

*One of a series of articles covering the  
lives of Dorsetians and local events of international renown*

# Charles Dickens

7 February 1812 – 9 June 1870

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7<sup>th</sup> February 2012 sees the bicentenary of the birth of Charles Dickens. The great author stayed in Dover on numerous occasions, which provided him with inspiration and therefore, to my mind, the anniversary should be celebrated.

On the last building in Camden Crescent before the car park is a Dover Society plaque to Dickens. He brought his family to stay at number 10 (destroyed during World War II) for three months in 1852. Dickens friend, the novelist Wilkie Collins came to stay and wrote a vivid account of the regulated way the household was run - breakfast at 08.10hrs, afterwards writing until 14.00hrs then walking. Dinner was at 17.30hrs and bed between 22.00 and 23.00hrs.

Although Dickens was involved in an acting tour during the stay, it is known that he did spend time writing *Bleak House*. He also undertook speaking tours and in Dover, these were usually held at the Apollonian Hall, Snargate Street - which was demolished in 1930 to widen the then Commercial Quay.

The 'talks' mainly consisted of the reading

passages from his works. Following a presentation from *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Pickwick Papers* on 5 November 1861, he wrote: "The effect of the readings at... Dover really seems to have outdone the best

usual impression,... they wouldn't go.... The people in the stalls set the example of laughing, in the most curiously unreserved way, and they laughed with such really cordial enjoyment, when Squeers read the boys' letters, that the contagion extended to me. For one couldn't hear them without laughing too."



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In 1856, Dickens stayed at the Ship Hotel, on Custom House Quay, to work on *Little Dorritt*. However, due to concerns over domestic issues he spent most of his time taking long walks and talking to locals. These were recounted in *Out of Season*, published in Household Words. Some years ago, I undertook a piece of acclaimed academic research in relation to *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens's twelfth novel, (*Dickensian Summer* 2002 pp 140-144). He started working on the novel in March 1859 but in my research I successfully showed that it was his 1856 stay that inspired many of the themes he used.

The book is set at the time of the French Revolution and starts with a coach journey to Dover, which he describes, making oblique reference to smuggling: *"The little narrow crooked town of Dover is itself away from the beach, and ran its head into the chalk cliffs, like a marine ostrich. The beach was a desert of heaps of sea and stones tumbling wildly about, and the sea did what it liked, and what it liked was destruction. It thundered at the town and thundered at the cliffs, and brought the coast down madly ... A little fishing was done in the port and a quantity of strolling about by night, and looking seaward, particularly at those times when the tide made and was near flood. Small tradesmen who did no business whatever, sometimes unaccountably realised large fortunes, and it was remarkable that nobody in the neighbourhood could endure a lamplighter!"*

My research showed that Lucie Manette, the heroine, and Jarvis Lorry, agent for Tellson's Bank, were based on local characters. Further, that the hero of *Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Darnay, was based on one of Dover's leading personalities at the time of the French Revolution, John Minet Fector who built Kearsney Abbey!

While in Dover, Dickens sometimes stayed at the Lord Warden Hotel (now Lord Warden House). In a letter, dated 1863, he referred to John Birmingham, the manager and licensee, and his wife as *"my much esteemed friends."* John Birmingham was also the Mayor of Dover in 1860, 1861, 1868 and 1869. The nearby streets of what was then the maritime Pier District provided the atmosphere of the *Tom-All-Alone's* described in, *Bleak House*.

It was at Dickens Corner, in the Market Square that *David Copperfield* rested before ascending Western Heights in search of his aunt, Betsy Trotwood. John Igglesden opened his bakery there in 1788. When it closed, in 1967, John Wilkins bought the building and adjacent properties on Church Street for redevelopment, but ensured that the façade remained. The shop was subsequently occupied by Dennis Weaver's stationers before becoming a café.

The description of Peggity's brother's 'house' at Yarmouth - an upturned boat - was that of Smith's Folly, that once graced East Cliff. As for Betsy Trotwood's House, this is described as, *"A very neat little cottage with cheerful bow windows: in front of it, a square gravelled court or garden full of flowers; carefully tended and smelling deliciously."*



Dickens Corner

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Although Broadstairs have, wrongly in my view, claimed that the inspiration came from the home of one of their local characters, in reality, it was based on a cottage on what was then Pilots Meadow, at the top of what is now Adrian Street. Pilot's Field was a favourite resting place of Dickens when walking the cliffs and there was a double fronted cottage with a small walled in garden, just as he describes.

As for the character of Betsy Trotwood, there is no doubt in my mind, that she was based on Sarah Rice, a formidable lady

who was the mother of Dover's MP, (1837 - 1857), Edward Royds Rice. She lived in the area of the present petrol station on Townwall Street.

Nearby a Mr Golder kept a stud of donkeys that visitors to the town would hire for riding on the seashore. Sarah objected vehemently about these donkeys especially as they often went into her beautifully kept garden and ate the plants! Sarah was a business associate of John Minet Fector, on whom the hero of *Tale of Two Cities* was based!

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## MEMBERSHIP NEWS

Spring 2012

### Subscriptions Are Due

The usual reminder:- Subscriptions remain the same remarkable value at £6 single or £10 for two members living at the same address. Please pay by cash or cheque either at the AGM or by post or through our letterbox. Thankfully cheques are not going to disappear but an alternative method of payment is to set up a standing order and hopefully save yourself from further trouble - forms are always available from me.

It is remarkable that many Dovorians are still unaware of the Society's existence in spite of Terry's regular articles in the local press, Mike's work on our website, our posters publicising our meetings and the placing of Newsletters in the waiting rooms of local surgeries.

Perhaps we have a member willing to explore the possibilities of local radio? Nevertheless personal introduction remains the surest method of recruiting new members and we are very grateful to those who bring friends along. At our meetings there are always spare copies of the recent newsletter available in the lobby at St Mary's Parish Centre for distribution to potential members.

Currently we have 453 members and have recently welcomed:- Mr B & Mrs J Powell, Mrs B Henry, Mr G Wiltshire, Mr D Rhys, Mr B & Mrs N Cameron Ward.

This is also the time of year when we express our sympathy to the families and friends of the members who have recently died:- Mrs Muriel Mellanby, Mr Ken & Mrs Delysia Berry, Mrs Brenda Lee, Mr John Turnpenny, Mr David Pike, Mrs Jean Steed, Mr Maurice Sayers.