

The Mysteries of Charles Dickens

1812–1870

Key exhibition texts in English translation

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The Mysteries of Charles Dickens

1812–1870

- 1812 Born on 7 February in Landport near Portsmouth
- 1815 Moves to London
- 1817 Family moves again to Chatham in Kent
- 1822 Returns to London for good
- 1824 Works in Warren's Blacking, a shoe polish factory
Rest of the family sent to Marshalsea Prison for three months for bad debt
- 1825 Leaves Warren's Blacking; returns to school
- 1827 Works as a clerk in the law offices of Ellis & Blackmore
Teaches himself shorthand
- 1829 Court stenographer at Doctors' Commons
- 1830 Meets the love of his youth Maria Beadnell
- 1831 Works as a parliamentary reporter and freelance journalist
- 1833 Publication of his first story
- 1834 Reporter for the *Morning Chronicle*
- 1836 Start of his career as a writer: *Sketches by Boz*
Marriage to Catherine Hogarth
- 1837 *Pickwick Papers*; death of Dickens's sister-in-law Mary Hogarth
Birth of his first child
- 1838 *Oliver Twist*
- 1839 *Nicholas Nickleby*
- 1841 *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Barnaby Rudge*
- 1842 First visit to the USA; *American Notes*
- 1843 *A Christmas Carol*
- 1844 *Martin Chuzzlewit*; extended visit to Genoa
- 1846 *Pictures from Italy*; five-month stay in Lausanne
Begins work on *Dombey and Son* (published in book form in 1848)
- 1850 *David Copperfield*; editor of the new weekly periodical *Household Words*
- 1851 Death of his father
- 1853 *Bleak House*
- 1854 *Hard Times*
- 1856 Purchase of Gad's Hill Place near Rochester, Kent
- 1857 *Little Dorrit*; meets Ellen Ternan
- 1858 Separation from Catherine; first appearances as a lecturer
- 1859 Founds the weekly journal *All the Year Round*
A Tale of Two Cities
- 1861 *Great Expectations*
- 1863 Death of his mother
- 1865 Railway accident in Staplehurst; *Our Mutual Friend*
- 1867 Second visit to the USA
- 1870 Death on 9 June; *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*

E02 Ticket office

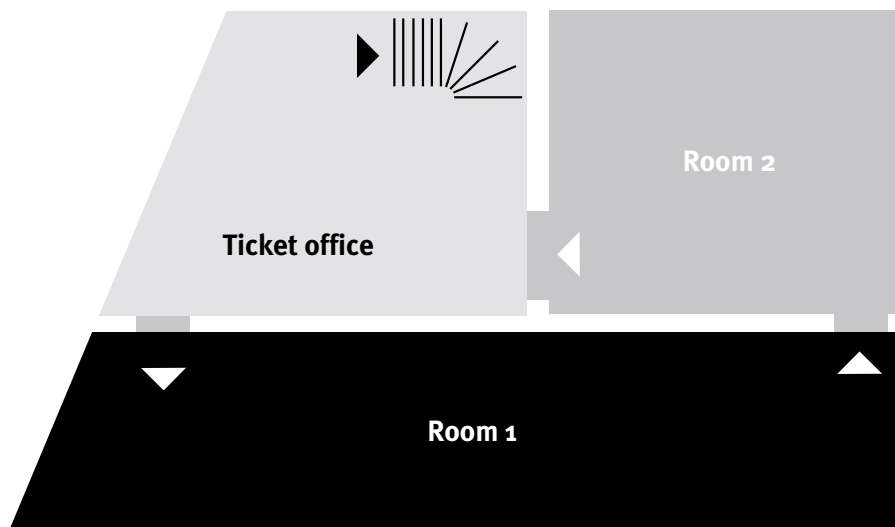
“Because I have read Dickens, who is without question the chieftain, major, colonel and commander of the art of novel-writing, I am now a wretched, pathetic beggar. [...] Those who marvel at nothing ought to read Dickens, for then they will surely know how to marvel.”

Robert Walser

As the twelve-year-old Charles Dickens pasted labels onto jars of black shoe polish in 1824 in a London factory teeming with rats, no one could have imagined that the boy would go on in the following decade to become the most popular author of his time, whose posthumous fame in the English-speaking world is eclipsed perhaps only by Shakespeare – a writing career that could scarcely have been more improbable!

From such bleak beginnings, Dickens’s life culminated in an utterly monumental oeuvre: fifteen extensive novels, five major Christmas stories, two travel books along with letters and journalistic texts covering thousands of pages, not to mention his reading tours during the last dozen years of his life whose scale and intensity seem to defy the limits of human endurance: a lifetime’s achievement that would leave its mark – not least in the prematurely worn visage of its creator.

The exhibition attempts to convey an impression of the vastness and variety of the Dickensian cosmos while also tracing the many mysteries that are as richly plentiful in his personal biography as in his work.



E03 Room 1

"In the power of evoking visual images Dickens has probably never been equalled. When he has once described something you see it for the rest of your life."

George Orwell

Charles Dickens dreams up a world

Virtually no other author has produced characters able to summon such vivid imagery in the minds of so many readers as those of Charles Dickens. Figures like Mr. Pickwick, Fagin and Mr. Micawber have become deeply entrenched in the collective consciousness, reinforced time and again by a never-ending stream of movie and television adaptations.

This vivid presence comes across in Robert Buss's unfinished painting *Dickens' Dream*, produced shortly after Dickens's death, which shows the author surrounded by the best-known creations of his imagination. In the work, the painter directly cites a number of the original illustrations that accompanied nearly all of Dickens's novels, of which a good many examples can be found reproduced in this exhibition.

Just as Dickens and his illustrators have left an indelible impression on the visual imaginations of broad segments of the population, many of his characters have also found their way into everyday parlance. In England, even those who have never read a line of Dickens recognise the expression "Don't be such a Scrooge" or the adjective "Pecksniffian". And Dickens's name alone, as shown in the accompanying example, provides the basis for multiple derivations in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

E04 Room 1

The Juvenile Drama in two acts, 1812–1833

Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show.

Charles Dickens in: *David Copperfield*

The rupture that split the first twenty years of Dickens's life in two could not have been more dramatic. After a fairly carefree childhood in a small-town setting, fate bore him away to a London existence surrounded by the most flagrant social inequities. With brutal abruptness, the dim and dark gravity of life blotted out the colourfully vivid world that had previously shaped his imagination – a contrast that would later be mirrored in Dickens's literary work.

Two years after arriving in London, he underwent two traumatic experiences that he kept hidden under a veil of silence his entire life. At the same time, these blows triggered the restless, almost manic energy with which he pursued all his endeavours up to his death.

Finally, towards the end of his youth, Dickens learned that in England's class society, being lucky in love was mainly dictated by one's origins.

E05 Room 1

Act One: Shams, charlatans and showmen

The first mystery of Charles Dickens: the disgrace of common origins

Charles John Huffam Dickens was born on 7 February 1812 in Landport near Portsmouth, the second of eight children. His father John worked as a clerk in the Navy Pay Office, just like his mother Elizabeth's father. Charles spent the first three years of his life in Portsmouth, after which time his father was temporarily transferred to London. Then followed what was undoubtedly the happiest period of his life during his five years spent in Chatham, Kent.

His parents were members of a precarious lower middle class that strove to improve its social position but felt constantly threatened by a descent into poverty. Those in the Dickens family guarded two dirty secrets: his father's parents hailed from the then quite extensive servant class, whereas his mother's father held a higher social rank as an employee of the Navy, but got caught embezzling two years before Charles's birth and had to flee abroad in disgrace. The deep-rootedness of these two stigmas in the rigid class consciousness of British society can be seen in the fact that even Dickens's closest friends did not learn of his lower origins until after his death.

The taboos of real life later find themselves numerous reflected in Dickens's writing, with mysteries and skeletons in the closet wherever the

eye turns: from *Oliver Twist*, who proves to be the offspring of more noble stock, or the reverse scenario of high-and-mighty Estella, who finds out at the end of *Great Expectations* that her father is a convicted criminal.

E06 Room 1

“Dickens was the greatest dramatic writer that the English had had since Shakespeare.”

Edmund Wilson

Theatre and acting held a lifelong fascination for Dickens. Thanks to the popular toy theatres of his childhood, Charles not only absorbed the work of Shakespeare and other major stage authors at an early age, but also exhibited a trait while playing with his younger brothers that would characterise him in later life as well: wherever he was involved, he wanted to pull the strings – as theatre manager, director, playbill designer and lead actor rolled in one!

And soon as an author too. At the age of nine, he wrote his first play, the tragedy *Misnar the Sultan of India*. But it was not merely on the paper stage where he proved his talent during these years. His father often took him along to the pub where Charles entertained the crowds with song and dance.

E07 Room 1

What mattered it that the stage was three yards wide, and four deep? We never saw it. We had no eyes, ears, or corporeal senses, but for the Pantomime.

At the age of eight, Dickens saw a performance by Joseph Grimaldi, the era’s greatest clown. The Christmas pantomime made such an impression on him that, following Grimaldi’s death, Dickens revised and published his unfinished memoirs. In the foreword, Dickens wrote in 1838 how he experienced the world of pantomime as a child:

What words can describe the deep gloom of the opening scene, where a crafty magician holding a young lady in bondage was discovered, studying an enchanted book to the soft music of a gong! – or in what terms can we express the thrill of ecstasy with which, his magic power opposed by superior art, we beheld the monster himself converted into Clown!

