“The Mystery of Edwin Drood” is Dickens’ final novel. The reason why it is the last is that he died exactly half way through writing it, with 6 of 12 instalments to go. I am one of several who have attempted to supply the second half.

Let me deal immediately with two possible misperceptions about my role. Do I consider myself in any way the equal of Dickens? Of course I don’t. Dickens was a towering genius who reshaped literature, the master of the written word from humour to tragedy to drama to pathos, with an enormous following and a style which changed during his working lifetime from writing about Pickwick to creating Bradley Headstone and John Jasper. I am none of these things. I have not therefore entitled this talk “Being Dickens”!

Secondly, am I an expert on Dickens? Again, the firm answer is No. I studied Our Mutual Friend with great pleasure for A Level English, but that was way back in the 20th century – and not the later part either. I know that there is an enormous bibliography on Drood, and any number of theories about it and the ending. Even a film. I fear that I am by no means an expert on these works either. But at least I cannot be accused of plagiarism.

Since that approach might seem a little cavalier, let me explain. I wanted my Part 2 to flow directly out of what Dickens wrote in Part 1, and to be based on Part 1 in content and as far as possible in style, uninfluenced by other considerations and conjectures. To misquote Hamlet, the book’s the thing.

Let me very briefly resume what Dickens did write: with apologies to those who already know it well. John Jasper, the young choir-master and organist at Cloisterham Cathedral, who is also a drug-addict who hates the Cathedral, is madly in love with a young orphan, Rosa Bud. She has been betrothed since their infancy to another orphan, Edwin Drood, who is Jasper’s nephew. They break their engagement; but, before anyone else knows this, he disappears; and the finding of his watch and pin thrown into a pool suggests his murder. The unused engagement ring is not discovered: only Rosa’s guardian Hiram Grewgious knows that Edwin had it in his pocket that day. Jasper ensures that suspicion falls on Neville Landless, who has recently arrived in Cloisterham from the East, together with his sister Helena, to complete his education with the Reverend Septimus Crisparkle. Neville has immediately fallen in love with Rosa; and Jasper has already instigated a violent quarrel between him and Drood.

Six months after Drood’s disappearance, two things happen to move the story forward. A stranger called Datchery appears in town; he is clearly trying to solve the mystery, suspects Jasper, and sets himself to observe the latter at close quarters. Secondly, Jasper declares his love to Rosa, who is so frightened that she flees to London, to her guardian Grewgious: where she also meets a youngish sailor called Tartar. The mutual attraction between Rosa and Tartar is immediate and obvious: but there the first part ends.

Of course I checked whether there were any outside indicators of what Dickens intended for Part 2. There is nothing in the Number Plans, which refer solely to Part 1, though there are twice repeated references to murder, once in relation to Uncle and Nephew. The number plans are fascinating for understanding Dickens’ way of working up and developing the story, but not a great help for eliciting the likely content of the second half. Indeed, there is nothing at all on the subject direct from Dickens: and this is a vital element in what I set out to do, and how I did it.
Contemporary testimony is thin but clear. Dickens’ son recorded the following exchange with his father, initiated by himself: “Of course, Edwin Drood was murdered?” “Of course, what else do you suppose?” According to Forster, the friend and first biographer of Dickens: “The story was to be that of a murder of a nephew by his uncle.” Collins, Dickens’ son in law and the designer of the front cover, wrote about the book: “Edwin Drood was never to reappear, he having been murdered by Jasper”.

