
London Particular

The Dickens Fellowship Newsletter

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING The AGM of the Dickens Fellowship will take place via Zoom on **Fri 15 July at 18.00**. Members of the Central DF or of any branch are invited to attend and hear reports from the Officers and to welcome the new President – Professor Cathy Waters. You should have received an invitation to apply for a link. If not, or if you have mislaid it, please let us know.

ANNUAL CONFERENCE Following the cancellation of the planned Annual Conference in Haarlem, a virtual conference will be held via Zoom on **Sat 16 July**. The programme and further details are obtainable via the website. Again, invitations to access the link have been sent out. Please let us know if you would like to attend and have not received the link.

One more custard pie Following on from the last edition of LP, here's another excerpt from George Orwell's essay on Dickens that appealed to DF member **Roberta Berryman** (Virginia, USA): *"If Dickens had been merely a comic writer, chances are that now no one would remember his name... The one thing that ... caused us to remember him, was simply the fact that he was a moralist, the consciousness of his having 'something to say'. He is always preaching a sermon, and that is the final secret of his inventiveness. For you can only create if you can care. Types like Squeers and Micawber could not have been produced by a hack writer looking for something to be funny about. A joke worth laughing at always has an idea behind it, and usually a subversive idea. Dickens is able to go on being funny because he is in revolt against authority, and authority is always there to be laughed at. There is always room for one more custard pie."*

Dickens back on radio David Aaronovitch (*The Times* 30 May) is inspired by a radio version from long ago of *Martin Chuzzlewit* – now available on BBC Sounds. **"What is it?" asks the inimitable voice. 'Is the Thames afire and cooking its own fish?'"** This is **Patricia Hayes playing Sairey Gamp, a broadcast first made 35 years**

ago - and "it is glorious. For ten hours my companions are the hypocritical Pecksniff, the murderous Jonas Chuzzlewit and the conman Montague Tigg, and I travel from an Islington boarding house to a Mississippi swamp. It's just bliss." [I assume Mr Aaronovitch is referring to Mrs Todgers's boarding house, which is of course NOT located in Islington, but a lot further south - in the City, indeed in the very shadow of the Monument. CD's description of the location and of the house itself is superb, one of my favourites. Ed.]

A not very good reason for being nice James Marriott (*The Times*, 12 May) talks about novelist V S Naipaul, saying, "his cruelty and lack of sentimentality were essential to his charisma. This is hard for modern readers to admit, because now 'Goodness is becoming mandatory'. The Victorians believed they loved only virtue ... religiose invalid children; the bland, oval-faced heroines of Dickens.

"A rejection of the 19th century fetish for innocence was integral to the backlash against Victorianism. 20th century citizens prided themselves on being grown up enough to understand that women liked sex and that Dickens was both a humane artist and a monster.

"Today the Victorians don't seem so strange. Publishers make their authors sign 'morality clauses' guaranteeing good behaviour. Goodness seems more urgent today than it did in the 1990s because of resurgent authoritarianism and European war... and social media is so dangerously exposing and so full of enemies that, for celebrities, a paranoid commitment to the performance of niceness has become a necessary survival strategy".

Dickens and railways – worse than Staplehurst? DF member from Sheffield, **Maria Michael**, quotes from a letter from CD published in *The Times* 29 Jan 1867. Dr Tony Williams (DF Past President) has kindly sent me the wording of the whole letter, so I can quote it in full, as follows: *'I beg most earnestly to warn the public through*

your columns against the morning express train on the Midland railway between Leicester and Bedford. I took that train this morning, leaving Leicester at 9.35. The reckless fury of the driving and the violent rocking of the carriages obliged me to leave it at Bedford rather than come on to London with my through ticket. When we stopped at Market Harborough, general alarm was expressed by the passengers and strong remonstrances were urged on the officials, also, at Bedford.

