
Part I
Perspectives on the Life



D2



A Sketch of the Life

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All life was grist to the writing mill that was Charles Dickens, particularly his own life and especially his childhood. "All these things have worked together to make me what I am," he wrote of one period of his childhood. Born at Portsmouth on February 7, 1812, he left the town at the beginning of January 1815, carrying memories of a military parade and the landlady of the house in which the Dickens family had lodged, later used in the creation of Mrs. Pipchin in *Dombey and Son*. John Dickens, his father, had started as a clerk in the Navy Pay Office at Somerset House in London in 1805, and in June 1809 had married Elizabeth Barrow, the sister of a colleague. The Admiralty moved the clerk to Portsmouth, a major naval dockyard in the forefront of Britain's war against Napoleon, where the young couple set up home in a brand new house at Mile End Terrace. Here their first child, Frances Elizabeth, was born on October 28, 1810, followed 15 months later by a brother, baptized in the local church as Charles John Huffam Dickens, but known to the family throughout his childhood as Charley. John Dickens's domicile arrangements always had an impermanency about them, and the new baby stayed only five months in his birthplace before being carried across town to lodgings in Hawke Street, much closer to the Navy Pay Office; and 18 months later to Wish Street in the adjacent area of Southsea. Here they were joined by a young widowed sister of Mrs. Dickens, Mary Allen, whose name was given to a third child, Alfred Allen Dickens. Unfortunately, Alfred died of water on the brain just six months later.

With the defeat of Napoleon and the end of a war against America, the Admiralty's presence at Portsmouth was reduced, and on January 1, 1815 the Dickens family was moved back to London, probably staying in lodgings in Norfolk Street. Here a fourth child, Letitia, was born. Situated near Oxford Street, they were close to John Dickens's older brother William, who ran a coffee shop there; they were close also to Grosvenor Street in Mayfair, home of the wealthy Crewe family where Charley's grandmother, now 70 years old, served as housekeeper. His grandfather, William Dickens, butler

to the Crewes, had died many years before, in 1785. This early contact with London saw Charley through the ages of three and four, leaving him with a memory of a visit to a bazaar in Soho Square, probably with his grandmother, and the purchase of a harlequin's wand.

Off then went the family to the Navy dockyards on the River Medway in Kent, first to Sheerness for about three months and then on to "the birthplace of [Dickens's] fancy" at Rochester and Chatham (Forster bk. 1, ch. 1), two towns so joined at the hip that it was difficult to say where one ended and the other began. John Dickens rented a house at 2 Ordnance Terrace, in an elevated part of Chatham, commanding beautiful views over the river and the surrounding countryside. Three more children were born, Harriet in 1819, Frederick in 1820, and Alfred in 1822, making the house a little crowded with six children, their parents, Aunt Mary, and two servants, 13-year-old Mary Weller and elderly Jane Bonny. Dickens later wrote happy accounts of his time in Chatham, playing with friends, attending school, visiting the theater and pantomime, and going to parties; there were regular walks with his father and with Mary Weller, trips up the Medway on the Navy Pay Yacht, and hours spent reading. Many years later, he recollected that one of the walks with his father took him past a large house at Gad's Hill and his father promised that if he worked hard then he might come to live there.

It was in Chatham that Charley first tried his juvenile hand at creative writing, where he enacted plays in the kitchen, and where he first enjoyed the applause of an audience, standing on a table and singing at the local inn. These were activities that forever echoed through his life. At the end of 1821, Aunt Mary married Thomas Lamert, an army surgeon, and these two soon after moved to Ireland, taking with them the servant Jane Bonny but leaving behind a stepson, James Lamert, who was later to have a profound influence on Dickens's life. The new baby, Alfred, was given the middle name of Lamert, but the family was shocked soon after when news came from Ireland that Aunt Mary had died, aged just 34.

In Chatham, it is unlikely that Charley had any idea that his father had difficulties with money. John Dickens's salary had rocketed from £200 in 1816 to £441 in 1822, but he handled it badly, and in 1819 borrowed £200 on which he failed to make the repayments, causing a family rift with a brother-in-law who had stood surety. There were other debts in Chatham, and in 1822 the family moved to a smaller house at St. Mary's Place on The Brook where they stayed for a year. That same year John Dickens was moved back to London, but Charley was left behind for several months, staying with his schoolmaster, William Giles. He later recollected his own journey to London, a small child of 10:

Through all the years that have since passed have I ever lost the smell of the damp straw in which I was packed – like game – and forwarded, carriage paid, to the Cross Keys, Wood Street, Cheapside, London? There was no other inside passenger, and I consumed my sandwiches in solitude and dreariness, and it rained hard all the way, and I thought life sloppier than I had expected to find it. (*Journalism* 4: 140)