Such pretences and transformations would later repeatedly crop up in his novels – one need only think of the larger-than-life hypocrites Pecksniff (in *Martin Chuzzlewit*) and Uriah Heep (in *David Copperfield*).

Eo8 Room 1

“... a glorious host ...”

After learning how to read from his mother, Charles voraciously devoured all the books he could get hold of in the family home between the ages of five and ten. Tucked away in an attic room, his father owned a small but surprisingly well-stocked library. The rogues and fairytale heroes in these volumes not only spurred Charles’s childhood imagination but also influenced his later literary work, with his first novels clearly displaying the influence of the picaresque novel.

Abridged versions for children did not exist in Dickens’s youth – he read the adult editions, just as the following generation would do with his own books. Thirty years later in the autobiographically tinged novel *David Copperfield*, Dickens depicts the delights of his childhood reading sessions:

From that blessed little room, Roderick Random, Peregrine Pickle, Humphrey Clinker, Tom Jones, the Vicar of Wakefield, Don Quixote, Gil Blas, and Robinson Crusoe, came out, a glorious host, to keep me company. They kept alive my fancy, and my hope of something beyond that place and time – they, and the Arabian Nights, and the Tales of the Genii – and did me no harm; for whatever harm was in some of them was not there for me; I knew nothing of it.

The display case presents a number of contemporary editions of the titles mentioned by Dickens.

Eo9 Room 1

Early promise

As a child, Charles often roamed with his father through the countryside surrounding Chatham and Rochester. On one such outing, the two came upon a stately country home by the name of Gad’s Hill Place. As his son would repeatedly recount in later years, John Dickens made a pledge to him that, for once, would *not* prove empty. Thirty-six years later Charles would go on to purchase the very house his father had promised would be his some day if only he worked hard enough! The area is also reflected in Dickens’s writings. After London, the county of Kent is by far the most frequent setting of his novels.

In *David Copperfield*, Dickens immortalised his father as Mr. Micawber. In the British biopic shown here from the 1970s, the elder’s theatrical manner of speaking and the calculated optimism that refused to be defeated by the adversities of a tenuous existence are also closely modelled on Mr. Micawber.

E10 Room 1

Act Two: London – magic lantern and the pits of hell

There was no other inside passenger, and I consumed my sandwiches in solitude and dreariness, and it rained hard all the way, and I thought life sloppier than I had expected to find it.

When Dickens was ten years old, his father was transferred to London for good. The family relocated from Chatham. Only Charles was allowed to stay on a few more weeks to complete school. Ultimately he too was called to join the others.

The subsequent chronicler of Victorian London arrived in a city that he found both fascinating and repellent. The contrast to his previous life – playing with his toy theatre or with masks, exploring the fantastical alternative world of picaresque novels, taking walks in the countryside – could hardly have been more pronounced.

Four decades later, Dickens revisited the places of his childhood and recalled the coach ride that once wrested him from a happy past and led him toward a future that was anything but cheerful.

E11 Room 1

Trouble comes in pairs: Warren's Blacking & Marshalsea Prison

Once in London, John Dickens no longer sent his son to school, but soon ensnared him into all manner of odd jobs around the household. Decades later Dickens told his friend and subsequent biographer John Forster of his bewilderment at this abandonment of parental responsibility:

My father was proud of me, in his way, and had a great admiration of my comic singing. But, in the ease of his temper, and the straightness of his means, he appeared to have lost utterly at this time the idea of educating me at all, and to have utterly put from him the notion that I had any claim upon him, in that regard, whatever.

During his contented years in Chatham, Dickens had always believed he could someday become a gentleman, but now he saw his future prospects suddenly jeopardised. And just days after his twelfth birthday, fate struck him a double blow and shattered any remnants of hope.

Audio station: The author's great grandson Gerald Dickens reads from the autobiographical fragment written by his ancestor around 1847 but only published posthumously. In this passage, Charles Dickens recounts how his parents had sent him to work at the Warren's Blacking shoe polish factory at the age of twelve for six shillings a week.

Video station: This film clip shows W.C. Fields in the role of Mr. Micawber. The latter's comical manner of speaking is based on Dickens's own father who was himself arrested and forced to take up quarters in the Marshalsea debtors' prison for several months along with most of the family while Charles was toiling away at Warren's Blacking.

E12 Room 1

I never could have done what I have done without the habits of punctuality, order, and diligence, without the determination to concentrate myself on one subject at a time, no matter how quickly its successor should come upon its heels.

Following the release of his parents from debtors' prison and the end of his own travails at Warren's Blacking, Dickens was finally able to resume his education. He attended Wellington House Academy, whose schoolmaster he would later disparagingly recall as "...by far the most ignorant man I have ever had the pleasure to know, who was one of the worst-tempered men perhaps that ever lived, whose business it was to make as much out of us and to put as little into us as possible".

After two years, he was forced to leave this school as well when his father encountered renewed financial difficulties. The now fifteen-year-old Charles found work as a solicitor's clerk at the firm Ellis & Blackmore, where he was popular with colleagues for his comic imitations of London characters. In terms of his later work, however, the experience would have a greater impact in exposing him to the legal world: there is scarcely a novel that does not feature lawyers in some fashion or another. Moreover, Dickens got to know the city during this period like the back of his hand. It soon became clear, however, that any future education would have to be obtained by dint of his own efforts.

Audio station: In 1960, the German author Arno Schmidt composed a dialogue-based radio feature on Dickens, in which he described the latter's tremendous diligence in learning stenography.

E13 Room 1

Maria Beadnell and Dickens's "habit of suppression"

At the age of eighteen, Dickens fell in love with Maria Beadnell, a banker's daughter two years his senior. Over the following three years, he wooed her incessantly, but found all his overtures refused by the coquettish Maria. The reserved stance of her parents toward the man of questionable background did not exactly help his chances: the elder Mrs. Beadnell persistently addressed her daughter's admirer as "Mr. Dickin", as if she could not even be bothered to memorise his correct name.

On his twenty-first birthday, Maria turned him down once and for all. Dickens saw fit to grant her comic immortality two times over – once as the girlish Dora Spenlow in *David Copperfield* and a second time as the plump chatter-box Flora Finching in *Little Dorrit* – but the rejection left a deep wound, which he revealed to Maria twenty years later in a letter:

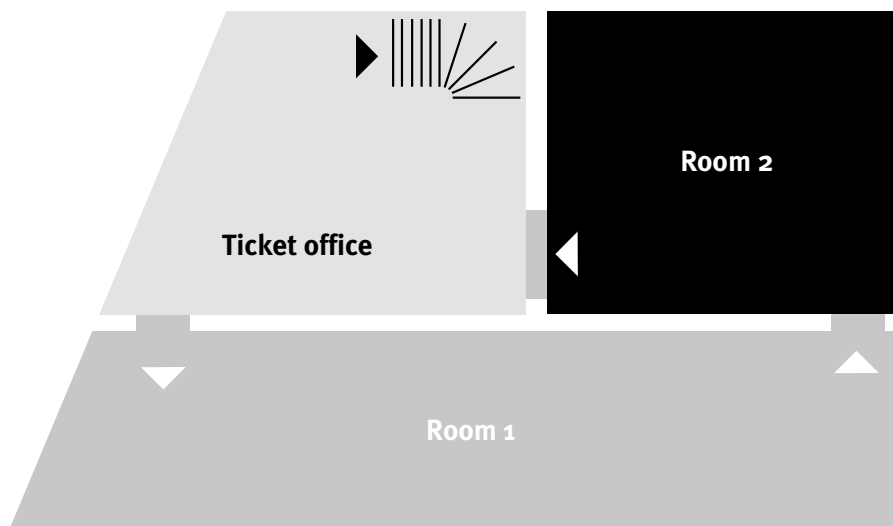
My entire devotion to you, and the wasted tenderness of those hard years which I have ever since half loved half dreaded to recall, made so deep an impression on me that I refer to it a habit of suppression which now belongs to me, which I know is no part of my original nature, but which makes me chary of shewing my affections, even to my children.

E14 Room 1

I dropped it stealthily one evening at twilight, with fear and trembling, into a dark letter-box, in a dark office, up a dark court in Fleet Street.

In what is arguably the most famous scene in any of Dickens's novels, Oliver Twist – who has fallen into misfortune through no fault of his own – asks for a second helping at the workhouse. The sentence "Please, sir, I want some more" would become one of the most cited in all of English literature. It is fair to assume that the author put the line in his protagonist's mouth with deliberate intention, as more than just a passing reflection on his own desolate youth.

Like Oliver, Dickens would no longer accept the thin gruel dished out by fate. He started to write in earnest. Under the title "A Dinner at Poplar Walk", he composed his first literary text in autumn 1833. One evening he delivered it to the letterbox of the periodical *The Monthly Magazine*. The waiting began ...



E15 Room 2

I walked down to Westminster Hall, and turned into it for half an hour, because my eyes were so dimmed with joy and pride, that they could not bear the street, and were not fit to be seen there.

