830s, the house is described by heritage groups as second only in importance to the Bronte Parsonage in Haworth, Yorkshire. It is also one of the few surviving buildings of its type in Manchester. The property is owned by the Manchester Historic Buildings Trust, which needs about £2m for a full restoration. The grant will allow repairs to the roof, rotten windows and cracked walls as well as removing the dry rot, which is eating its way through the house.

Dame Judi Dench, a patron of the Trust and star of the recent BBC television adaptation of Cranford, welcomed the grant. She said: "I am delighted that English Heritage is offering a grant to carry out the work that is needed on Elizabeth Gaskell's house. This is a major historical building and it will be wonderful to see it restored to its former glory."

As part of its long-term project, the trust wants to open the house to visitors and refurbish parts of the interior as it was in Gaskell's time. Henry Owen-John, of English Heritage, said: "The house where she wrote much of her work is an integral part of the story of this dynamic period when Manchester's textile industry was at the forefront of world trade. It is vitally important that this building is saved from dereliction so it can help to tell the story of Manchester and the industrial north." While Gaskell is best known for Cranford, she wrote five other books along with two novellas, numerous articles and short stories and a biography of her friend, Charlotte Bronte.



## PART IV:

*Dickens, Seymour, Cruikshank and Co (Illustrators)...*

### **Dickens and his Illustrators**

From the original pairing of Dickens with George Cruikshank on *Sketches by Boz* to his final collaboration with Luke Fildes on *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, illustration was an important part of the Dickens experience. In fact only two of Dickens' major works, *Hard Times* and *Great Expectations*, were issued originally without illustration. Dickens' works were all issued serially, in monthly or weekly parts. Monthly parts were issued with two illustrations, these were usually sketches etched onto steel plates, printed on special paper and bound into the book after an advertisement section and just before the text. In some cases, as in *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Barnaby Rudge*, published in Dickens' weekly magazine *Master Humphreys Clock*, the illustrations were cut into wood blocks and dropped into the text so that the illustration appeared in the part of the story being illustrated.

Dickens worked in close collaboration with his illustrators, supplying them with an overall summary of the work at the outset for the cover illustration which was printed on heavy coloured stock, usually green, which served as a wrapper for each of the monthly parts. Dickens briefed the illustrator on plans for each month's instalment so that work on the two illustrations could begin before he wrote them. This close working relationship with his illustrators is important to readers of Dickens today. The illustrations give us a glimpse of the characters as Dickens described them to the illustrator and approved when the drawing was finished. Film makers still use the illustrations as a basis for characterization, costume, and set design in the dramatization of Dickens' works.

#### **Original illustrators with whom Dickens personally collaborated:**

##### **Robert Seymour (1800-1836)**

In 1836 publishers Chapman and Hall approached Dickens with the proposal that he write a series of short stories to accompany illustrations by popular artist Robert Seymour. Dickens argued successfully that the stories be the main focus and the illustrations should complement the text. The result of this collaboration was *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*. Seymour, who had had a nervous breakdown in 1830, illustrated the first two monthly instalments with some difficulty satisfying Dickens and his publishers. On the completion of the second instalment Seymour committed suicide



THE SAGACIOUS DOG

"Dog of my own once-Pointer-surprising instinct-out shooting one day-entering enclosure-whistled-dog stopped-Ponto, Ponto!-wouldn't move-staring at board-looked up, saw an inscription-'Gamekeeper has orders to shoot all dogs found in this enclosure'-wouldn't pass it-wonderful dog."

—*Pickwick Papers*, chap ii

From the etching by Seymour

### Robert W. Buss (1804-1875)

Buss was hired by Dickens' publishers, Chapman and Hall, when Robert Seymour committed suicide after the second monthly part of *Pickwick Papers*. Buss did two illustrations for the third monthly part of *Pickwick* which disappointed the publishers and Buss was dismissed from the project. Though disappointed, Buss remained a lifelong Dickens admirer. After Dickens' death Buss produced the famous painting *Dickens' Dream* of the author surrounded by his characters.