His parents had taken a small house at Bayham Street in Camden Town, just on the edge of London. Life was quiet here: Charley was disappointed not to be sent to school, especially since his older sister was boarded at the Royal Academy of Music, and he passed his days running errands, looking after the younger children, and cleaning boots. An unnamed orphan from the Chatham workhouse had been brought with them; so too had James Lamert, who built a toy theater for Charles. This stirred his imagination, as did visits into the city: to his godfather Christopher Huffam who supplied ships from his business on the Thames at Limehouse; to his uncle Thomas Barrow who lived above a bookshop in Soho, where books were borrowed and Charley wrote a description of his uncle's barber, father of the artist Turner; and to his grandmother Dickens who gave him a silver watch and probably told him stories, not only fairytales but reminiscences of her own and stories from the pages of history, as she did with the Crewe children. Such reminiscences most likely included the Gordon Riots and the French Revolution, events with which the Crewes were intimately linked and which became the subjects of Dickens's only two "historical" novels. This casual way of life continued for about 15 months, toward the end of which the financial difficulties of the Dickens caught up with them and necessitated profound change. A revival of their fortunes, they believed, would be found in the establishment of a school, to be run by Charley's mother, and to this end at Christmas 1823 they moved to a rather grand new house in Gower Street North.

With no pupils registering at the school, the scheme collapsed in a matter of weeks and hope turned to despair. James Lamert tried to help by offering paid employment and some business training to 12-year-old Charley. The 6–7 shillings a week were seized upon by his parents, and a nightmare for the boy began at Warren's Blacking, a firm that produced boot blacking from a rat-infested warehouse beside the Thames. References to Warren's and to boot blacking were later scattered throughout his books and the factory was transposed into Murdstone and Grinby's wine-bottling business in *David Copperfield*. Then, only two weeks after Charley's start at Warren's, his father was arrested for debt and confined to the Marshalsea Prison. It was a tearful, demeaning episode that forever left its mark and legacy in the mind, life, and books of Charles Dickens. The Gower Street home had to be given up, their belongings – including books – sold, and the family moved into prison. Charley was first found a room to share with other boys at Little College Street, Camden Town, the home of a family friend, Ellen Roylance, and after a few weeks a room of his own at Lant Street, not far from the prison.

John Dickens's incarceration lasted only three months, during which time his mother died, leaving him the large sum of £450, which later helped toward paying his debts. His financial position was further improved when the Admiralty granted his retirement on the grounds of ill health with an annual pension of £146, supplemented by modest earnings from a new career in journalism as a correspondent for the *British Press*. Upon release, their friend Mrs. Roylance took the family in for a short while, after which a few months were spent at an address in Hampstead before they all finally settled at Johnson Street in Somers Town.

Meanwhile, throughout this post-prison time, Charley continued to work at Warren's, though his place of work was moved from the warehouse to a rather public position in the front window of a shop in Chandos Street in the colorful Covent Garden area. It was not until March 1825 that his father took him away from a situation in which he felt neglected and unhappy, and sent him once more to school. His year at Warren's Blacking, a year he thought would go on forever, was seared onto his young mind. As an adult, the vulnerable or parentless child featured throughout his books: *Oliver Twist*, *Little Nell*, *Smike*, *Jo*, *David Copperfield*, *Little Dorrit*, *Pip*, and others. The adult Dickens always drew attention to the plight of poor and neglected young people.

For two years, he returned to what the modern observer would recognize as a normal childhood, attending school at the grandly named Wellington House Academy, at the end of which his parents found a position for him as a clerk with solicitors Ellis and Blackmore of Gray's Inn. The work was dull but later supplied material for his pen, and after 18 months he moved on to another solicitor, Charles Molloy of Lincoln's Inn, where he met his lifelong friend and legal adviser, Thomas Mitton. He stayed for three months; then, aged just 17, displayed a great sense of self-confidence and a level of decision-making probably independent of his parents by striking out as a self-employed, shorthand reporter. His earliest commissions were for civil law cases held in Doctors' Commons where he honed the skills of his craft before adding to his repertoire, probably from 1830, reports of proceedings in the House of Commons, writing for the *Mirror of Parliament* and the *True Sun*. Over nearly five years, he established a reputation for speed and accuracy as one of the best in the business, and was eventually taken on to the regular staff of the *Morning Chronicle* (see chapter 11).

It was during these years as a youth and young man that he developed many of the interests, skills, and traits that were to shape and color the rest of his life. He frequently indulged his love of theater, sometimes serious drama like Shakespeare but often music-hall entertainment. It became a passion for him, attending some theater, he later told Forster, almost every night for at least three years. Trained as a singer at the Royal Academy of Music, his sister Fanny also mixed in theatrical circles, introducing her brother to actor John Harley and musician John Hullah. Indeed, such was his love for the stage that he considered he might have a career there – and in a way that eventually turned out to be the case. Perhaps as part of this aspiration, he became a careful observer of people, their mannerisms, and accents, which he learned to imitate, a talent also ascribed to his mother. A colorful, stylish way of dressing was established, sometimes described as “flashy,” which was to stay with him throughout his life.

