
London Particular

The Dickens Fellowship Newsletter

NEWS FROM THE DICKENS FELLOWSHIP HONORARY GENERAL SECRETARY:

The Annual Wreath Laying Ceremony, to mark the anniversary of Dickens's death, will take place in Westminster Abbey at 6pm on Tuesday 9 June 2026. Those attending should meet at the Abbey's West Door at 5:45pm, or they may attend Evensong at 5pm and make their way to Poets' Corner after the service.

A Memorial Event for the late Professor Michael Slater MBE will be held in May. Details will be circulated as soon as possible.

The 119th Annual Conference and AGM of the Dickens Fellowship will be hosted by our Denmark Branch, 4 - 6 August 2026, and based at the Scandic Falkoner Hotel in Copenhagen, 3km from the city centre and close to the Frederiksberg Metro Station. This is a wonderful opportunity to meet in person with fellow Dickensians from around the world, to have your say on Fellowship matters at our AGM, and to hear a range of informative and entertaining lectures relevant to our theme - which, this year, is 'Dickens, Fairytales & Fantasy'. Everyone is welcome to attend, and booking should be open by the time you receive this newsletter. Information to be found on our website - <https://www.dickensfellowship.org/index.php/news-household-words/440-annual-onference-agm-2026> - and will also be available at our meetings. If you have any questions about booking, please contact Jacquie Stamp (jacqueline.stamp99@gmail.com or +44 7812 995736). Accommodation is not included in the conference package, but rooms are available at the Scandic Falkoner Hotel; use the booking code BOOK040826, or join the Scandic Friends, to obtain a discount.

We have some exciting talks to look forward to at The Charterhouse in London in the coming weeks - all at 6:30pm, with welcome drinks available from 6pm: 24 March - Dr

Stephen Ridgwell - 'At His Majesty's Imperial Service: Beerbohm Tree's Adaptations of Dickens, 1905-1915'; 28 April - Marion Maule - 'Augusta and Charles: a Mesmerising Encounter'; 26 May - Dr Christine Corton - 'Fagin on Film'.

Hedgehogs in the cellar? "Nature Notes" in the Times have proved a fruitful source for Dickens quotes this spring. "These days you are unlikely to meet a hedgehog in Covent Garden, but if you had been ambling over those famous cobbles during the Victorian era, you would have encountered a whole shopful of the little urchins. As well as selling lavender water, herbs and seeds, the Covent Garden premises of JAS Butler offered customers a hedgehog emporium. Known as "cell hogs" or "under-stairs pets", the animals were sold as the solution to London's beetle and cockroach infestations. Kept in kitchens, the hedgehogs would also have dispatched the many slugs to be found. Persistent rumours maintain that CD kept a "cell hog", the legendary animal known as Bill Spikes. The only hedgehogs found in central London now are in Regent's Park." Does anyone know anything about this? I didn't know hedgehogs were kept in Victorian kitchens. Does anyone know anything about Bill Spikes? Also...

..."The garden at the Charles Dickens Museum is graced with shrubs and flowers. Most were planted recently, but one species would have been here at the time of Dickens - the maidenhair spleenwort sprouting from the back wall. This is a long-living, slow-growing and pollution-tolerant species, and the specimen growing in the wall is likely to have descended from a plant growing here during Dickens's time. Surely the great writer would have noticed the evergreen fern. As its name implies, it has an oddly beguiling human quality, with its fronds shimmering like unruly tresses of human hair. He might even have made himself some tea from the plant; maidenhair spleenwort was a popular remedy against the coughs and bronchial problems caused by coal-fire pollution."

The Class Divide A letter in *The Times* in December from Dr Kim Howells, former MP, Pontypridd, notes that: 'In 1983, a puzzled academic examining the shelves at the South Wales Miners' Library in Swansea, asked why they held so many volumes of classic literature. 30 years later, Hywel Francis and Sian Williams, writing the history of the library, used the academic's question as their book title, "Do Miners Read Dickens?"' Dr Howells then refers to a *Times* article regarding this by Libby Purves ("Decline in history of art widens class divide", Dec 1), which warns us that 'the ignorance and snobbery evident in 1983 is at least as widespread now as it was then and highlights the dangers when contemporary politicians of the right and left "spread the myth of high culture as elitist". Chief among those dangers is a toxic widening of class division and with it a dampening of class aspiration.'

"Masculinity is now caricatured as brute, stupid and disposable" Lord Sewell, a black Conservative peer, wrote (*The Times*, 12/25) about the "internet fight of the century" between Piers Morgan and Nick Fuentes, an American far-right influencer, aged 27, who calmly accepted the labels thrown at him – racist, fascist, misogynist. Lord Sewell says, "*If Charles Dickens were alive today and looking for a social cause, he might well turn his attention to the alienated white boys of Britain and America. He was ferociously hostile to systems that crushed the young. His novels are populated by children and adolescents struggling against corrupt adult institutions: the law in Bleak House, bureaucracy in Little Dorrit, education in Hard Times. One suspects CD would have little patience with today's universities, solemnly delivering "facts" about decolonising the empire while treating large numbers of young men as bearers of inherited guilt. Criticise mass immigration? Racist. Raise concerns about social breakdown or grooming gangs? Right-wing. So the white Zoomer retreats: to his bedroom, his games console, his pornography. This is the Dickensian world Fuentes exploits. Everything has failed these young men – education, work, culture, politics. Dickens understood that societies collapse not only from cruelty but from moral blindness. His children rebel against a world that has no place for them. Today's boys are doing the same. What they need is not indulgence but purpose: work, responsibility, family and, above all, a story in which they are not born as moral criminals. Dickens knew this. We would do well to remember it.*"

Weather report I couldn't resist quoting again the following from Bleak House, last quoted in LP in March 2020. '*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.' By the time you read this, though, we'll probably be anxiously contemplating our first hose-pipe ban!

Michael Slater I was very sad to hear of Michael's death last November. His knowledge was encyclopaedic and his lectures were always erudite, informative - and very funny. I once heard him say that Volumnia Dedlock (*Bleak House*) was his favourite Dickens character. He might have been joking, but I thought I would look her up. Volumnia is a poor cousin of Sir Leicester's, entertained at Chesney Wold from time to time:

'Foremost in the front rank (of poor relations) stands Volumnia Dedlock, a young lady (of sixty), who, displaying in early life a pretty talent for cutting ornaments out of coloured paper, and also for singing to the guitar in the Spanish tongue, and propounding French conundrums in country houses, passed the twenty years of her existence between twenty and forty in a sufficiently agreeable manner. Lapsing then out of date, and being considered to bore mankind by her vocal performances in the Spanish language, she retired to Bath; where she lives slenderly on an annual present from Sir Leicester.. She has an extensive acquaintance at Bath among appalling old gentlemen with thin legs and nankeen trousers, and is of high standing in that dreary city.' 'Volumnia is a little dim, but she is of the true descent; and there are many who appreciate the honour of taking the fair Dedlock in to dinner, or even the privilege of her hand in the dance. On these national occasions, dancing may be a patriotic service; and Volumnia is constantly seen hopping about, for the good of an ungrateful and unpensioning country.'

Well, perhaps not such an odd choice of Michael's after all.

Staying with Bleak House: like Jo the crossing-sweeper, "I don't know nothink about nothink at all"... except that I badly need your contributions/comments, to be sent, please, to 'Danesdyke', 27A Ashcombe Road, Carshalton, Surrey SM5 3ET or by email: aligowans17@outlook.com.