'I am an experienced railway traveller at home and abroad; I was in the Staplehurst accident; I have been in trains under most conceivable conditions, but I have never been so shaken and flung about as in this train, and have never been in such obvious danger. The very obliging authorities suggested that the road was "rough" from the thaw, and that I was in a light carriage... I am certain from experience on other railways since the thaw set in that there is no such "roughness" on other railways. As to the second suggestion, one of the passengers who protested the most strongly was a gentleman in a heavy carriage next to my own. I may add that my companion in the carriage (who left the train with me) is almost constantly on English railways, and fully confirms what I have here written'.

Still a big issue Further to Prince William's recent foray onto the streets with a Big Issue seller, I'm glad he didn't meet anyone like this: ***'Suddenly, a thing that in a moment more I should have trodden upon without seeing, rose up at my feet with a cry of loneliness and houselessness, the like of which I never heard. We then stood face to face looking at one another, frightened by one another. The creature was like a beetle-browed hair(sic)-lipped youth of twenty, and it had a loose bundle of rags on, which it held together with one of its hands. It shivered from head to foot, and its teeth chattered, and ... it made with its whining mouth as if it were snapping at me, like a worried dog. Intending to give this ugly object money, I put out my hand to stay it – for it recoiled as it whined and snapped – and laid my hand upon its shoulder. Instantly, it twisted out of its garment... and left me standing alone with its rags in my hands.'*** (Uncommercial Traveller – Night Walks)

Dickens and teeth It may be difficult for some to access NHS dentistry at present, but I think we're still better off, dentally speaking, than in Dickens's time. **Dr Nicholas Cambridge**, honorary research fellow in humanities and medical history at Buckingham University (and DF member), has written a book – ***Bleak Health*** - about Dickens's

health and that of his family. *The Times*, 21 May, quotes Dr Cambridge as saying that Dickens's poor health (he had gout and several other problems) would have greatly affected his gums and overall dental hygiene. During CD's reading tour in the US in 1867, he wrote to his dentist: ***"What was my horror at New York one night to find the light plate you so kindly made me, useless, and nevermore to be fixed by any skill of mine!!!"*** Referring to his second, heavier duty denture, he wrote: ***"What were my emotions the other day to find my faithful heavy plate, that charming instrument which had become part of myself and served me through all sorts of dinners, suddenly give in, in the same manner, and positively refuse to be coaxed or compelled into any adjustment whatever!!! I have put the two by carefully, and shall fly to you ... for safety and for succour in the earliest hours of my return to England."*** His dental troubles appear to have begun in 1841, when he first mentions toothache.

A good definition In Dickens's story, *"The Lamplighter"*, the chairman of a group of lamplighters tells his audience about "Tom's uncle" who, disgruntled by the invention of gas-lamps, ***"petitioned the government for – I want a word, gentlemen – what do you call that which they give to people when it's found out, at last, that they've never been of any use, and have been paid too much for doing nothing?"*** ***"Compensation?"*** suggested the vice-chairman. ***"That's it",*** said the chairman. ***"Compensation."***

Well, I never knew that... I was surprised by something I read the other day in Anthony Trollope's *Dr Thorne*. The rich heiress Miss Dunstable has been trying to find a buyer for her family ointments business, which is called 'Oil of Lebanon'. She doesn't think much of the appellation 'Oil of Lebanon' and says: ***'I thought of changing the name to "London Particular"; but my lawyers say the brewers would bring an action against me'***. In the explanatory notes at the end of the book, *London Particular* is defined as ***"Later a term for a thick London fog but then a kind of Madeira. The vintners rather than the brewers might have brought an action against Miss Dunstable"***.

"It's of no consequence" to Mr Toots (Dombey & Son) perhaps, but it's of great consequence to me to receive your contributions/comments: Alison Gowans, Danesdyke, 27A Ashcombe Road, Carshalton, Surrey SM5 3ET, or by email – aligowans17@outlook.com