At this time, London became entrenched as part of his consciousness: building on his wanderings as a child at Warren's Blacking, he was now able to walk further, delve deeper, understand better the people and the institutions of this great and growing metropolis. Although he knew it all, his centrifugal point was established in his teens: the office of Ellis and Blackmore where he started was little more than a half-mile from the office of *All the Year Round*, the periodical he edited at his death.

If London was the spinning center of his life, though, his work as a reporter sent him throughout the country, often at as great a speed as coach and horses would permit: to Birmingham and Bristol, Edinburgh and Exeter, Chelmsford and Kettering.

It was also at this time that he first fell seriously in love. Maria Beadnell, a year older than Dickens, was pretty and flirtatious, and in an unkind game she encouraged, rejected, and teased her admirer for about four years. His letters to her that have survived demonstrate the depth of his feelings and the thinness of her response. It would seem there was little enthusiasm for the match from her parents: as a banker, Maria's father must have frowned upon marriage to a young journalist whose father had been imprisoned as an insolvent debtor and still struggled to keep his head above water. Dickens gave up the pursuit soon after his twenty-first birthday but later reflected on the affair by casting Maria as Dora Spenlow in *David Copperfield*. The Beadnells, with their prestigious address in the City of London's Lombard Street, were doubtless unimpressed with the peripatetic nature of Dickens's home life. Between the ages of 17 and 22 he shared seven different addresses with his parents as they moved around the London area to avoid creditors. In addition, he twice rented rooms, once by himself and once with a friend, before finally separating his living arrangements from those of his parents in December 1834, taking rooms at Furnival's Inn and carrying with him his younger brother Fred.

Dickens's parliamentary reporting had appeared before the public a great many times and his reputation as a reporter was high, but this was nothing to the elation he felt when his first piece of creative writing was published in the *Monthly Magazine* in December 1833. He received no payment but was sufficiently pleased to see his work in all the glory of print to contribute a further six pieces over the next 12 months, the first five unsigned but the sixth, which appeared in August 1834, appearing with the pseudonym Boz. In the same month, he first met his future wife, Catherine Hogarth, daughter of the music and drama editor of the *Morning Chronicle*, and was taken on to the permanent staff of that newspaper, with a not insubstantial salary of £273 a year (his grandmother had earned only 8 guineas a year as a housekeeper; a schoolmaster at that time might earn about £35 a year, a governess or curate only £30).

Besides employing him as a reporter, the *Morning Chronicle* also published five "street sketches" before the end of the year, all under the name of Boz, for which the author still received no payment. However, such was the originality shown in the sketches that when a sister paper, the *Evening Chronicle*, began publication in January 1835, edited by George Hogarth, and when Dickens proposed a series of twenty sketches, the proposal was taken up and his salary was increased, during publication of the sketches, from five guineas a week to seven guineas – his first payment as an author. The sketches attracted attention, and when the series in the *Evening Chronicle* drew to a close in September 1835, Dickens found a further outlet through *Bell's Life in London*, which had the added attraction of paying more money. In another major step forward, the publisher John Macrone, whom Dickens had met socially at the home of William Harrison Ainsworth, suggested book publication for the sketches,

including illustrations by the popular engraver George Cruikshank. With an initial payment of £100 on offer, Dickens seized the opportunity.

People like Macrone took to Dickens easily, as did his editor Hogarth, so that Dickens became a regular visitor at Hogarth's home in Chelsea. Here he met, fell in love with, and, in May 1835, proposed to Hogarth's eldest daughter, Catherine. Dickens's letters to her from this period, always treasured by Catherine, help chart the progress of their romance, culminating in their marriage at St. Luke's Chelsea on April 2, 1836 (*Letters* 1). That year proved exceptionally busy and successful. In February, the first series of *Sketches by Boz* appeared, and just two days later Chapman and Hall offered Dickens the authorship of *The Pickwick Papers*, to be written and published monthly in 20 episodes – publication started on March 31. In May, in what seemed a good idea at the time, Dickens agreed to write a three-volume novel for Macrone, but so fast did demand for his work move that this was overtaken three months later by a promise to write two three-volume novels for Richard Bentley.

Eleven new sketches and tales appeared through the year, mostly in the *Morning Chronicle*, to which was added a political pamphlet *Sunday under Three Heads*. Maintaining his fascination with the theater, Dickens wrote and had produced *The Strange Gentleman* in September and *The Village Coquettes* in December; both works were also published in book form. In November, he agreed to edit a monthly periodical called *Bentley's Miscellany*, and in December the second series of *Sketches by Boz* appeared. These events, together with the spiraling popularity of *Pickwick*, ensured a growing reputation and a growing income for Dickens, but his promises and his value outstripped his ability to deliver, resulting, eventually, in acrimony with publishers and renegotiation. So that he could better devote time to writing, he resigned from the *Morning Chronicle*. This whirlwind year ended with his introduction to John Forster, author, critic, editor, and literary adviser, who was to become Dickens's lifelong friend, confidant, and eventually biographer.