Some weeks after Dickens had submitted his first story, he returned to the offices of *The Monthly Magazine* to buy a copy of the latest issue. And lo and behold: there was his article in all its glory! Years later Dickens described the pride and emotion that overcame him upon seeing it in black and white.

Over the coming months, the magazine printed another eight stories by him. Although he never received any payment for the works, it was an important first step. The same year, 1834, Dickens began to write for a much more prestigious periodical: the liberal *Morning Chronicle*. At first his role was limited to being a parliamentary reporter, but over the following two years the scope of topics increasingly expanded. He penned theatre reviews and travelled the country to report on elections, gala dinners and public meetings.

At year's end, he fulfilled a long-held dream. Together with his younger brother Frederick, he finally moved into a place of his own, affording him the necessary distance from his parents and their continuing money troubles.

E16 Room 2

To be continued ... the restless improviser, 1834–1841

“Dickens’s talent is a fearful locomotive to which he is bound and can never be free from it nor set to rest.” (Ralph Waldo Emerson)

After his initial articles in newspapers and magazines, Dickens shot to fame virtually overnight with *Sketches by Boz* in 1836. And he added to this early achievement soon thereafter with a handful of even greater literary successes. Spurred by the rhythm of the serial novel, a form of literary publication he almost single-handedly turned into a respectable format, he never had a moment’s rest for himself nor – having meanwhile got married – for his wife Catherine in the following years. His major novel projects often overlapped and, as if this were not hectic enough, he additionally became the editor of two magazines. This impressive capacity was made possible by two characteristics that also distinguish the prose of his early career: the merry art of improvisation and the sheer overabundance of his imagination.

The epitome of a self-made man, Dickens seemed to prove that anyone could succeed in a capitalist society as long as they had the will. Yet success in no way reconciled him with the society that had enabled his ascent. Instead, he became its harshest critic!

E17 Room 2

A cast of characters in the making: *Sketches by Boz* – 1836

In the winter of 1834, Dickens met the theatre critique George Hogarth who was about to become editor of the *Evening Chronicle*. He asked Dickens to write a series of articles, which would soon appear under the title “Sketches of London”.

In autumn of the following year, the publisher John Macrone approached the up-and-coming journalist with a proposal to reprint the texts in book form, accompanied by illustrations of the renowned George Cruikshank: a pure stroke of luck for Dickens. Unfazed by the elder colleague’s esteemed reputation, Dickens reacted with remarkable self-assurance and was soon gruffly commanding the artist to get to the task at hand.

The two-volume book edition was a success – and within a short time, Charles Dickens was the talk of the town. Or rather, his nom-de-plume “Boz”, under which he initially published his works. As a young lad, Dickens had given this name – a corruption of “Moses” – to his brother Augustus and now borrowed it as a pseudonym for himself.

The city Rambler with a camera-like eye

During his employment at Warren's Blacking, Dickens had needed to cross half the city every Sunday to visit his family in the Marshalsea debtors' prison. And later when working as an office clerk, he set out on regular nightly wanderings – a habit to which he would remain true until the end of his life: twenty kilometres on foot each day, covered at a frantic pace, tended to be the rule rather than the exception.

On his walking tours of the city, he registered literally EVERYTHING in his path. Having made his way down a particular street, he could subsequently enumerate each and every shop in the right order. And with the same photographic precision, he committed to memory all the various personalities he encountered – continuously taking mental shorthand as he went along!

In *Sketches by Boz*, Dickens collected a motley assortment of such figures – laying the groundwork for the richly sketched characters of his novels, the very thing he would become famous for as an author.

E18 Room 2

Charles & Catherine

George Hogarth, the editor of the *Evening Chronicle*, not only got Dickens's writing career off the ground. He also introduced him to his daughter Catherine, who would soon become Dickens's wife. In early 1835, the young author began to pay regular visits to the Hogarth family. Unlike the narrow-minded parents of his early love Maria Beadnell, Catherine's parents immediately recognised Charles's exceptional qualities. In their household, intellect counted more than money: George Hogarth had been a close friend of Walter Scott, and his maternal grandfather an associate of Robert Burns.

Attracted by her unaffected manner, Charles fell in love with Catherine. Yet compared to the yearning-filled letters he had written to Maria Beadnell five years prior, the fairly pedantic tone he assumed toward Catherine early on made for a stark contrast. All the same, the pair was engaged after six months of courtship. In April 1836 they got married.

The honeymoon in Kent passed quickly but already offered a preview of the pattern that would define the marriage until its sad end: Charles remained absorbed by his work on *The Pickwick Papers* and was otherwise happiest taking long walks. Catherine, by contrast, lacked her husband's boundless energy reserves and was content with the realm of domestic bliss.

After just one month, she became pregnant for the first time and went on in the following fifteen years to bear ten children, of whom one died in infancy. Like Catherine, Dickens's children exhibited their own lifelong difficulties coping with their father's all-enveloping presence and exceedingly high standards.

“Pickwick is in Dickens’s career the mere mass of light before the creation of sun or moon. It is the splendid, shapeless substance of which all his stars were ultimately made.”

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The Pickwick Papers – 1837

The Pickwick Papers originated as a simple commission. The publisher William Hall asked Dickens in February 1836 if he could come up with entertaining stories to accompany drawings by the renowned illustrator Robert Seymour. Dickens agreed to the proposal, although he was little enthused by the prospect of playing second fiddle. After a short time, however, he took over the reins. As in his earlier dealings with Cruikshank, he evinced little respect for Seymour’s age and reputation. With great determination, he soon proceeded to put his own stamp on the project: Dickens’s first novel was born.

Yet prior to the publication of the second instalment, things took an unexpected turn. Suffering from depression, Seymour shot himself. A new illustrator had to be found in all haste. Dickens met with two applicants: Hablôt Knight Browne and William Makepeace Thackeray (who would embark on his own career as a writer just four years later). Dickens was unimpressed by Thackeray’s sample drawings and opted instead for Browne, who promptly took on a pseudonym that harmonised perfectly with Dickens’s “Boz”: “Phiz”.

If Dickens had become the talk of the town with his earlier *Sketches*, he was now known all over Europe. From modest beginnings, *The Pickwick Papers* went on to become a phenomenal success.

Picaresque precursors

As a child, Dickens read many major picaresque novels, an influence that is apparent in his first novel at every step. The storyline is often coarse and episodic, and in the rural taverns where Mr. Pickwick is wont to put up for the night with the other three members of his club, the evening gatherings by the fireside provide the setting for all manner of tall tales and horror stories.

From Henry Fielding, Dickens borrows the mock-heroic rhetoric and countryside adventures on the open road. Yet Cervantes, too, furnishes an unmistakable inspiration. In the fourth instalment, Dickens paired his title character Mr. Pickwick with the servant Samuel Weller and – following in the footsteps of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza – they soon became established as one of literature’s great comic master-servant relationships.

E20 Room 2

My friends told me it was a low, cheap form of publication, by which I should ruin all my rising hopes, and how right my friends turned out to be, everybody knows.

The first chapters of *The Pickwick Papers* sold just a few hundred copies each. Yet no sooner had Dickens framed the series in novel form than the circulation figures skyrocketed. For the final instalments, a sensational 40,000 copies were snapped up. The commercial buzz surrounding the book was ear-splitting, with Pickwick hats and cigars, Pickwick songbooks and porcelain figurines. But that's not all – the book even wrote medical history. To this day, Pickwickian syndrome describes an illness under which “The Fat Boy”, a perpetually dosing minor character in the novel, seems to suffer.

Yet Dickens's true historic achievement consists in gaining acceptance for the form of the serialised novel. Until then, at least for new novels, this mode of publication tended to be regarded with suspicion. Dickens dismissed all the well-intentioned warnings – and was proven right.

The affordable sales price of one shilling per issue facilitated the acquisition of literature for broad groups of readers for whom bound book editions were far too expensive. Over the next three decades, all of Dickens's major works were released accordingly in instalments, in most cases following a monthly rhythm, occasionally on a weekly basis.

E21 Room 2

The two chief illustrators

For the illustrations of “Public Dinners” in *Sketches by Boz*, George Cruikshank smuggles himself (third adult from the right) and the author (second adult from the left) into the picture.

While the drawings for Dickens's first two books stemmed from the publisher's initiative, the author quickly sensed the profound opportunities inherent in the process. With two exceptions, his novels were all accompanied by original illustrations. These served to further elevate the impact of his already highly vivid prose. Over the decades, Dickens went on to work with a total of eighteen illustrators. Two of them stand out in particular. They are George Cruikshank and Hablôt K. “Phiz” Browne.

It is the custom on the stage: in all good, murderous melodramas: to present the tragic and the comic scenes, in as regular alternation, as the layers of red and white in a side of streaky, well-cured bacon.

Oliver Twist – 1838

After the mirthful and carefree tone of his first novel, Dickens struck a very different chord in *Oliver Twist*. No other work from his pen bears such pronounced elements of melodrama. The orphan Oliver grows up in a workhouse and later gets hired out as an undertaker's apprentice and eventually flees to London, where he falls in with a gang of thieves run by Fagin, a Jewish receiver of stolen goods.

Three years earlier, Dickens had followed the debate surrounding the *New Poor Law* as a parliamentary reporter and now found himself with an opportunity to attack the much-hated decree, which made poverty a crime and drove tens of thousands into the newly created workhouses as slave labourers.