### Hablot Knight Browne - Phiz (1815-1882)

When Robert Seymour committed suicide after the second instalment of *Pickwick* the author and his publishers needed a new illustrator. Artists such as John Leech, William Makepeace Thackeray, and Robert W. Buss were considered but the man selected was Hablot Knight Browne who had done some work for Chapman and Hall earlier, and had worked with Dickens on a recent pamphlet. Browne and Dickens developed an excellent working relationship and Browne took the nickname Phiz to complement Dickens' Boz. Browne would go on to illustrate Dickens' work for twenty-three years and ten of Dickens's novels were illustrated by Phiz. Browne's comic/satiric style of illustration did not fit well with Dickens' later, more serious, novels and after the somewhat disappointing illustrations for *A Tale of Two Cities*, he never worked for Dickens again.



### **George Cruikshank (1792-1878)**

One of the greatest illustrators of his time, Cruikshank came from a family of artists. Dickens met Cruikshank through John Macrone, publisher for successful writer William Harrison Ainsworth, Macrone suggested that Dickens' sketches should be put together in a book, illustrated by Cruikshank. The result was *Sketches by Boz* published in 1836. Cruikshank would later illustrate Dickens' *Oliver Twist* and was an actor in some of the plays done by Dickens' amateur company. Cruikshank, formerly a prodigious imbibor, would later become a staunch supporter of the temperance movement. After Dickens' death, Cruikshank claimed that the plot and many of the characters from *Oliver Twist* had been his idea, which Dickens' friend and biographer vehemently denied.



Illustration for "Public Dinners" by Cruikshank. The artist worked Dickens and himself into the drawing



### **George Cattermole (1800-1868)**

Dickens friend and illustrator, collaborating with Browne (Phiz), of *Master Humphrey's Clock* and the novels *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Barnaby Rudge*. Cattermole's specialty was interior and exterior architectural illustration rather than character drawings.

### **Samuel Williams (1788-1853)**

Williams was a skilled wood engraver who had cut several blocks for *Master Humphrey's Clock*. When Hablot Browne and George Cattermole were both unavailable to draw a needed illustration for *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Dickens asked Williams to draw it. Dickens was reportedly pleased with the result but Williams never did another illustration for Dickens.

### **Daniel Maclise (1807-1870)**

Artist and close friend of Dickens early in his career. He painted several portraits of the Dickens family including the famous Nickleby Portrait, painted in 1839, and used as the frontispiece for *Nicholas Nickleby*. Maclise provided illustrations for *The Old Curiosity Shop* and several of the Christmas books: *The Chimes*, *Cricket on the Hearth*, and *The Battle of Life*.

### **John Leech (1817-1864)**

Cartoonist and illustrator famous for his work for *Punch*. Leech was one of the artists considered to replace Robert Seymour for *Pickwick* and although not selected Leech and Dickens became lifelong friends. Leech contributed many illustrations for Dickens' Christmas books and was sole illustrator for *A Christmas Carol*. He was, along with Cruikshank, one of the actors in the amateur plays put on by Dickens' circle of friends.

### **Frank (1800-1859) and Marcus Stone (1840-1921)**

Dickens' close friend Frank Stone, artist and actor in Dickens' amateur theatricals, provided illustrations for *The Haunted Man*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, and *Martin Chuzzlewit*. When Frank died in 1859 Dickens recommended his son Marcus to his publishers. Marcus illustrated *Great Expectations* and *Our Mutual Friend*. Stone's figures are more realistic and less caricature than his predecessors. Marcus later gave up book illustration and became an accomplished painter.



**Marcus Stone**  
**Our Mutual Friend**

### **Luke Fildes (1844-1927)**

With Marcus Stone's decision to quit illustration in favour of painting and Dickens' dissatisfaction with the recent work of Hablot Browne, a new illustrator was needed for *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. Originally Charles Collins, brother of Dickens' friend Wilkie Collins and husband to Dickens' daughter Kate, was hired. After designing the cover he gave up the project citing ill health. Dickens interviewed and hired Luke Fildes, a young artist who had studied at the Royal Academy. Using the existing cover design and close collaboration with Dickens, Fildes had completed six illustrations when Dickens died halfway through the monthly parts. Fildes later completed six more illustrations to accompany the release of the remaining three monthly parts published posthumously. Fildes remained close to the Dickens family and was pursued to the end of his life for clues as to the ending of Dickens' unfinished novel.