Thus far, thus clear: but there is nothing on how he was murdered; or on the discovery of the body or the consequences. So the exercise essentially becomes not a whodunnit but a howdunnit; and everything has to be worked out and deduced from a careful reading of Part 1

The first point is a very obvious one. This is no “Mystery” on the lines of the works of Dickens’ friend Wilkie Collins, of Conan Doyle, of Agatha Christie and so on. It is clear from the text who the victim is, and who the murderer is, even without the evidence of Dickens’ family circle. The first two chapters set the scene, with Jasper’s opium habit and violence, and his uneasy relationship with Drood. Later, there is the curious night-time visit to the Cathedral crypt and tower by Jasper and Durdles (who at one point falls asleep for some time), and then Jasper’s sudden rage when he discovers that they have been observed by a local urchin, Deputy. Above all, there is his marvellously-described fainting on hearing from Rosa’s guardian Grewgious that the betrothal was terminated even before the disappearance of Drood. As is his wont, Grewgious tells the story in a careful and painstaking way, observing the effect on Jasper the while.

I should emphasise that this is no Agatha Christie technique of appearing to point all the evidence in one direction, before backtracking and finding another suspect/other suspects. The whole of the first half of the book is testimony to Jasper’s villainy, for example laid bare in the scene by the sundial, when Jasper declares to Rosa his mad love for her, which reinforces Rosa’s suspicions of Jasper’s part in the disappearance of Drood. And this is not a Poirot-like imaginative reconstruction of the scene, the product of those exceptional “little grey cells”. No, it is direct reported speech of a scene at that point known only to Jasper and Rosa – and to ourselves, the privileged readers (just as we are the only witnesses of Jasper’s successful attempt to set Neville at Drood’s throat.)

It is also worth noting Dickens’ description of Jasper as “so terrible a man” and a “horrible wonder apart”: a little overdone if his sins are mainly to indulge in opium, as many did at the time; and fall in love with an exquisitely pretty girl. No, Jasper is a murderer.

So this is a novel, with the mystery of the disappearance of Drood at its centre. It is clearly logical to expect that Part 2 will explain the mystery, discover how Jasper killed him, and how the story finished, with Jasper punished and most (and I use the word advisedly) most of the loose ends tied up, and the whole tale brought to a fitting conclusion: and yes, I do mean marriages as well.

The extant text also highlights some aspects of crucial importance. For example, the engagement ring. When Edwin decides not to show the ring to Rosa, but to keep it in his inside pocket, Dickens writes: “…there was a chain forged in the moment of that small conclusion, riveted to the foundations of heaven and earth, and gifted with invincible forces to hold and drag.” I think that we can safely assume that this is an important
moment, and that the ring will play a further part in the story; and indeed that the circumstances of its reappearance will be directly related to the murder of Drood.

I would also argue that references to the tower and to the mysterious spike in the opening lines of the book, describing Jasper’s opium-induced dream, are intended to be significant. The tower is a recurring theme throughout the book. The spike in the dream “may be set up by the Sultan’s orders for the impaling of a horde of Turkish robbers, one by one.” The focus on the tomb of Mrs Sapsea, deceased wife of the self-important Mayor, and on the pile of quick-lime, speak for themselves.

The keys in the possession of Durdles – to crypt, tower and Sapsea tomb – also receive careful attention. They are in the hands of Jasper, and being “idly” examined and clinked in Chapter 4, used in what Dickens calls the “unaccountable sort of expedition” up the tower by Jasper and Durdles, and the key to the crypt door is found by the side of Durdles when he awakes from his drunken doze on that portentous occasion.

So, some of the elements for Part 2 are there. But how does one set about completing a greatly admired and discussed masterpiece.

The initial answers are technical. The first part is written in 6 instalments. So should the second. The first is written in a mixture of the past and present tenses, with the Princess Puffer (the chatelaine of the opium den) invariably appearing in the present, while others tend to attract the past. So should the second. Part 1 has a chapter title from Macbeth, and various other borrowings: it is reasonable to suppose that Part 2 should continue the Macbeth theme: after all, it’s the same novel.

So, having established the structure and some of the approach, how does the story develop? And what about the style?