Indeed, the book culminates in a “murderous melodrama”, but also in a fairytale-like ending, which was deeply rooted in Dickens's own biography. Like the young Charles, who had once seen himself as a “young gentleman” amidst his fellow sufferers at Warren's Blacking, Oliver turns out to be the son of a respectable family. To this day, the novel remains one of Dickens's most popular works.

Larger than life: through the eyes of a child

No one, at any rate no English writer, has written better about childhood than Dickens. [...] He has been able to stand both inside and outside the child's mind, in such a way that the same scene can be wild burlesque or sinister reality, according to the age at which one reads it. (George Orwell)

Oliver Twist is one of the first novels to feature a child as the central protagonist. The villains appear inflated to larger-than-life scale, at times cast as demons, at times as comic buffoons. This characteristic exaggeration of the author's, so often branded as caricature by critics, reflects the manner in which a child regards a hostile world – a world with which Dickens had made his own bitter acquaintance during his youth. In the other autobiographically influenced novels of his mature period – *David Copperfield*, *Little Dorrit* and *Great Expectations* – Dickens takes the inner perspective of a child to the level of a masterpiece.

All the world's a stage: *Nicholas Nickleby* – 1839

The stage appears in many of Dickens's works, yet nowhere is his enthusiasm for the theatre so radiantly expressed as in *Nicholas Nickleby*.

After the death of his father, the young Nicholas is forced to earn his daily bread at the dreadful boarding school Dotheboys Hall. A subsequent interlude with a travelling theatre troupe is followed by a job in a firm run by the kind-hearted Cheeryble brothers. Just as Dickens's malevolent villains are cast in exaggerated larger-than-life scale, their good-natured counterparts are often tinged by an air of unreality themselves.

Having campaigned against the *New Poor Law* in *Oliver Twist*, the author took on yet another evil of his day in *Nicholas Nickleby*: the so-called Yorkshire Schools. These barbaric educational institutions served as dumping grounds for unwanted children, many of whom failed to survive the sordid deprivations. The garrulous and distinctly selfish Mrs. Nickleby is – rather unflatteringly – modelled after Dickens's own mother: a belated revenge on the part of the son for the thirteen months he spent in Warren's Blacking, not least due to her manoeuvrings.

A born actor

Already as an office clerk, Dickens went to the theatre nearly every night. One performer, in particular, made a vivid impression on him: the actor Charles Mathews, who was celebrated for his protean onstage transformations. At home, Dickens would then rehearse the actor's roles for hours in front of the mirror. As an author, this later became second nature in his regular habit of speaking dialogue passages out loud.

It was only due to chance that Dickens became a writer instead of an actor. As a twenty-year-old he was booked to audition in a theatre, but was indisposed at the scheduled time. Fortunately life took another turn.

All the same, he continued to indulge his passion: whether in countless private and benefit performances or in the large-scale readings he gave during the last twelve years of his life. And a number of actors could be found in his circle of friends, including the great Shakespeare mime William Macready (1793–1873).

I have just burnt into Newgate, and am going in the next number to tear the prisoners out by the hair of their heads.

Letter to John Forster

***Barnaby Rudge* – 1841**

Throughout his life Dickens remained true to his journalistic roots. Just a year after resigning his post as editor of *Bentley's Miscellany*, he launched a new magazine project: the weekly periodical *Master Humphrey's Clock*. The original concept employed the technique of a frame story: Master Humphrey, a lonely old man, keeps manuscripts stored in the case of his grandfather clock and establishes a club where these are read. This format plainly mirrors the narrative structure in the stories from *The Arabian Nights*, which Dickens had cherished so much as a child.

The initial sales figures were disappointing, however, and Dickens did what he always did in such situations: he improvised. Instead of individual stories, he used the periodical as a platform to publish his next two novels.

Barnaby Rudge was the second novel to appear in *Master Humphrey's Clock*, but its origins date back to 1836. After having already written a number of chapters, Dickens put the project on hold following a breach with Richard Bentley for whom the book was originally intended.

In the footsteps of Walter Scott

Barnaby Rudge is one of two historical novels in Dickens's oeuvre. With its writing, the author placed himself in the tradition of Walter Scott (1771–1832), whose works he had once devoured in the reading room of the British Museum. Yet Scott's influence on Dickens was not merely literary – he provided an example of how a career as a novelist could bring riches and international fame.

The storyline of *Barnaby Rudge* centres around the anti-Catholic Gordon Riots of 1780. Especially noteworthy are the bloody riot scenes, the most vivid of which being the storming of the Newgate Prison by a raging mob – for which Scott's novel *The Heart of Midlothian* clearly furnished a model.

Barnaby Rudge was not a great success, at least by Dickens's standards, and has remained his least popular book to the present, marked by a weak structure and simplistic and one-dimensional portrayal of the villains. Two decades later with *A Tale of Two Cities*, the author ventured a second – and much more successful – attempt to conquer the domain of the historical novel.

I am slowly murdering that poor child, and grow wretched over it. It wrings my heart. Yet it must be.

The Old Curiosity Shop – 1841

Just as Dickens's weekly periodical *Master Humphrey's Clock* opened with a narrative format reminiscent of *The Arabian Nights*, the first novel to appear within its pages exhibits fairytale qualities of its own. Virtually no other work by the author is as far removed from reality as *The Old Curiosity Shop*.

The orphan Nell Trent ("Little Nell") lives surrounded by innumerable grotesque objects in her grandfather's curiosity shop. The latter succumbs to the pull of gambling and sinks more and more heavily into debt with the diabolical moneylender Quilp. Finally the grandfather and granddaughter flee the city and set out on a long period of wandering, which often reads like a surreal nightmare. In the end Little Nell ultimately finds peace: she dies. The mentally bereft grandfather refuses to accept her death, however, and waits for months by her grave until he eventually dies as well.

Tear ducts and laugh muscles

One must have a heart of stone to read the death of little Nell without laughing.
(Oscar Wilde)

The Old Curiosity Shop is a book of the starkest contrasts: city and countryside, youth and age, life and death, sexual innocence and desire. Similar disparities can also be measured in the opinions of readers. In most cases, the bone of contention is the sentimentality in the descriptions of the main character Little Nell. She is clearly modelled after Dickens's sister-in-law Mary Hogarth, whose early death left unfortunate traces in the work of the author. Such anaemic and divinely enraptured female figures are rooted in the almost bizarre idealisation with which Dickens conceived of his beloved Mary.

Most contemporaries were truly shocked about the heroine's death. Many even wrote letters begging the author not to make Little Nell die. Later years saw a waning of tolerance for such maudlin sentimentality, as underscored by Oscar Wilde's famous bon mot. Notably, however, the novel found two German advocates in the twentieth century, neither of whom could be accused of a propinquity for kitsch: Theodor Adorno and Arno Schmidt. The latter even considered *The Old Curiosity Shop* to be the "masterpiece" of the first phase of Dickens's career – precisely because of its fantastical elements.

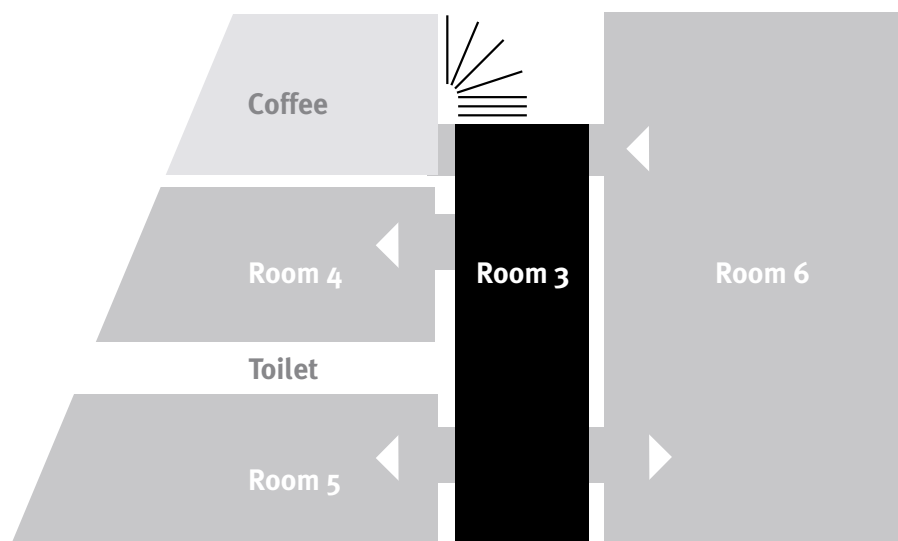
E26 Room 2

RMS Britannia goes America

The tremendous waves of emotion that Dickens's novels set off among his contemporaries can be illustrated by a little anecdote: In the New York harbour in early 1841, hundreds of people awaited the arrival of a ship from England where – unlike in the USA – the latest instalment of *The Old Curiosity Shop* had already come out. To sate their curiosity, the uninformed New Yorkers shouted out to disembarking British passengers, impatiently inquiring about the latest developments: “Is Little Nell dead?”

As his novels travelled the world, so did Dickens. After six restless years that produced the same number of major works, he urgently needed to catch his breath. Multiple long periods spent abroad defined the following decade and expanded his horizons. At the same time, they sharpened his perspective on his own society.