(This material is taken from David Perdue's website  
<http://charlesdickenspage.com/index.html>)

## PART V:

### *Dickens and Zimmerman (Public Relations)...*

*Barbara Zimmerman has kindly offered to be the latest 'victim' in the Q&A section of this newsletter. Barbara has recently joined the North East Branch, but living, as she does, in the city of Philadelphia in the United States, is unlikely to be in regular attendance at North East Branch meetings! Barbara met many of the local Branch when she attended the Durham Conference last year, and has already contributed a number of written pieces to previous newsletters. She offers this lovely personal account by way of introduction...*

#### **First of all, and since you live in Philadelphia, how did you come to be a member of the North East England Branch of the Dickens Fellowship?**

It all started with Herb Moscovitz, the editor of the Electronic Buzfuz. The day before I left for England last summer I asked Herb if there was anyone he would like me to extend his regards to at the conference in Durham. He replied with a list as long as my arm. I recognized many of the names, but one in particular, Herbert Savory, piqued my interest, perhaps because I had never heard of a name like Savory before. Upon arrival at St. Chad's on the 30<sup>th</sup> of July, my *enormous* bag in tow, (no one will ever accuse me of travelling light!) I stumbled, missed the step and tumbled through the door and almost into a bearded, white haired gentleman whose name tag proclaimed: Herbert Savory! "Aha! It's YOU!" or something in that vein were my first words to the man, as he stood there eyes wide and mouth agape at the spectacle of me and my big red bag. When I could collect myself, I offered him a handshake and explained that I brought him regards from Philadelphia, and Herb M. in particular. This was the beginning of my friendship with my favourite Geordie, Herbert Savory. My membership in The North East England Branch, #198 came as a complete surprise to me... a gift from him! (Perhaps to ensure I would help him through *Our Mutual Friend*, admittedly not his favourite Dickens' work!)

#### **To be honest, have you actually read ALL of Dickens' works?**

No. I have read all the major novels at least once, many of them two or three times. I have not yet read *Pictures from Italy* nor have I read but a smattering of his journalism. I take comfort in the fact that there will always be some unread Dickens waiting for me.

#### **Of those that you have read, do you have a particular favourite?**

My first impulse is to say *Bleak House* but then *Great Expectations* comes to mind and then I think of *David Copperfield*, and, oh my, after this year *Martin Chuzzlewit* (and nurse Sairey Gamp, so near and dear to my heart!) and on and on it goes! There is so much brilliance in each and every one.... To answer the question though, I will say *Bleak House*, because it is the one that brought me to Dickens.

**Do those of your family and acquaintances who know of your affection for the works of Dickens think that you are ever so slightly barmy?**

Do they ever, and how! Many of them have stopped rolling their eyes in my direction and given up hoping that it was merely a phase I was going through (like country music and using too many exclamations points in my writing...a work in progress!!!). Some of them say I am becoming a bit of a Dickens' character myself. (But which one I wonder??)

**What was it that first introduced you to a love of Dickens?**

Oprah Winfrey. I guess the year was 2000, or 2001. I used to read all the 'Oprah Winfrey Book-club' books. One in particular, *The Book of Ruth*, intrigued me. I hardly remember how the plot went, but I do remember one of the characters was reading to an elderly neighbour. The book being read was....of course, *Bleak House*. I found as I read, I spent most of the time fanaticizing about what a book by that title could possibly be about. Days later, while walking in my neighbourhood I noticed a pristine copy of said book on the table of a little consignment shop. I bought it for a song! That was it...once I read it, I never stopped nor did I ever read another Oprah book.

**And how did you become involved with the Dickens Fellowship?**

Herb Moskovitz - again. He and I both belonged to 'The Inimitable Boz', an on-line Dickens' reading group. He happened to notice that I lived in Philadelphia and emailed me to tell me about the Fellowship and to invite me to join the Philadelphia Branch. I, being very new to this 'Dickens' thing, felt intimidated and told him I couldn't possibly join such an erudite group. I pictured them as a bunch of stodgy old men drinking Port wine and smoking cigars.