I read and reread Part 1, until I felt that I had developed some understanding of how Dickens was likely to continue his story, and the elements he would include. Then I sat and wrote it in the way in which a close reading of the first half suggested that Dickens might have written it. So I was certainly not being Dickens with all his complicated life and emotions and energy and penetrating brilliance and history of writing. If you like, I was trying to put myself close to the mind of the Dickens who had written the first half of Drood, and was now focussed on completing his work, in the second half of 1870, because he had not died, but lived to complete his tale: and, at the same time, trying to get inside the characters he had created – a double act of ventriloquism. Perhaps, as I suggest in my Introduction, my experience as a diplomat, listening to others, and playing my own multi-faceted role, helped in this endeavour.

So, some specific examples of the approach I followed.

I introduced one new character: Nicholas Mander Endcombe, and his family. This was foreshadowed by Dickens. Helena refers to the “enemy” who would in some way communicate with Tartar to warn him off Neville. Hence the name: NME.

Apart from this sole usurper, the dramatis personae remain the same and retain their trade-mark characteristics, with some changes and developments e.g. Sapsea falling out of love with the figure of the Dean, and Crisparkle falling further into love with the person of Helena. With Crisparkle and Helena, and Rosa and Tartar, I have been very traditional; two prospective brides, two putative grooms, two weddings. Another reason, as some wit remarked, for Drood not returning from the dead and spoiling the symmetry.
The detective Datchery was introduced by Dickens towards the end of Part 1; but who was he, or she, according to some theories? I believe that there are few characters in Drood, apart from Jasper himself and such obvious misfits as that dainty piece of china Mrs Crisparkle, the comely Miss Twinkleton and the gunpowderish Mr Honeythunder, who have not been suspected at one time or another of being Datchery, with convincing or unconvincing evidence being presented. Even Helena is considered a candidate, on the basis that when a young girl in Ceylon she dressed as a boy in an attempt to escape; but the timing does not fit. After Datchery’s appearance on the scene, school term ends and Helena departs the Nuns’ House to attend her brother’s fortunes in Holborn, where Rosa duly finds her when she flees to London shortly after. No time there to sit all day at the porch of the inconvenient lodging by Jasper’s room, observing Jasper’s movements. It is obvious that Datchery wears a white wig, presumably to make himself look older; but there is not much else in the way of concealment, just a tightish blue surtout. A note in my Penguin Drood comments that this was a frockcoat worn tightly buttoned to show off the figure. One really cannot imagine the beautiful Helena of all people evading recognition in this way. No, Datchery was himself; though that is unlikely to have been the character’s real name, given his elaborate charade about announcing his name on first arrival at The Crozier.

One final point before I leave the theme of Datchery. I believe that one theory has it that Drood returns as Datchery. But if he returns, there is no murder to investigate. And Drood will presumably know what happened to him during his disappearance. So why hang round Jasper’s doorstep, looking for clues?

Back to the plot. Dickens’ illustrator, Luke Fildes, records Dickens as telling him for a picture of Jasper: “I must have the double necktie! It is necessary, for Jasper strangles Edwin Drood with it.” And indeed it appears in Dickens’ text. In chapter 14, Jasper is wearing on the evening of Drood’s disappearance “a large black scarf of strong close-woven silk.” But then, in Dickens’ final chapter, number 23, Jasper whispers the following words to the Princess Puffer in the opium den: “No struggle, no consciousness of peril, no entreaty”. Could Jasper really have strangled Drood with a scarf without any of these things? Possibly, if Drood was again drugged by Jasper – and/or mesmerised. But, it is the night of the great storm; and it seems a little bathetic for Dickens to have dreamed that up as background for the simple murder of an unresisting victim. “No such power of wind has blown for many a winter night. Chimneys topple in the streets, and people hold to posts and corners…[in the morning] it is seen that the hands of the Cathedral clock are torn off, that lead from the roof has been stripped away… and that some stones have been displaced upon the summit of the great tower.” Surely the reader will have expected a little more than an uncontested strangling after that build-up: possibly something involving the tower (remembering that it was in the tower that Durdles heard “the ghost of a howl of a dog: a long, dismal woeful howl, such as a dog gives when a person’s dead”: precisely two Christmas Eves before Drood disappeared).