The inaugural journey was a trip to the United States. In January 1842, the *RMS Britannia* put out to sea with Mr. and Mrs. Dickens on board.



1842–1845

E27 Room 3

I wish you could have seen the crowds cheering the inimitable in the streets. I wish you could have seen judges, law-officers, bishops, and law-makers welcoming the inimitable.

Letter to John Forster, shortly after arriving in the USA

The journey to the USA seemed to transpire under an unlucky star, starting with exceedingly stormy weather during the crossing of the Atlantic. Once he arrived, the reception accorded to “The Inimitable” was no less stirring. (As a schoolboy, Dickens acquired the sobriquet “The Inimitable” from a teacher and eventually all the world came to know him under this title; he himself used the epithet from time to time in letters.)

The first weeks were a complete and utter triumph. The elites of New York City society organised the “Boz Ball” with no fewer than 3,000 guests. In addition, Dickens made the acquaintance of the admiring colleagues Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Edgar Allan Poe and Washington Irving. No wonder, then, that the well-celebrated visitor was initially full of praise for his hosts.

E28 Room 3

This is not the Republic I came to see. This is not the Republic of my imagination.

Letter to William Macready, two months later

The mood of amicable harmony did not last long. In a number of speeches, Dickens bemoaned the lack of an international copyright agreement. The background: his books were sold in the millions in the USA, but he personally did not receive one cent of the profits. The American press took the criticism poorly and pounced on him in unexpectedly scathing tones.

Yet his admirers' lack of distance taxed Dickens's nerves just as much, as he wrote in a letter home: "I can do nothing that I want to do, go nowhere where I want to go, and see nothing that I want to see. If I turn into the street, I am followed by a multitude. If I stay at home, the house becomes, with callers, like a fair."

In short: the Eden of his illusions deteriorated into a pestilent morass. In any case, Dickens went on to present his dashed expectations and disenchantment with the country in this very light in his next novel, *Martin Chuzzlewit*.

E29 Room 3

I have nearly killed myself with laughter at what I have done in the American number.

Martin Chuzzlewit – 1844

Nowhere did Dickens's stupendous ability to respond to changing circumstances with breakneck improvisation bear finer fruit than in *Martin Chuzzlewit*. When sales figures for the first instalments remained below expectations and the simultaneously released tale *A Christmas Carol* failed to yield the hoped-for profits, the author spontaneously sent his title character across the Atlantic to boost circulation. This also provided a perfect opportunity to compensate for the shameful end of his own journey to the USA by subjecting the country's peculiar customs to ridicule. And when the targets of his spoofing reacted as anticipated, he gloated to John Forster: "Martin has made them all stark raving mad across the water."

As the tie between the still rather loosely structured early writings and the ever more carefully planned works of his later career, *Martin Chuzzlewit* links improvisational daring and the neatly framed thematic focus on the struggle between egoism and altruism.

Comic effects of an unbridled imagination

Alongside its trenchant social criticism and masterly characterisation and dialogue, one of the most typical features of Dickens's prose is undoubtedly its humour. His comic talent even flourishes in passages where it runs counter to the prevailing mood of drama, but some ideas, it seems, were simply too good for the author's fancy to resist.

Martin Chuzzlewit is perhaps the finest example of such an overabundant imagination. Dickens's contemporaries were quite restrained in their reaction to the novel, even if two characters went straight to their hearts: the architect Pecksniff who practically bursts with hypocrisy and the perpetually tipsy nursemaid Sarah Gamp.

Over the course of the twentieth century, *Martin Chuzzlewit* increasingly gained in popularity. Stephen Marcus's pioneering study *From Pickwick to Dombey* from 1965 ranks the novel among the comic masterpieces of English literature and describes its style as "Joycean".

E30 Room 3

If you had seen Macready, undisguisedly sobbing, and crying on the sofa, as I read – you would have felt as I did: What a thing it is to have power!
Letter to Catherine

A Christmas Carol – 1843

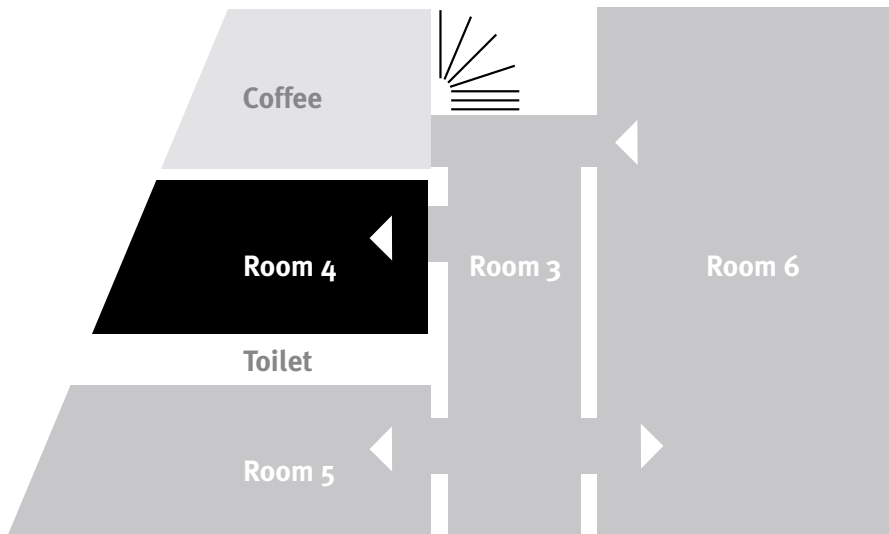
While writing *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Dickens felt he was at the climax of his creative powers and so it comes as no surprise that he simultaneously managed to put his virtuosic tale *A Christmas Carol* on paper.

His whole life, the author retained fond memories of the Christmases of his early childhood and later sought to hand this down to his own children. In the Dickens's household, the season was always marked by abundant feasting and drinking, dancing and singing, conjuring tricks and theatre. He saw the holidays as a time to revive traditions of hospitality, gaiety and compassion that had nearly been finished off by Puritanism and the Industrial Revolution.

In *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens contrasts the simple Christmas joys of the junior office clerk Bob Cratchit with the miserliness of his fearsome employer Ebenezer Scrooge. As in the later Christmas stories, supernatural phenomena eventually lead to the moral reformation of the main character. Despite such otherworldly elements, the political goal Dickens pursued with his story remains decidedly secular. He understood it as a "sledge-hammer" with which he sought to attack the ruling classes and their indifference towards widespread child poverty.

It just isn't Christmas without Dickens

With *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens established a tradition that he would continue almost right up to his death. After four other major Christmas tales – *The Chimes* (1844), *The Cricket on the Hearth* (1845), *The Battle of Life* (1846) and *The Haunted Man* (1848) – he published an annual Christmas edition between 1850 and 1867 in the periodicals *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*, featuring shorter stories that exuded the spirit of his “Carol Philosophy” (as he called it). These issues secured huge circulation figures and soon became as indispensable to the holiday ritual in England as plum pudding. While most of the other Christmas stories eventually fell into oblivion, coming nowhere near the virtuosity of *A Christmas Carol*, this story probably remains the most popular of the author's works, as attested to by the endless stream of new treatments and film adaptations.



E31 Room 4

“The story-weaver at his loom”, 1846–1848

In 1846, the Dickens family spent five months in Lausanne. The author had first become acquainted with Switzerland the previous year, following a longer stay in Italy (recorded in his second travel book *Pictures from Italy*). Now he hoped that the Villa Rosemont, looking down on Lake Geneva, would give him the necessary peace and quiet not only to write the first instalments of his new novel *Dombey and Son* but also to draft the next Christmas book. This room shows Dickens the “story-weaver” at work. Letters he wrote to London reveal how he settled into his temporary home and workplace. For the first time Dickens composed a novel following a comprehensively conceived structure. The new system of planning and organisation was written down in individual *number plans*. Sketches and drawings by the illustrator Phiz along with manuscript pages and galley proofs complete the picture of a work in progress.

E32 Room 4

Letters from Switzerland (quotes located above the audio station)

All well here. Country stupendously beautiful. Mountains covered with snow. Rich crisp weather

The absence of any accessible streets continues to worry me [...]. I should not walk in them in the day time, if they were here, I dare say; but at night I want them beyond description. I don't seem able to get rid of my spectres unless I can lose them in crowds.

A life in letters

No sooner had Dickens's writing career got underway than he met the man who would become his closest friend and most important advisor for the rest of his life: John Forster (1812–1876). From 1836, Forster edited nearly all instalments of the serial novels and negotiated most of the contracts with the publishers and periodicals. Two years after Dickens's death, he put out the first biography of the author.

The foundation for the latter was provided by the some thousand letters Dickens had written to him over the years, which display a depth of feeling that the author kept under wraps to all others – even to Catherine. In addition to sharing the same year of birth, the men were bound by their humble origins. Forster was the son of a butcher. After studying law, he made a name for himself from the 1830s onwards as a journalist, historian, literary critic and biographer.

E33 Room 4

From improvisation to planning – *Dombey and Son* as a work of transition

With the new novel, Dickens's work technique underwent a fundamental change. Reacting to the pressure of deadlines, he had formerly lived from hand to mouth and relied on his talent for improvisation, but now he turned over a new leaf and began to sketch out the individual instalments with greater care and forethought.

