
London Particular

The Dickens Fellowship Newsletter

WREATH-LAYING CEREMONY AT WESTMINSTER ABBEY Eagle-eyed members will have spotted a glaring error in this year's membership card. The ceremony will take place on **TUESDAY 9 June** – not on the preceding Monday, as printed. As usual, it will take place at 6 pm (following Evensong at 5 pm). Our Media Manager has been sacked and will not receive his six-figure bonus.

ADDITIONAL FELLOWSHIP EVENT On **Sat 23 May**, former DF Hon Gen Sec, **Edward Preston**, will lead a ramble in Old Isleworth and St Margaret's. Members wishing to attend should meet at Busch Corner, Isleworth, at 2pm. Nearest train station Syon Lane.

MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL REMINDER Members should have received a renewal form for 2020 with the last LP. If you have renewed, you will have received membership card/programme for 2020. If not, please renew asap. If you've mislaid the form, send your name and address, with your cheque, payable to "Dickens Fellowship", or credit card details, to Membership Secretary, Dickens Fellowship, 48 Doughty Street, London WC1N 2LX. Fees are unchanged, i.e. £17 for membership, £15 for *The Dickensian*.

2020 CONFERENCE The Fellowship Conference will take place in London on **15 – 20 July**. It will be non-residential. If any members in the London area would be willing to offer accommodation to visiting members from overseas, please let the editor know at the address below.

Jacob's Island and the Dickens Estate (*Membership Secretary Allan Clack's article cont'd from last issue*) Southwark council gave the names of Dickens characters to the blocks of flats on the Bermondsey estate, which was built on the former Jacob's Island, a slum area of the

19th century where, at high tides, the creeks filled up and cut off a ramshackle collection of buildings. This was the location famously used by Dickens as the setting for Bill Sikes's death following the murder of Nancy. From the Dockhead end of the estate, there are 8 handsome brick-built council residential blocks of flats, built on the site of former dilapidated courts and streets. They were built in 1929 in late Victorian style. The first is Nickleby House, on which there is a blue plaque commemorating "*Tommy Steele, Entertainer*". The other blocks are named Oliver, Dombey, Pickwick, Weller, Bardell, Brownlow and Tapley. Round the flats are open spaces, grass, trees, three schools, a church and two pubs. It feels peaceful and the flats are much in demand for people who want to live a mere stone's throw from the City. (*To be cont'd*).

(Literary) comfort for the troops DF member **Alison Glasheen** has found an excellent example of the way CD is all-pervading in society - in a book by Alexander Baron, *The Human Kind*. In a chapter called 'Copperfield and the Erbs', some new recruits are kicking their heels in Nissen huts on a deserted moor in 1941, bored and feeling forgotten. The author finds a copy of *David Copperfield* among a batch of books from the Women's Voluntary Service, starts reading and is soon absorbed. The men ask for the book to be read aloud. They become engrossed, discuss the characters and DC becomes for a while part of their lives. *The Human Kind* is part of a war trilogy – all worth reading, Alison says.

Pickwick Bicycle Club 150th anniversary Our Hon Gen Sec, **Paul Graham**, reminds us that 2020 marks not only the sesquicentenary of the death of Dickens but also the sesquicentenary of the foundation of the Pickwick Bicycle Club. The Club was formed on 22 June 1870 - just 13 days after Dickens's death – at the Downs Hotel in Hackney Downs. It is not only the oldest cycling club in the world, but also the oldest club with an overt Dickensian connection. The PBC is one of several Pickwick Clubs affiliated to the Dickens Fellowship. Many congratulations to the Club on achieving this landmark.

A journalist's (slightly twisted) view ... Edward Preston has sent in an article re Bleak House in Broadstairs from the Times 'Property of the Week' section. It's described as a 7-bedroom, Grade II listed property, price £2.5 million. The article starts with an interesting description of CD: *'an international celebrity by his mid-20s, smoked endless cigars and was a disaster with women. He was married with 10 children, but fell in love with a 17-year old actress. Plus, he was a hardcore boozier. On tour in America, he breakfasted on a sherry cocktail and, in lieu of afternoon tea, had a pint of champagne at 3pm'*.