Dickens may have initially intended Jasper to strangle Drood; though he was always guarded, even with his family, in offering information about contents in advance, and was probably reluctant to give his illustrators too many hints. Even if he did, he may have changed his mind; or alternatively, he may have wanted his fictional creation Jasper to change his, not least because of the timing of the death in relation to the great storm. Above all, it’s a pity to waste that “boisterous gale”.
Next it is Forster who offers a piece of evidence: but is it? He describes Dickens’ intention to set the final chapters in the condemned cell. Fildes confirms a plan to visit Maidstone Gaol for an illustration: never done, because Dickens was dead and Drood left unfinished by then.

If one takes those last two points together, and accepts Fildes and Forster at face value, Jasper would have strangled Drood with a scarf (and, remember, no struggle, no consciousness of peril, no entreaty); and, being already in the condemned cell, would have paid for his crime by himself being hanged by the common hangman, like the meanest and most commonplace criminal. Is it not a little banal for someone billed as “so terrible a man” and a “horrible wonder apart”? I also doubt the “final chapters” being set in the condemned cell. What about the chapters in which Dickens will bring his tale to a (presumably positive) conclusion, with those lovers married, most ends tied and some indication of what awaits his many characters in the future. I am reminded of Oscar Wilde’s Miss Prism on the subject of her novel: “The good ended happily and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means”. I do not see how the story-line would work if all this necessary work of completion is done before the end of Jasper, before the other characters are relieved of his lowering presence. We need the calm after the drama, as in Beethoven’s Pastoral Symphony

There are other puzzles in the Forster testimony: and remember that it is Forster speaking, not Dickens. There was to be a review of the murderer’s career by himself, with its temptations “dwelt upon as if, not he the culprit, but some other man, were tempted” and his wickedness elicited from him, as if told of another. Does this suggest another elaborate attempt to lay the blame on another? Neville again? But surely Dickens has played out that theme, in the first half. Who then?

As for Jasper’s wickedness being elicited from him, already in Part 1 Dickens had introduced Datchery to investigate Jasper. Was Forster perhaps thinking of a conversation with Dickens before Datchery was created? Because Forster did not know that Dickens was going to die on 9 June any more than Dickens did. He is unlikely therefore to have kept an unusually close eye on the development of Drood: even if he had pierced Dickens’ watchful defences.

To make this point a different way, what is to be the main theme of Part 2 if not the patient unravelling by Datchery of the clues left by both Dickens and his creature Jasper? And the evidence suggests that he will make a success of it. In his final chapter, almost the last piece he wrote, is Dickens’ famous evocation of Cloisterham in the sunshine. This last passage tells us – or at least it tells me – that God is in his heaven and all’s right with the world, and that Datchery is firmly on the heels of Jasper: though he may need a little help, e.g. from Helena, to get there finally.

Why do I single out Helena? I am convinced that she plays a big role in the second half of the novel: quite apart from marrying Septimus Crisparkle. After Rosa’s confession about Jasper’s infatuation, Dickens writes of Helena: “There was a slumbering gleam of fire in the intense dark eyes…. Let whomsoever it most concerned, look well to it!” Watch out, Jasper: and, watch out reader!

Who knows how the book would eventually have been finished by Dickens. Let’s remember that when he died he was exactly 6 months from completion. A lot can happen in an author’s mind in that time.
All that we can say with some certainty is that, based on what Dickens actually wrote in Part 1, which is our constant yardstick, Jasper is likely to reveal his crime under the influence of opium. And perhaps doing so in a state of “scattered consciousness”, which is Dickens’ description of his opium-fuelled haze at the start of the novel. Thus, and this is a nod in the direction of Forster, perhaps believing himself to be in the condemned cell, reviewing his life and the murder, making what amounts to a confession in his confused state, and also in part making himself a spectator of events.