Dickens had shown energy and commitment as a newspaper reporter, but to these traits of character was now added extensive demand for his output that resulted in an outpouring of creativity. Commentators and public alike recognized and welcomed an original new voice. Monthly sales of *Pickwick* soared, rising from less than 500 in the early months to 40,000 at the end. Only halfway through *Pickwick*, he started to write *Oliver Twist*, published in monthly parts in *Bentley's Miscellany*; completion of *Pickwick* was followed swiftly with commencement of *Nicholas Nickleby*; he then tumbled into *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Barnaby Rudge*, both presented through the artificial and not wholly successful publishing vehicle called *Master Humphrey's Clock*. Dickens's output was partly driven by the demands of monthly publication, a device not new but brilliantly suited to and exploited by Dickens and adhered to throughout his career. Still he found time to write a burletta called *Is She his Wife?*, two short collections called *Sketches of Young Gentlemen* and *Sketches of Young Couples*, as well as editing the *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi* and *The Pic-nic Papers*. This last item comprised miscellaneous pieces by various authors, including Dickens, published for the benefit of the wife and children of John Macrone, publisher of *Sketches by Boz*, Macrone having

died suddenly at the age of 28. Here was a man of dynamism, whom Forster captured in a few lines:

there was that in the face as I first recollect it which no time could change, and which remained implanted on it unalterably to the last. This was the quickness, keenness, and practical power, the eager, restless, energetic outlook on each several feature, that seemed to tell so little of a student or writer of books, and so much of a man of action and business in the world. Light and motion flashed from every part of it. "It was as if made of steel," was said of it . . . It has the life and soul in it of fifty human beings. (Forster bk. 2, ch. 1)

From the beginning, Dickens was popular with the literary world. Comparisons with other writers, and artists, were numerous. He became the soul of Hogarth, the Cruikshank of writers, the Constable of fiction; he was compared with Smollett, Sterne, Fielding, Defoe, Goldsmith, Cervantes, Washington Irving, Victor Hugo, Wordsworth, Carlyle, and Shakespeare. His schoolmaster from Chatham included in a letter to him the epithet "the inimitable Boz," which Dickens took up and repeated. Some reviewers were more cautious:

The fact is, Mr. Dickens writes too often and too fast; on the principle, we presume, of making hay whilst the sun shines, he seems to have accepted at once all engagements that were offered to him . . . If he persists much longer in this course, it requires no gift of prophecy to foretell his fate – he has risen like a rocket, and he will come down like the stick. (Collins 1971: 62)

The public spoke with their money: monthly sales of *Oliver Twist* rose to 7,500, *Nicholas Nickleby's* first number sold 50,000, *Master Humphrey's Clock* started at 60,000, dropped off but picked up to 100,000 during the final installments of *The Old Curiosity Shop*; at only 30,000, sales of *Barnaby Rudge* were good but not spectacular. At the end of each run of monthly parts, the completed book would be published, with the advantage of further sales. Such popularity brought other benefits: election to two clubs, the Garrick and the Athenaeum, an invitation to stand as a Member of Parliament, which he declined, dinners given in his honor, the freedom of the city of Edinburgh, and invitations to public speaking: Dickens reveled in such performances, was reported to be an outstanding speaker, and continued them for the rest of his life (*Speeches*).

If his public life was hectic, so too was his private. Having married in April 1836, his first child, Charles junior, was born nine months later in January 1837, followed by Mary in 1838, Kate in 1839, and Walter in 1841; others followed relentlessly: Francis in 1844, Alfred in 1845, Sydney in 1847, Henry in 1849, Dora in 1850, and Edward in 1852. His children pleased him more as youngsters than they did as adults, never quite matching up to his demanding standards and straining his financial resources. So, too, did his parents and his siblings test his patience and his bank balance, particularly his father.