I finally succumbed in 2003 when I learned Cedric Dickens was holding a 'Tea' downtown at The Dark Horse, (formerly The Dickens' Inn), and all were welcome to attend. Him, I just HAD to meet. When I arrived, the Philadelphia Branch were also in attendance, none of whom I might add, were stodgy or smoking cigars! I felt very welcome and attended my first meeting two days later. I haven't missed one since.

**Do you only read Dickens, or do you have other writers of whom you are particularly fond? If so, who?**

I am usually always reading something by or about Dickens, but generally have another book or author going too. I absolutely love Thomas Hardy. I have to do a lot of reading and studying for my docent position at the Rosenbach Museum & Library. Presently on *that* stack are books by and/or about James Joyce, William Shakespeare and Herman Melville. There is also a lot of research to be done for our next themed tour through the historic house that requires a lot of reading. Recently I treated myself to two contemporary fiction books with Dickens in the plot...what larks!

**Where do you do most of your reading of Dickens? Is it in a favourite armchair, at a desk, in bed etc?**

I prefer my bed...it makes such a nice desk for the reference books, like my *A to Z London, Dickens A to Z, London Encyclopedia* and other reference books I find helpful in understanding what I am reading. My second favourite reading spot is the rocking chair in my Dickens' room amidst all the Dickens' books, posters, drawings and memorabilia.

**Do you have a preference for paperbacks or hardbacks?**

Not really, but it must be a copy I can write in. I have to be able to highlight the text and write my own little annotations for future reference.

**Tell us something about yourself and your background?**

I was born near Harrisburg, which is the capital city of Pennsylvania and moved to Philadelphia via Atlantic City, New Jersey, where I met my husband James, our 'sometimes' Dickensian. He is very supportive and helpful to me and the Philadelphia Branch, but not a member. We have lived in Philly for 30 years in October.

I worked as a Registered Nurse for 30 years, specializing in acute geriatric medicine for 25 of those years and then Geri-psych nursing the last 5. I retired from medicine in 2006 after my mother passed away. I keep busy these days with the Dickens Fellowship, where I was on the program committee from 2007-2009 and the Rosenbach Museum and Library where I volunteer as a docent. I have recently been elected as Secretary to the Docent Council there.

I am a real 'city-gal' and lucky to live in such a culturally rich city as I do. I frequently attend museums, concerts and lectures with my friends and fellow docents. One of our favourite pubs is The Bard, which never fails to remind me of the haunted Shakespeare Pub in Durham....except our beer is chilled!

I am teaching myself to play the piano, a gift from my husband after my mother's passing. It has filled many pleasurable hours and, as an added bonus, relieved the arthritis that used to plague my hands! One-half hour a day is the dosage. I should be ready for my recital in another 25 or so years!

I do not have any children, but I do have plenty of cats, (one of them, Nick, is deaf and blind) and one high-spirited dog, a Cairn terrier named Katy, who is my heart's delight. She and I walk (and sometimes run when she spies a squirrel) in the park almost everyday.

I like to think of myself as a pretty good cook and anyone who has ever read anything I've written knows how I enjoy food!

I try to live by Mr. Sleary's advice, "Make the best of us, not the worst."

## **In your opinion, what is it about Dickens that continues to make his books so relevant to the 21st Century?**

No matter what current topic I am dealing with there is always something in Dickens' works I can find that is relevant. I am never at a loss to find the exact word, phrase or sentiment to suit the subject. He is timeless.

## **Of the various and many attempts to render the books of Dickens in other ways - film, television, radio, readings, theatre - do you have any preferences?**

Yes, I do. I love listening to unabridged recordings of Dickens' works. I have quite a few in my library and usually listen to the recordings while following along in the book. It adds another dimension for me.

I generally do not enjoy Dickens on film- too much is left out or changed- but I was delighted by *Martin Chuzzlewit*, starring Paul Scofield as well as the latest *Little Dorrit* offering. And, the Alastair Sim version of *A Christmas Carol* is a holiday tradition at my house.

## **Which, if any, of his books are you currently reading?**

I am re-reading *Little Dorrit*, as it will be the book of the year at the Philadelphia Branch for the 2009-2010 season. I am very much looking forward to Michael Slater's *Charles Dickens: A Life Defined by Writing*, which I understand will be coming out this fall.