For this purpose, he availed himself of so-called *number plans*. The left side of each page was given over to the *mems.*: reminders, questions to be resolved and the like. On the right, by contrast, he listed a brief description of the chapter's content. For each of the nineteen parts, Dickens created such a notational sheet.

On the wall, the *number plans* for the first and last monthly instalments of *Dombey and Son* are displayed. The last instalment always had two parts (19 and 20) and, accordingly, twice as many pages. Here too, the final *number plan* is longer and more detailed, in particular, to ensure that all the various storylines of the plot are satisfactorily brought together.

In 1987, the author Harry Stone published an analysis under the title *Dickens' Working Notes for His Novels*, which showed for the first time that the length and complexity of the social novels from the final two decades of Dickens's life could not have been achieved without this new work method.

E34 Room 4

The Little Wooden Midshipman

Part of the novel plays in the “Wooden Midshipman”, a shop for nautical instruments, but the name also refers to the carved wooden figure of a midshipman that greets customers. Describing it at his writing desk in Lausanne and later in Paris, Dickens had a real-life London shop figure in his mind's eye. In the twentieth century, this object was transferred to the collection of the Charles Dickens Museum.

In many of his novels, Dickens endowed non-living objects with animistic attributes. The shop figure in *Dombey and Son* is no exception, with Dickens breathing life into the wooden statue on more than one occasion:

The Wooden Midshipman at the Instrument-maker's door remained supremely indifferent to Walter's going away. With his quadrant at his round black knob of an eye, and his figure in its old attitude of indomitable alacrity, the midshipman displayed his elfin small-clothes to the best advantage, and, absorbed in scientific pursuits, had no sympathy with worldly concerns.

“There’s no writing against such power as this – one has no chance!”
William Makepeace Thackeray

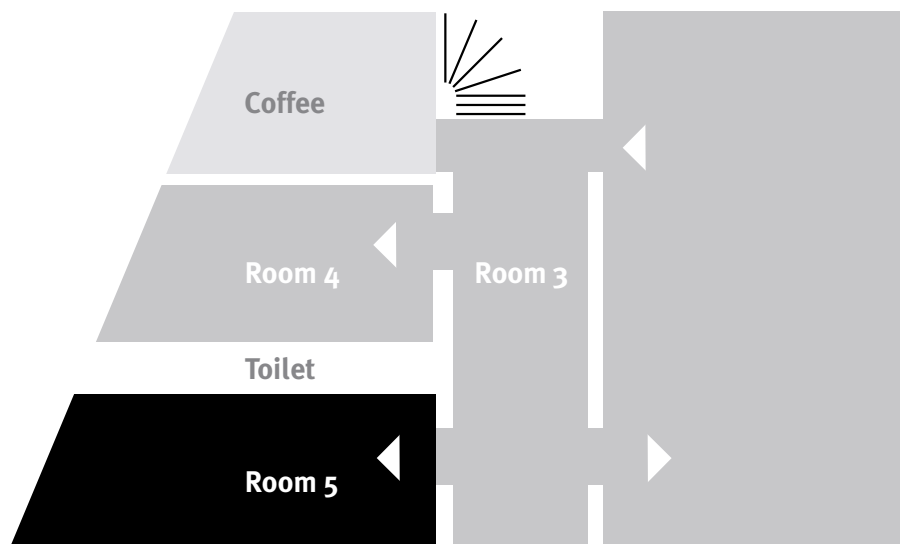
Dombey and Son – 1848

With his new work, Dickens sought to deal with pride the way *Martin Chuzzlewit* had dealt with selfishness. In addition, he incorporated an aspect in *Dombey* that had already been planned for the predecessor novel: the sea became its leitmotif.

In the major social novels of the 1850s, Dickens would increasingly turn his focus to institutions of power, but here the action still centres on an individual merchant: the patriarch Mr. Dombey, bursting with overbearing pride and inflexibility. After the death of his wife, he runs his own family the same way he runs his business. His son Paul, whose birth opens the novel, is regarded solely as a future business partner. His daughter Florence, by contrast, gets dismissed as “merely a base coin that couldn’t be invested”.

His cold mercantile attitude destroys the family. Paul dies at the age of six and Dombey remarries, in the hope that his new wife – who rivals her husband for coldness – would bear him a lasting male heir. The marriage fails miserably. Eventually the daughter Florence, too, flees her father’s hatefulness and takes refuge with Captain Cuttle in the “Wooden Midshipman”, the second principle setting of the novel. Only at the very end does the daughter reconcile with her father, who has been driven to the brink of suicide by his social and personal ruin.

The initial instalments, written in Lausanne, show Dickens at the peak of his craft. The later parts do not measure up, however, and aside from grand comic creations like Major Bagstock, the novel suffers from a lack of credibility among the main female characters. Nevertheless, *Dombey and Son* laid the foundation for the masterpieces of the years to come and, following the disappointing revenues from *Martin Chuzzlewit* and *A Christmas Carol*, the huge commercial success finally freed the author from money troubles for the rest of his life.



E36 Room 5

Creeping darkness, 1849–1857

The extended travels of the 1840s widened Dickens's horizons as *Dombey and Son* ushered in the second, and one could even say mature, phase of his work. The new system of *number plans* helped him manage the subject matter for the vast tableau-like novels produced in the final two decades of his life. In these works, he sketched out the dark vision of a society sick to the core. Even though humour never entirely disappears from Dickens's work, it grows more and more caustic – the rot of the world captured therein palpably oozing from the pages.

The progressive darkening of his worldview can also be read in Dickens's perspective on his own biography. In *David Copperfield*, the character of Mr. Micawber, modelled on his own father, is cast as a good-natured lightweight, but then seven years later – by which time John Dickens had passed away – a similar character in *Little Dorrit* is treated to a much less forgiving and harder-edged portrait.

And finally, the period of years that saw the creation of the four novels shown in this room were marked by ever-widening fissures in Dickens's marriage.

E37 Room 5

“If you sift the world’s prose literature, Dickens will remain, sift Dickens, David Copperfield will remain”

Leo Tolstoy

David Copperfield – 1850

In the novel just prior, Dickens had masterfully captured the inner perspective of a child. Unlike his earlier child characters, the young Paul Dombey is no longer a passive creature resigned to the vagaries of fate. In *David Copperfield*, Dickens ventured a step further and worked through his own traumatic youthful experiences in the first person, with **C**(harles) **D**(ickens) being transformed into **D**(avid) **C**(opperfield).

Like Dickens, his alter ego is torn from a happy childhood and cast into a nightmare. His widowed mother marries the domineering Edward Murdstone, who sends David off to the factory after his mother’s death.

Ever since its publication, *David Copperfield* has remained one of the author’s most popular works, not least among other writers. Its admirers include Dostoevsky, who read the book during his exile in Siberia, and later Sigmund Freud. And finally, the depiction of David’s childhood is closely echoed by Franz Kafka’s novel *Amerika: The Man Who Disappeared*.

Truth and fiction – autobiography as a novel

A central theme of the Christmas stories published from 1843 onwards is the confrontation with one’s own past. During these years, the very same became a preoccupation for Dickens, too, as he embarked on the writing of his autobiography. The memories grew too painful, however, when he came to the love of his youth Maria Beadnell. He burned the greater part of the manuscript, delivering the few surviving remnants to John Forster. Forster encouraged him to forego an autobiography and, instead, to write a novel in the first person.

A comparison of the autobiographical fragment dealing with his employment at Warren’s Blacking and his parents’ imprisonment for debt and the related passages in *David Copperfield* reveal considerable overlap, in many cases even corresponding word for word. Nonetheless, the novel frequently sublimates his childhood traumas into the realm of the comical. His chronically indebted father is turned into Mr. Micawber while Maria Beadnell provides a model for David’s later spouse, Dora Spenlow. In any case, the comic minor characters represent the novel’s greatest triumph: alongside Dora and Mr. Micawber, figures like Aunt Betsey and the duplicitous toady Uriah Heep instantly etch themselves into readers’ memories.

“I repeat: BLEAK HOUSE. – Anyone who himself takes up a pen to write should read it multiple times, at various stages of his development, and draw his lessons from it. [...] In all of world literature there are only 3 or 4 other works on this scale, which are as ‘calculated’, as ‘constructed’.”

Arno Schmidt

***Bleak House* – 1853**

With *Bleak House*, Dickens put forth what was perhaps his most ambitious narrative project: a masterpiece of structure, one of the fiercest literary critiques of the judiciary system and among the first detective novels in the English language.

In no other work does Dickens keep such a precise and steady hand on his material. Without such control, it would have been impossible to depict the labyrinthine web of relationships in which the cast of characters find themselves ensnared.

Today *Bleak House* is considered by many to be the author’s greatest work. This was not always the case. The reactions of most contemporary book critics ranged from sceptical to negative, and it was not until the mid-twentieth century that its merits were reassessed and recognised for the incisiveness and precision of the social criticism as well as the audacity of the double narrative. With the street sweeper Jo, who turns out to be the central figure of the novel, Dickens moreover created one of his most successful child characters.

Law vs. justice

Dickens’s engagement on behalf of social concerns was never stronger than in the years preoccupied with the writing of *Bleak House*: whether as a public speaker who incessantly decried injustices or – together with the rich philanthropist Angela Burdett-Coutts – as a supporter of various charitable organisations. And the lessons derived from these involvements worked their way into the new novel, which no longer roots the fundamental ills of society in the moral turpitude of individual characters, but in the failure of entire institutions and their representatives.