Charles often invited John Dickens to social events: to theaters, dinners, holidays, and parties. He shared Charles's good fortune, and between 1835 and 1839 we have no evidence of money troubles coming between them. Toward the end of that period it is probable that John Dickens's journalistic work dried up, yet still he was swept along by the new style of life his son was living, the new circle of friends, enjoyment of life, the optimism and energy that surrounded Charles, a growing fame that was attaching to him. John Dickens probably felt himself part of it and he continued to spend more money than he had coming in. His mismanagement burst to the surface in March 1839, and seemed to come as a surprise to his son. But Charles acted swiftly and resolved to move his parents to Exeter in Devonshire, as far away as possible from the temptations of London and the people who were owed money. He set up home for them and settled all the debts, estimating his father to have cost him £300–400. John Dickens's stay in Devon lasted three years, but he borrowed and spent money as easily there as in London, driving his son to new heights of exasperation. He started to sell samples of his son's writing and signature. In his quest for money, he tapped a local newspaper editor, Dickens's bank in London, and Dickens's friend Macready. Dickens put a disclaimer in the London newspapers: "certain persons bearing . . . the surname of our client have put into circulation, with the view of more readily obtaining credit, certain acceptances made payable at his private residence . . . Such bills made payable as aforesaid will not be paid" (*Letters* 2: 225). Dickens considered sending his father abroad but relented and went himself, visiting America for the first six months of 1842.

The following October they were all back in London, the Devonshire exile being given up on both sides. Over the following three years, John Dickens continued to behave as badly as ever he had. Perhaps we will never know the full extent of his misdemeanors, since so many of Dickens's letters were later systematically destroyed or cut by his biographer, his relations, and by Dickens himself to hide the behavior of his father. Nevertheless, enough have survived to demonstrate his anger and frustration. In September 1843, for example, he wrote:

I am amazed and confounded by the audacity of his ingratitude . . . tell him that his letter has disgusted me beyond expression; and that I have no more reference to anything he wants or wishes or threatens or would do or wouldn't do, in taking on myself this new Burden . . . Nothing makes me so wretched, or so unfit for what I have to do, as these things. They are so entirely beyond my own controul, so far out of my reach, such a drag-chain on my life, that for the time they utterly dispirit me, and weigh me down.
(*Letters* 3: 576)

From the earliest times it was clear that John Dickens was not the sort of father who could be relied upon to look after the needs of his family. Charles, as the eldest brother and with his earning power, his talents, his connections, and his personality, effectively became the head of the family. He helped his brothers and sisters with education, used his influence to find them work, advised and castigated them; he

entertained them, took them on holiday, helped them set up home; and in death helped support their families. Death came early to all but one: two died in childhood; three failed to reach 40, one died at 48. One of his brothers, Fred, married a young girl of 18, against Dickens's advice, separated from her, committed adultery, was sued for separation, refused to pay, gave up his job, fled abroad, and was arrested for debt on his return; he had a spell in prison, drank too much and died at the age of 48. Another brother, Augustus (born 1827), deserted his wife when she went blind only two years after their marriage, later emigrating to America with another woman, where they lived as man and wife. He died in Chicago at the age of 39 and the woman he lived with killed herself a year later. As the effective "head of the family," Dickens had to deal with these and many more family trials while he worked at writing his books. He found time and money for them all but paid heavily with the anxiety they caused.

In 1842 he made his first journey to America, arriving in Boston on January 22 and leaving from New York on June 7. He traveled extensively, going south as far as Richmond, taking in Philadelphia and Washington, D.C.; however, repulsed by the sight of slaves, he cut short plans to continue on to Charleston; he then turned west as far as St. Louis, passing through Pittsburgh and Cincinnati before proceeding north to Canada where he took in Niagara Falls, Toronto, Montreal, and Quebec. The Americans received him enthusiastically but some did not welcome his calls for an agreement on international copyright. His account of the visit, *American Notes*, published five months after his return to Britain, and the insertion of American chapters in his next novel, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, containing, as they did, elements of criticism and caricature, lost him some American friends, but there remained a large audience for his books in America throughout his life, as there still is.

It was the following year, 1843, that Dickens established himself as the world's favorite author of Christmas with the publication of *A Christmas Carol*. Though he had written of Christmas in *Sketches by Boz*, *Pickwick Papers*, and *Master Humphrey's Clock*, it was not until he created the characters of Tiny Tim, Scrooge, and the ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Future that he captured the hearts and minds of the nineteenth-century public and of all future generations. It is the most filmed of Dickens's books (Glavin 2003), as well as being produced for stage, radio, and audio-tape/CD. This small book, together with a further four Christmas books published over the succeeding five years, changed the course of Christmas publishing and so linked the festive season with Dickens in the minds of the public that he subsequently felt loath to leave a gap he ought to fill. Consequently, from 1850 to 1867, he produced Christmas stories for the magazines he edited, the popularity of which were reflected in sales toward the end of that time of nearly 300,000.

Throughout his life there was rarely a settled period to Dickens's living arrangements, inflicted on him as a child by the nature of his father's work and the necessity of eluding creditors, but self-inflicted as an adult. The first real home of his own was in 1834 at Furnival's Inn, Holborn, though he changed from one set of chambers to a larger set just prior to his marriage in 1836. The following year, with his prospects

rising, he took a three-year lease on a terraced house at 48 Doughty Street, which he exaggeratedly described as a frightfully first-class, family mansion involving awful responsibilities. Here he completed *Pickwick* and *Oliver*, wrote *Nicholas Nickleby* and worked on *Barnaby Rudge*, but tragically it was also here that his much-loved 17-year-old sister-in-law, Mary Hogarth, died suddenly while Dickens held her in his arms; he took a ring from her finger and wore it for the rest of his life and the ring remains with the Dickens family to this day. So too does the house remain, the foremost Dickens museum and the headquarters of the worldwide Dickens Fellowship.