The Lion Hotel, Shrewsbury Shrewsbury has been in the news recently because of the floods – it is almost completely surrounded by the river Severn. I went there in drier times last year and stayed at the Lion Hotel, a coaching inn dating from 1618. Famous people who have stayed there include opium addict William de Quincy (who slept in the ballroom), King William IV, Madame Tussaud, who presented an exhibition; Paganini gave two concerts and Jenny Lind sang there. Other patrons included Disraeli, Darwin and Dickens. CD stayed three times, in 1838, 1852 and 1858. In 1858, he wrote to his family: *'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 downhill and slantwise at the crookedest old black and yellow houses'*. (Ed.)

A Dickensian start in life... Novelist and former British army infantry officer Steven Billy Mitchell, alias Andy McNab, was left at birth (in 1959) on the steps of Guy's Hospital, wrapped in a Harrods shopping bag. He came to prominence in 1993 with the novel *Bravo Two Zero*. Asked recently by the 'i' newspaper re his favourite author, he replied, *'Charles Dickens. Having come to reading late in life (I joined the Army at nearly 17 with the reading age of an 11-year old), I've really enjoyed discovering classic literature. CD's characters and the dilemmas they face are still so relevant'*.

The Pick-me-up Papers The Sunday Times (1st March) reports that *'Classic works of literature by Shakespeare, Dickens and other great writers can boost your brain and relieve depression, chronic pain and dementia – while self-help books are a waste of time'*. The findings show that 'challenging language' can send 'rocket boosters' to the brain and improve mental health. Modern novels can also spark 'aliveness', but only if the storyline is unpredictable, the research found. Self-help books do not usually 'ignite' the brain because

people read them only to extract information – this does not light up parts of the brain linked to memory and emotion. The research, carried out at Liverpool University, hooked readers up to brain scanners and monitored them as they read classic texts. 'You could see the brain coming to life', said Professor Davis.

Restoration House DF member **Fleur Hogarth** visited Restoration House in Rochester last year. She hadn't realised how extensive it was. The current owners live in the house and have spent a fortune ensuring its survival against the ravages of time. Known to us as Satis House, the home of Miss Havisham and Estella in *Great Expectations*, it was interesting to walk round the rooms filled with period furniture, artefacts and paintings by great artists such as Gainsborough, Reynolds and Lely. In 1660 King Charles II stayed there on his way to London to be restored to the throne (hence the name); his bedroom and staircase have some interesting features, such as an oak chest-of-drawers with original lining paper of 1660 celebrating his marriage to Catherine of Braganza. In 'Miss Havisham's Room' or the Great Chamber, a beautiful Italian harpsichord is prominently displayed. At the rear of the property is the old brewery featured in *GE*. Fleur adds that the house is open Thursdays and Fridays, from June to September, and is well worth a visit.

A topical note from Bleak House *'The waters are out in Lincolnshire. An arch of the bridge in the park has been sapped and sopped away. The adjacent low-lying ground, for half a mile in breadth, is a stagnant river, with melancholy trees for islands in it, and a surface punctured all over, all day long, with falling rain. My Lady Dedlock's 'place' has been extremely dreary. The weather, for many a day and night, has been so wet that the trees seem wet through and the soft loppings and prunings of the woodman's axe can make no crash or crackle as they fall. The deer, looking soaked, leave quagmires, where they pass. The shot of a rifle loses its sharpness in the moist air, and its smoke moves in a tardy little cloud towards the green rise, coppice-topped, that makes a background for the falling rain.'* So much for the floods. I wonder what CD would have had to say about coronavirus!

"Out with it', as the father said to his child, when he swallowed a farden." (Sam Weller, Pickwick). In my case, it's not 'fardens' I want, but contributions, to be sent, please, to: Alison Gowans, "Danesdyke", 27A Ashcombe Road, Carshalton, Surrey SM5 3ET, or by email – aligowans17@outlook.com