In *Bleak House*, Dickens took on the world of justice – or more precisely the Court of Chancery, which stood in the crosshairs of critics at the time for its aversion to reform and utter stagnation. The fictional case of *Jarndyce vs. Jarndyce* has languished in the court for years with nothing to show for it – aside from lining the pockets of attorneys and destroying the livelihood of many of the parties involved.

Dickens’s experiences as a young clerk in the law firm Ellis & Blackmore and later as a court stenographer provided inspiration for the story, as well as

a lawsuit he had won in 1844 against the publisher of a pirated edition of *A Christmas Carol*, only to learn that he himself had to pay the 700 pounds in legal fees!

E39 Room 5

“If you ask any ordinary reader which of Dickens’s proletarian characters he can remember, the three he is almost certain to mention are Bill Sykes, Sam Weller, and Mrs. Gamp. A burglar, a valet, and a drunken midwife – not exactly a representative cross-section of the English working class.”
George Orwell

Hard Times – 1854

In 1850, Dickens not only became the editor of a new periodical, but also its co-publisher. The goal of the literary weekly magazine *Household Words*, as he described to fellow writer Elizabeth Gaskell, was “the raising up of those that are down”. At the same time, of course, he was also interested in shoring up his own stature and independence.

Faced with declining circulation four years after the magazine’s founding, Dickens ended the one-year hiatus he had hoped to take from writing following the publication of *Bleak House* and began composing a new novel to boost sales of the magazine.

For the first time since *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Barnaby Rudge*, Dickens returned to a weekly publishing rhythm, bringing back his frustrations with the format’s limitations and the lack of “elbow room”.

Like all the other pieces in *Household Words*, the instalments of *Hard Times* appeared without illustrations. It was only eight years later that a reprint came out with four drawings by Frederick Walker.

World of labour

For an author who had himself toiled in a factory as a twelve-year-old, industrial work could be expected to assume a central role in his writings, yet this is not the case, notwithstanding David Copperfield’s forced stint in his stepfather Murdstone’s factory. The world of low-level office clerks, another field of employment that Dickens had encountered first-hand in his younger years, seemed to hold much more sway for him.

An exception is his shortest novel *Hard Times*. Like Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* from six years earlier, Dickens’s story also plays in an industrial city in North England, namely the fictional Coketown, modelled after the textile metropolis of Preston.

In *Hard Times*, Dickens condemned the appalling conditions in the factory run by the cold-blooded industrial magnate Bounderby, yet he is no less negative in portraying the practices of the unionised labour force. The real hero is the independent factory worker Stephen Blackpool, who is battered by misery at every turn. Such characterisations reveal a curious political ambivalence on the part of the author, which becomes even further accentuated five years later in *A Tale of Two Cities*.

E40 Room 5

“A more seditious text than Marx’ Das Kapital ... When the English nation realizes it is a great book and a true book there will be a revolution in this country.”

George Bernard Shaw

***Little Dorrit* – 1857**

Four years after *Bleak House*, Dickens painted his second great tableau of English society: *Little Dorrit*. In his letters at the time, he constantly railed against the rigid political institutions of the day, comparing the situation to that on the eve of the French Revolution.

In the novel, England is in the grip of the powerful Barnacle family, who hold sway in the Circumlocution Office, where they succeed in suffocating all progress through their stubborn devotion to red-tape, do-nothing bureaucracy.

Little Dorrit is Dickens’s darkest and gloomiest work, drawing upon many of his own early experiences as a parliamentary reporter. The mordant satire met its mark and enraged the intended targets – as evidenced by its lukewarm critical reception at the time. Like *Bleak House*, this is a work whose true literary merits would be recognised only by later generations.

Life as prison

The protagonist Amy (“Little”) Dorrit grows up in the Marshalsea debtors’ prison where her father is an inmate. As in *David Copperfield*, Dickens resurrects his own childhood experiences here, while his readers remain oblivious to the autobiographical background.

Following the death of John Dickens in 1851, his son Charles took the earlier character of Mr. Micawber – a hapless, though fundamentally kind-hearted paternal figure – and transformed him into the negative image of William Dorrit. Irresponsible and conceited, the father Dorrit nearly robs his daughter Amy of any chance in life.

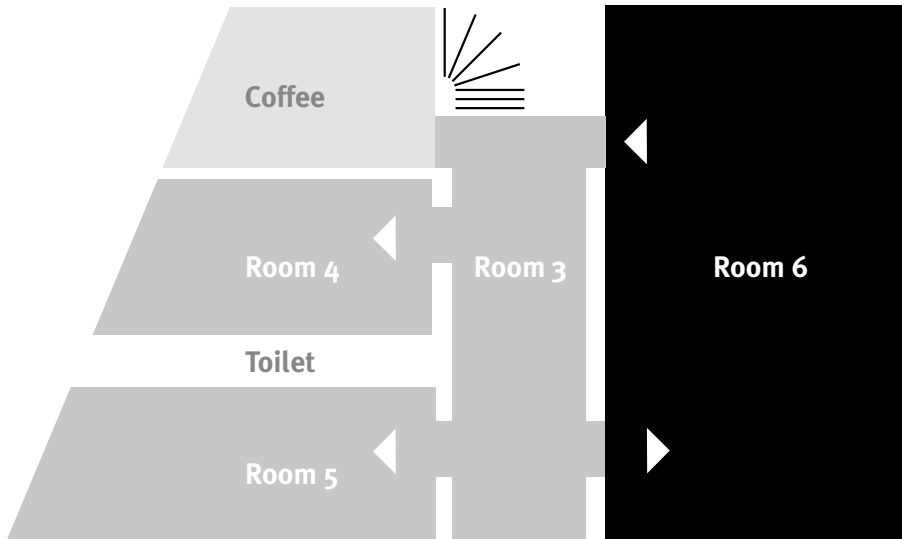
At the same time, Marshalsea prison serves as a metaphor for the prison within – that sense of stifling oppression that was taking an ever-firmer hold on Dickens himself in those years. His marriage to Catherine was faltering, and the number of people dependent on him was growing. His brothers, in particular, were an almost daily reminder to him that financial irresponsibility might well be an inherited trait.

While he was working on the novel, Dickens met Maria Beadnell again, the love of his youth. It was an altogether sobering experience, but one that proved immensely beneficial to the book in that it inspired the comical figure of Flora Finching.

E41 Room 5

The Birds in the Cage

The metaphor of imprisonment in *Little Dorrit* is mirrored in Dickens's own life. He felt increasingly trapped and the need to break out of this prison grew all the more urgent. In particular, his marriage to Catherine had come to seem hopelessly stale. As can be seen in the room opposite, he proceeded to cast off his shackles several times over. A new phase of life thus began, marked by love, scandal, retreat, resurgence, and triumph.



E42 Room 6

“... the most interesting love-affair of his life”, 1858–1870

In the late 1850s Dickens's life underwent radical changes. First he fell in love with the young actress Ellen Ternan. Shortly thereafter, his marriage to Catherine disintegrated. The ensuing scandal threatened to suddenly destroy the image of domestic happiness that Dickens had always been so careful to cultivate and which was a source of his appeal for many readers.

The author subsequently parted ways with a number of old friends who he felt had evinced insufficient loyalty during the turbulent separation, including his long-time illustrator Phiz, the great writer colleague Thackeray and his publishers Bradbury and Evans. Dickens retreated to the countryside, namely to the very house his father had once promised him as a reward for perseverance and hard work.

The biggest shift in this phase of his life, however, probably came with the launch of his extensive public reading tours, which ushered in a whole new relationship with his readers but also unfortunately greatly hastened his death. Dickens literally upstaged himself. The wildly compulsive irrationality he displayed during the final years of his life remains a baffling puzzle.

Finally, one last mystery was left behind by Dickens with the book he was still working on at the time of his death. Never completed, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* continues to hold legions of riddle solvers in suspense.

E43 Room 6

Yet another mystery: “The invisible woman”...

In the spring of 1857, Dickens saw the eighteen-year-old actress Ellen (“Nelly”) Ternan onstage in a London theatre. A few months later, he hired her along with her mother and her sister Maria to act alongside him in Wilkie Collins’s play *The Frozen Deep*.

Dickens fell in love with the young woman. What exactly transpired between the two up until his death must remain an object of speculation, for both Dickens and Ternan did their very utmost to leave behind no traces. Another game of hide-and-seek began. Twenty years ago, the English author Claire Tomalin dedicated an entire book to the very Victorian life story of Ellen Ternan, entitled *The Invisible Woman*.

Among current scholars, there is broad consensus that the pair had a sexual and not merely platonic relationship. Claire Tomalin even speculates that the couple might have had a child who died in infancy. Only the Dickens biographer Peter Ackroyd comes to a decidedly opposite conclusion: “[The relationship] acted for Dickens as the realisation of one of his most enduring fictional fantasies ... sexless marriage to a young, idealised virgin.”