In 1839, the growing family moved to a larger house in Devonshire Terrace near Regents Park where they remained for 12 years. However, it was not a settled tenancy. Following the six months' American disruption in 1842, Dickens uprooted his family in July 1844 and carried them off to live at Genoa, Italy for a year, which he turned to profitable use with the publication of a travel book, *Pictures from Italy*. After a year back at Devonshire Terrace, he took them abroad again, to Switzerland for five months, then on to Paris for three months. Such restlessness reverberated through his life. He argued with Chapman and Hall, his publishers since *Pickwick*, and switched publication to the printers Bradbury and Evans, whom he remained with until 1859 (see chapter 11).

On behalf of his friend Angela Burdett Coutts, he devoted time to the establishment and running of Urania Cottage, a home set up to help rescue women from prostitution. This commitment lasted from 1846 to 1858. In 1845, he became involved in the establishment of the *Daily News*, a morning paper supporting Liberal politics. Printed by Bradbury and Evans, it employed associates from Dickens's past, such as John Forster and George Hogarth, and others whom he remained close to for the rest of his life: W. H. Wills, Douglas Jerrold, and Mark Lemon. Dickens was made editor on the enormous salary of £2,000 a year and his father was put in charge of reporters. Dickens was not suited, though, to the daily grind of newspaper editorship and resigned after less than three weeks in charge.

It was at this time of his life – his mid-thirties – that his passion for theater led him in a new direction. From his childhood, at home and at school, he had sought to stage theatrical productions, continuing with private theatricals at his parents' house in Bentinck Street in 1833 and assisting officers of the garrison at Montreal during his visit in 1842. Besides writing for the theater and being an avid theatergoer, he had also written the stage into the fabric of his novels, particularly so with the Crummles family in *Nicholas Nickleby*. In 1845, having grown in status, confidence, and influence, he was able to gather about him a small company of actors and friends and to stage-manage and act himself in Ben Jonson's *Every Man in his Humour*, performed at the Royalty Theatre, a small establishment in Soho. He reveled in his organization of the actors, of the scenery and props, the costumes and make-up, the theater, and the audience. He became the creator of the event no less than he was the creator of his novels.

Though some of the audience were critical of the production, they had no impact on Dickens and his friends, for whom the process and the participation were sufficient

reward. Nevertheless, the company attracted attention and there was always demand to see them. Three months later, a different play was performed at the same venue, but then Dickens's involvement with the *Daily News* and his travels abroad led to a gap of 18 months before interest was renewed, this time with even greater enthusiasm. In 1847, the company traveled to perform at Manchester and Liverpool, the following year expanding to London, Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham, Edinburgh, and Glasgow. *The Merry Wives of Windsor* was added to their repertoire, and in 1851 a new Bulwer-Lytton comedy, *Not So Bad as We Seem*; each main performance was accompanied by a selection from a clutch of short farces. In one farce Dickens played six different characters, involving rapid costume change – it was all great fun. There was no money in this for Dickens or his company, all income going to good causes.

Important social changes were taking place around Dickens. He it was who booked his company of actors onto trains to carry them to Manchester. *Martin Chuzzlewit* in 1844 seems a celebration of coach and horse travel, but his next novel, *Dombey and Son* in 1848, reflects the age of the expanding railways. Euston Station, just a short walk from his home in Devonshire Terrace, was completed in 1846; the track out of London took away his schoolhouse at Wellington House Academy. The Houses of Parliament, where he had worked as a reporter, were being rebuilt, having burned down in 1834.

Around 1850, Dickens had his photograph taken for the first time, a daguerreotype by Henri Claudet: it shows a clean-shaven, solid, respectable man, well dressed, unsmiling, a man of business; it makes him look tall, though he was only 5 feet 8 inches. There is a solemnity about his face that was to deepen and age him prematurely, perhaps with good reason, all documented in the numerous photographs of him to appear over the next 20 years. In 1848 his beloved sister Fanny died of consumption, aged only 38, a sadness followed by the death of his youngest daughter Dora in 1850 and his father in 1851. A period of introspection developed as he started to write down an account of his life: this he showed to his wife and to Forster but abandoned the project and wove much of the information into his new novel, *David Copperfield*, written in the first person and telling the early life of an author. Seventeen years later, in a preface to *Copperfield*, he wrote "Of all my books, I like this the best." The many links between reality and fiction in *Copperfield* were not made explicit by Dickens and not placed before the public until after his death, in Forster's *Life of Charles Dickens*.