I earlier used the word “mesmerised”. Dickens certainly leaves plenty of hints of Jasper’s powers over both Edwin and Rosa scattered about his text: his “look of intentness and intensity” in looking at Drood, Rosa’s “old horrible feeling of being compelled by him”. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that these powers may have played a role in the killing of Drood by Jasper: or at least that Dickens was giving himself the opportunity to use this theme when the moment came.

And now for a couple of elements which I discount from having a role to play in the second half.

One is Neville. Was he to die? Forster says Yes. Or, rather, perhaps Yes. “Landless, who was himself, I think, to have perished in assisting Tartar finally to unmask and seize the murderer.” And there may be a hint of an untimely end in Dickens’ text: “I wish that your eyes were not quite so large, and not quite so bright.” But large and bright eyes are hardly a signal that someone is to perish in unmasking and seizing a murderer; while they are quite consistent with a lengthy period of study and enforced isolation in hiding from the world in a period of significant mental turmoil as a result of being unjustly suspected of murder, and expelled from Cloisterham. Dickens describes Neville as having a prisonous look. Besides, I see no profit to the tale from Neville being killed off. I prefer to see him as a reformed character, greatly assisted by the ever charitable Grewgious as well as by Crisparkle, and becoming a special favourite of Mrs Crisparkle, who had previously thought so ill of him.

Secondly there’s the so-called “Sapsea Fragment”: a piece by Dickens about Sapsea, and indeed narrated by him, about Sapsea withdrawing from the Eight Club, which bears no direct relationship to anything in the first part of Drood. However, a conversation between the Sapsea of the Fragment and a character called Poker (which is the main point of the anecdote) appears to be a foretaste of the first meeting between Sapsea and Datchery in the fifth instalment of Part 1.

So we can be pretty sure that the fragment was not intended for Part 2 of Drood. Indeed since Sapsea leaps straight into the Number Plans already fully-formed as “Mr Sapsea. Old Tory Jackass”, when most of the other characters are still feeling their way, it could even be that the fragment precedes the writing of the first instalment, where we are introduced to Sapsea.

The existence of Poker as a kind of proto- or Ur-Datchery also seems to me proof that Datchery is a figure in his own right, not someone else in disguise. And it may point to a late entry by the finished Datchery in to the cast of characters.

One final point before I leave the fascinating fragment. Forster’s authority on the subject of Drood must be cast into doubt by his hypothesis that the fragment was intended for the second part, and represented an attempt to “open some fresh veins of character” in order to divert attention from the catastrophe i.e. the disappearance of Drood into which he had plunged “too early”: as if the reader could be fobbed off by some delaying tactic. There is however a grain of truth in Forster’s over-arching point. I
too have the sense that Dickens had told more than half of his story, which is why my instalments are slightly shorter.

So that is the palette of ideas, feelings and judgements which I used in assembling my second half of Drood. I hope that by completing it, I have provided people who were previously put off a half-finished work with an incentive to read what Dickens wrote: which is marvellous. They can always stop at mid-point!

And two final comments in conclusion. Which part of my writing was the most difficult? My first sentence. This was the moment at which I took up the challenge and the baton. And, more prosaically, it was where I would expect critics to look first. Who is this nobody tampering with the work of a master? Look, he can’t even start it off decently.

Just for the record, I start it thus: “The sun has boldly invaded the great smoky, tarnished city of London: illuminating the grand habitations of the rich, which mantle at its touch; unmasking the squalid abodes of the poor, which shyly submit to scrutiny; dispelling the darkness, proclaiming a new dawn; prying into gritty secrets, creeping into hidden corners.”

Secondly, I tried to use words which I felt Dickens might have used, but fell down on one. My old history tutor pointed out that Dickens, who lacked a classical background, would probably not have used the term “androgy nous”. Right; but how better to describe the uncompromising name BILLICKIN set out on its brass door-plate?