## **If you were asked to 'sell' Dickens to those who've not yet read any of his works, how would you go about it?**

If I had to sell Dickens - and mind, I am not a salesman - I imagine I would market it with the exuberance and energy it fills me with. It is one of the best parts of my life and has taken me to places where I never imagined I would set foot - witness my having lunch at 'The George Inn', reportedly a haunt of Dickens himself, in Southwark last summer. It is a journey that just seems to go on and on, and I hope it never stops. And if that's not 'richness', you tell me what is!

## PART VI:

### *Dickens and Chatterbox (Libel and Legal Affairs)...*

*There were scenes of nervous excitement at a recent Branch meeting when an unnamed participant (Mr CR) produced - in a version of the quaint American school custom of 'show and tell' - a copy of the 1971 treatise Sexual Analysis of Dickens Props by Arthur Washburn Brown Ph.D. The hardback book, delivered to the owner in plain wrapping, offered a tantalising glimpse of an alternate method of study, that disregarded the literal meaning of Dickens' writings and concentrated on a speculative interpretation - in a Freudian sense - of the hidden meaning of the objects and artefacts that are scattered among the novels.*

*Despite an attempt to generate a lengthy discourse on the wisdom, or otherwise, of such a methodology, most of those in attendance at the meeting found that their normally rational and moderate opinions were thrown into a blushing fluster by the prospect of chapters entitled: Ch 1 'A Hundred Thousand Games: Why cribbage represents sexual intercourse', Ch 2: 'The Wings of His Mind: The erotic meaning of wooden legs' or Ch 4: 'The Oldest Lettuce: Erotic umbrellas and sexually suggestive food.' Chatterbox was suitably shocked and distressed to learn that there is a lengthy queue of inquisitive readers hoping to borrow the book once it has been approved by the censors....*

*The forthcoming trip to London planned by members of the Branch is much anticipated, especially as the weekend will feature a guided walk around Dickens' London by Mr Tony Williams. Branch members have been warned to be on their best behaviour by an anonymous honorary official (AM), as she is anxious to preserve the illusion that the North East members are intelligent, sensible and knowledgeable in their affection for Dickens. Nothing, in fact, could be further from the truth, as most of those making the trip demonstrated so effectively at the Annual Conference last year during the closing ceremonies - a fact that an embarrassed Mr Williams will be unlikely to have forgotten....*

*The Branch's latest foray into theatre and the dramatic arts was not without the usual misunderstandings during the Friday evening performance at St Mary's Church, Gateshead. With some of the group making a commendable effort to wear period costume, others were disappointingly attired in what could only be described as normal clothes - perhaps taking solace in the fact that what they were wearing they could hardly be described as fashionable. There was further confusion when the Branch co-ordinator employed the theatrical 'finger-across-the-throat' gesture to one of the thespians. Leaving the stage under the impression that his life had been threatened by a local heavy, he was somewhat mollified to be told that it was, in fact, no more than a warning that he was over-running his allotted time slot....*

*There is already talk among some members of the prospect of attending the 2010 Annual Conference to be held in Eastbourne. Problems may arise, however, given that the south coast resort has an undeserved reputation as something of a retirement home for elderly relatives put out to pasture. One anonymous Branch member (HS) has been informed to make sure that he definitely purchases a return ticket, as he may otherwise be prevented from leaving the host town by the social workers routinely patrolling the railway and bus stations for confused old folk trying to escape....*

*The Branch has been delighted with the progress made on our very own website <http://www.charlesdickens-ne.co.uk/>. It has not gone unremarked, however, that the site has managed to preserve some semblance of respectability by the clever strategic decision taken by the Branch top-brass to ensure that no photographs of members are visible to unsuspecting visitors 'hitting' (as they say in cyber-speak) the site. Chatterbox accepts unreservedly the argument that any prospective new members would be immediately dissuaded from joining if they could see the 'clip' of the folk already involved....*

# The Dickens Fellowship, North East England

*The Branch officers are:*

Hon. President:	Paul Schilke
Hon. Secretary:	Anne McLeod
Hon. Treasurer:	Revd Ruth Crofton
Public Relations Secretary:	Ms Lynn Hitchen

Membership subscriptions are: £12.00 per annum

*The branch meets at Low Fell Library, Gateshead, at 7.00pm on the first Monday of each month. New and prospective members are most welcome.*

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