Journalism was one of the cornerstones of Dickens's career, and it was while working on *Copperfield* that he conceived and established, under his editorship, a weekly magazine called *Household Words*. Unlike the short spells he spent with *Bentley's Miscellany*, *Master Humphrey's Clock*, and the *Daily News*, his editorship this time was of long duration, lasting till his death 20 years later, albeit with a change of title to *All the Year Round* in 1859. Ably supported by his sub-editor, W. H. Wills, the running of his magazine was a major part of the routine of Dickens's life throughout the 1850s and 1860s. And just as he had himself been introduced to journalism by his father, who during his career as a correspondent for the *British Press* had

encouraged Charles to bring in notices of accidents, fires, and police reports, for which he was paid a penny for each printed line, so too did Dickens pass the fascination on to his own son Charley, who eventually, after his father's death, took over both ownership and editorship, which he held until 1888.

Sales, settling down to a regular 100,000 a week with *All the Year Round*, and rising to 300,000 with the Christmas numbers, provided Dickens with a good income. After *Copperfield*, four new novels through the 1850s – *Bleak House*, *Hard Times*, *Little Dorrit*, and *A Tale of Two Cities* – also earned him large sums. Re-issue of the earlier titles began in 1847 with the Cheap Edition, and was repeated from 1858 with a more expensive Library Edition. There followed in the 1860s a People's Edition and a Charles Dickens Edition which between them sold more than 880,000 copies before June 1870. Deals were also made with American publishers and with Tauchnitz to publish in European countries. All of this added considerably to Dickens's income.

In 1851 he moved out of the Devonshire Terrace home and into a larger house at nearby Tavistock Square. However, just five years later, there came onto the market the property of his childhood dreams: the house at Gad's Hill near Rochester, at the gates of which he and his father had stopped in admiration and aspired, in a hopeful sort of way, to own. His purchase of Gad's Hill Place was a step back to his childhood: the area that had first aroused his imagination and creativity became a revived source of inspiration. Chatham, Rochester, and the marshes formed the foundations for *Great Expectations*, written 1860–1; Rochester was the Cloisterham of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, started in 1869 though never finished; "Dullborough Town," "Chatham Dockyard," and other essays from *The Uncommercial Traveller*, all published through the 1860s, reminisced about the "birthplace of his fancy."

Gad's Hill Place was the first and only house for which Dickens bought the freehold; Tavistock House was held on a long lease, which he did not sell until 1860, thus maintaining a London and a country home for four years. His homes may have been an outward sign of Dickens's great success as a writer, but these were troubled years for his personal life. In 1857, while acting in *The Frozen Deep* at Manchester, he met and subsequently fell in love with an 18-year-old actress called Ellen Ternan. Besotted all his life by theater and the people who inhabited this morally doubtful world of escapism, at the age of 45 he surrendered his marriage and risked, but managed to hold onto, his family, his career, and his good name. His wife, perhaps not surprisingly after 10 children, did not compare well with the pretty face and well-developed figure of his mistress. Many years later, his daughter Kate said that the actress came like a breath of spring into his hard-working life and enslaved him. She flattered him, which he liked, and for her part she was 18 and proud to be noticed by such a famous man.

Various homes were set up for her in London, Slough, Peckham, and Boulogne, but for fear of public censure there was no question of them openly living together. Indeed, the relationship was hidden not just by Dickens but by the whole Dickens family for 80 years, and it was not until the 1930s that the truth came out, revealed by Dickens's daughter Kate and confirmed by her brother Henry. As a result of the

affair, he separated from his wife but sought ruthlessly, and successfully, to suppress the true reason for the split. Divisions occurred within the families: his son Charley went to live with Catherine for a year; his daughter Mamie, on the other hand, never once visited her mother till after Dickens died; Catherine's sister Georgina and the younger children remained with Dickens. His friendships with Baroness Coutts, with Thackeray, Lemon, John Leech, and others were ruptured by the separation. Dickens protected his public popularity and rode out the storm but the strain of his marriage breakdown, of maintaining a secret love affair, and of supporting the troubled lives of his siblings and his children all told in his aging face.

Such stress in his life was exacerbated by a new direction in which he now took his career. Producing and acting in the plays of others had satisfied him for a while, but his obsession with theater took a life-changing turn as he focused his not inconsiderable acting ability on "readings" from his own works. At first he had given such readings to small groups of friends and then to larger audiences for charitable purposes, but from 1858 he began performances for his own financial benefit. "His reading is not only as good as a play," wrote one critic, "but far better than most plays, for it is all in the best style of acting" (Collins 1975: xvii).

Between April 1858 and February 1859 he gave 108 performances, making a profit in the first month alone of £1,025: this compared with average earnings from his literary output of less than £3,000 a year. Starting and finishing in London, he traveled the length and breadth of England, Scotland, and Ireland, attracting large audiences wherever he went. Now the only actor on stage, he held his audiences in thrall and soaked up their spellbound fascination. His letters swell with pride at the receptions he received, and George Dolby, a later manager of the tours, wrote: "setting aside his pecuniary profits, the pleasure he derived from [this career] is not to be told in words" (Dolby 1912: 451). Of Birmingham, Dickens wrote: "My success is very great indeed"; at Sunderland: "I never beheld such a rapturous audience"; at Edinburgh: "I consider the triumph there, by far the greatest I have made. The City was taken by storm, and carried . . . On the last two nights, the crowd was immense, and the turn-away enormous. Everywhere, nothing was to be heard but praises." Scenes anticipated those given to film stars a hundred years later:

Arthur told you, I suppose, that he had his shirt front and waistcoat torn off, last night. He was perfectly enraptured in consequence. Our men got so knocked about, that he gave them five shillings apiece on the spot. John passed several minutes upside down against a wall, with his head amongst the peoples' boots. (*Letters* 8: 660)

At Belfast, people stopped him in the street:

the personal affection there, was something overwhelming. I wish you . . . could have seen the people look at me in the street – or heard them ask me, as I hurried to the hotel after reading last night to "do me the honor to shake hands Mither Dickens and God bless you Sir; not ounly for the light you have been to me this night; but for the light you've been in mee house Sir (and God love your face!) this many a year." Every

night, by the bye, since I have been in Ireland, the ladies have beguiled John out of the bouquet from my coat. And yesterday morning, as I had showered the leaves from my geranium in reading Little Dombey, they mounted the platform after I was gone, and picked them all up, as keepsakes. I have never seen men go in to cry so undisguisedly as they did at that reading yesterday afternoon. They made no attempt whatever to hide it, and certainly cried more than the women. (*Letters* 8: 643)

Through the 1860s, Dickens rode the crest of a wave of popularity: thousands flocked to his readings, the various editions of his books sold in huge numbers, and the periodicals he owned and edited were a great success. But the stress of too much work, too much traveling, too many demands on him, too many problems, all put deep lines on his face and a strain on his body. In 1865, returning from Boulogne, accompanied by Ellen Ternan and her mother, the train in which they traveled careered off a bridge at Staplehurst in Kent where workmen were repairing the track. Ten people died in the tragedy and Dickens, located in a coach left hanging from the bridge, was badly shaken. The accident weakened him, gave him nightmares, and he seemed to age rapidly after that. Through the 1860s death intruded constantly into his life: his son Walter died in 1863, aged only 22, his mother the same year, his brothers Alfred, Augustus, and Fred, his brother-in-law Henry Austin, his friends Thackeray, Daniel Maclise, and Clarkson Stansfield; it is said that there was a son born to Dickens and Ellen Ternan who died (Tomalin 1991: 143).

In 1864, Dickens began the last novel he was to complete, *Our Mutual Friend*, finishing it the following year. The readings, though, were more profitable than new novels, and in November 1867 he set off for a second visit to America, believing a tour of the theaters there would yield a fortune to him. Despite attacks in the American press accusing him of avarice and of deserting his wife, he was as much in demand there as he was in Britain. He gave 76 readings, attracting a total audience of more than 100,000 and cleared a profit of £19,000. On the downside, he suffered poor health for most of the five months of his trip. Concern for his health, though, did not stop him from embarking on a further tour back in Britain, starting in October 1868. In January of the following year, he introduced into his repertoire the murder of Nancy from *Oliver Twist*, a performance that terrified his audience, shook his fragile body, and left him drained of all energy. In April 1869, he became seriously ill and the remainder of his tour was canceled, having completed 74 performances out of a planned 100. Forced to rest from the readings, his mind turned once more to a new novel, and the writing of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* was begun six months later, publication of the first number appearing on March 31, 1870. The readings, he decided, had to be given up altogether, but like any good showman he squeezed in 12 farewell performances, treading the London boards from January to March 1870.

Resting more now, he was able to spend some time at Gad's Hill and some private time with Ellen Ternan at their home in Peckham. Until recently, all accounts of the demise of Dickens record his collapse from a stroke at Gad's Hill on June 8, 1870

and his death the following day. Claire Tomalin, though, suggests that there may have been a more intriguing end, which she writes as a postscript to the paperback edition of her book *The Invisible Woman* (1991: 271). Based on the hearsay of somebody who claimed to be present, and passed down by word of mouth, it is suggested that Dickens collapsed not at Gad's Hill but at Peckham from where, to avoid scandal, he was transported the 24 miles back to Rochester. The case is unproven, yet, given the family's subsequent protection of Dickens's reputation, an adjustment of the truth surrounding his death would not be surprising.

Charles Dickens was buried in Westminster Abbey on June 14, 1870. The first beneficiary in his will, receiving £1,000, was Ellen Ternan.

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