E44 Room 6

... and the one left abandoned

Whatever the truth of the relationship with Ellen Ternan – it brought about the collapse of Dickens’s already severely broken marriage. The author decided to separate from Catherine who had become reduced to an “intolerable burden” in his eyes. Even in earlier years, he had accused her, a mother who had given birth to and raised ten children, of lassitude and incapacity. Now the alienation had reached the point of no return. He slandered her in letters to friends by groundlessly claiming that she had never cared for the children nor they for her.

Rumours began to make the rounds. There was talk of an affair between Dickens and an actress, and even worse: with his sister-in-law Georgina Hogarth who was living in the same household! The second allegation was without any foundation, but it led to the utter loss of control over his situation and reputation for the first time since the beginning of his writing career. With fitting clumsiness, he sought to wrest free and take charge by trumpeting a secret to which only his circle of friends and close acquaintances had previously been privy.

Finally, the separation was made official: Catherine moved out with their son Charley while Georgina remained with her brother-in-law and the other children.

E45 Room 6

A childhood dream come true: Gad's Hill Place

In 1856 Dickens learned that Gad's Hill Place was up for sale, the house near Rochester once promised to him by his father. The property fulfilled a childhood dream, as he confided to a friend. Another factor was his growing displeasure with the ugliness of big city life in London. And so it came as no surprise that, after separating from Catherine, he and his children returned for good to the area associated with his happiest memories.

From Paris, the actor Charles-Albert Fechter sent Dickens a small prefabricated house dismantled into individual parts, the so-called Swiss Chalet. Its upper storey would be the place where the author composed his last two novels.

Yet Dickens did not simply retreat from the world – he opened himself up to it in a whole new manner. In 1858 he began his first major tour of public readings. From that point forward, he continually shuttled back and forth between his rural idyll and the big wide world.

E46 Room 6

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times ...

A Tale of Two Cities – 1859

With the now-famous words “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times”, Dickens opened his second historical novel. The two cities invoked in the title are London and Paris.

Dickens's new weekly journal *All the Year Round* began in 1859 with instalments of this book. The weekly publishing frequency called for dense compression of the action, which takes place in the years before and during the French Revolution. Dickens's perspective on the historic events was largely shaped by the work of his friend Thomas Carlyle, who also assisted the author in his research.

The strengths and weaknesses of the novel – the dark opening and the terrifyingly demonic villainess Madame Defarge on the one hand, the melodramatic ending and the angelic heroine on the other – led the British historian Simon Schama to conclude in 1990: “It has the best of Dickens and the worst of Dickens.” Even today, the book continues to receive a divided reception. Viewed rather sceptically by critics, it remains immensely popular with the reading public.

Revolutionary – radical – reformer?

My faith in the people governing, is, on the whole, infinitesimal; my faith in The People governed, is, on the whole, illimitable.

Dickens cast the atrocities of the French aristocracy in such a drastic light that the outbreak of revolution comes across as a sheer necessity of nature. At the same time, the blood-soaked passages about the popular uprising read like an utter nightmare.

Here, as elsewhere, Dickens's radicalism stems less from the coherency of his political analysis than from the sharpness of his morality-based social criticism. Or as George Orwell once put it: "The strongest single impression one carries away from his books is that of a hatred of tyranny."

His very extensive philanthropic involvements during this period centred on such charitable projects as the *Urania Cottage*, a home for prostitutes, the so-called *Ragged Schools*, which offered basic schooling for the poorest children, and the *Guild of Literature and Art*, which provided aid to fellow writers and artists in need.

E47 Room 6

In trying to become a gentleman, I had succeeded in becoming a snob.

Great Expectations – 1861

Dickens had originally intended to publish *Great Expectations* as a monthly serial, but when sales of his weekly journal *All the Year Round* unexpectedly plummeted in 1860, he decided to release it in weekly instalments instead. The constraints of working in this format proved a blessing in disguise: the novel is arguably his most perfectly crafted and cohesive work, as well as the most intensely atmospheric.

In the opening scene, seven-year-old Philip ("Pip") Pirrip encounters an escaped convict in the cemetery, who threatens to cut his throat if he does not help him. While the image of a helpless child fearfully facing an overwhelming world was already an element of Dickens's earlier works, here the author delves into the furthest reaches of the childhood psyche.

Pip is an orphan who lives in the Kent marshes with his cruel older sister and her husband, the amiable village blacksmith Joe Gargery. When he later falls in love with and is spurned by an arrogant girl called Estella, he determines to become a gentleman. Thanks to the generosity of an anonymous benefactor, he is able to leave the country blacksmith's shop for a privileged life in London.

Smoke and mirrors: the “young gentleman” bows out

A quarter of a century after creating the character of Oliver Twist as a born gentleman whose life's path could be diverted only by unfortunate circumstances, Dickens, by then an internationally acclaimed writer, was radically questioning such an approach. In the course of *Great Expectations*, all the impressions the characters have of each other and of themselves are undermined. Pip's anonymous benefactor turns out to be the former convict Abel Magwitch, and haughty Estella his daughter. The “great expectations” that Magwitch heaped upon his protégé Pip out of gratitude turn out to be a terrible burden – and, ultimately, mere vanities. In the end, a profoundly changed Pip returns to his childhood Kent, just as his creator Dickens had done a few years before.

After *Hard Times*, *Great Expectations* is the second of the author's novels to appear without original illustrations.

E48 Room 6

Harbingers of the modern era: *Our Mutual Friend* – 1865

Although Dickens's worldview had grown darker in prior years, his last complete novel makes an overall lighter impression compared to the two other major panoramas of British society, *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit*.

No longer able to write with the vim and vigour that had enabled the immense production of his early phase, he completed five instalments before the first monthly issue even appeared in print. This head start allowed him to live up to his own higher standards. During these years, he frequently complained that he was becoming harder and harder to satisfy.

With *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens bid his literary farewell to London, albeit without any trace of mellowing with age. As in the beginning of his writing career, here he once again takes aim at the moral depravity of a “better society” that finds no fault with letting the poor starve to death in the streets. There is *one* key difference in such criticism, however, which the English literary scholar Humphry House summed up seventy years ago: “In *Pickwick* a bad smell was a bad smell; in *Our Mutual Friend* it is a problem.”

Filthy rich: the dust heap as a metaphor

Such foul smells penetrate down to the very core of the novel and its two central metaphors: the dust heap on which one character's entire fortune rests and the cesspool-like Thames, which is the “mutual friend” of the title as it binds together the fate of all the protagonists.

Contrasting with the gloom of the novel's main settings, humour is injected by such ludicrous members of society as Mr. and Mrs. Veneering or the smug insurance broker Mr. Podsnap.

The many artfully interwoven narrative strands make *Our Mutual Friend* Dickens's most complex work and point ahead to the modern era: "A novel before its time", as described by the British writer Angus Wilson in an influential 1970 study. The work also exerted a direct influence on T.S. Eliot, who originally wanted to entitle his long poem *The Waste Land* after a sentence from the novel: *He Do the Police in Different Voices*.

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Cycles of Criticism

Dickens in the English-speaking world ...

Modern authors still get drunk on his vintage. (Vladimir Nabokov)

Charles Dickens is the bane of literary critics: Whatever they may say of him, positive or negative, has little influence on his appeal. Few nineteenth-century authors in the English-speaking world have enjoyed such unbroken popularity.

While *David Copperfield* met with critical acclaim, the progressively darkening tone of Dickens's subsequent works drew the increasing scepticism of literary critics, and for some seventy years after his death, he received little attention. Only a handful of supporters such as George Bernard Shaw, George Gissing and Gilbert Keith Chesterton continued to promote his talents.

Proponents of literary modernism, on the other hand, found a plethora of faults: dearth of realism, mawkish sentimentality, shallow characterisations, grotesquely exaggerated villains, weak heroes, spiritless female characters and a lack of narrative economy.

Around the year 1940 there was a dramatic turnaround. Within the space of just a few months, three major studies were published. George Orwell included his groundbreaking essay "Charles Dickens" in his book *Inside the Whale*, while on the other side of the Atlantic the literary critic Edmund Wilson entered the arena with an essay entitled "Dickens: The Two Scrooges". The academic world in Britain also began to take note of his work at last, with the publication of *The Dickens World* by the celebrated Oxford don Humphry House.

These three texts continue to have an impact, even today. No other English-speaking author, bar Shakespeare, has been the focus of as much attention as Dickens, with ever more new studies shining light on even the most obscure aspects of his life and work.

E50 Room 6

... and in the German-speaking world

During the mid-nineteenth century, Dickens was hugely popular in the German-speaking world. Nowhere else did first translations appear so quickly. Yet almost as soon as the darker phase of the second half of his oeuvre set in, the undercurrent of criticism began to swell and his former popularity declined to the point where Dickens was no longer regarded as the creator of a vast literary cosmos, but merely as the author of individual works such as *Oliver Twist* and *A Christmas Carol*.

Dickens had a direct literary influence on Wilhelm Raabe, who is often referred to as “the German Dickens”, and whose 1864 novel *Der Hungerpastor* clearly draws upon *David Copperfield*. In a similar vein, Franz Kafka noted in his journal that the character of Karl Rossmann was “a distant relative of David Copperfield and Oliver Twist”.

Some individuals played a particularly important role in shaping the reception of Dickens’s works in the German-speaking world. A hundred years ago, the writer Gustav Meyrink translated no fewer than six novels and a volume of Christmas stories – translations that still feel remarkably modern today. Around the same time, in 1911, Robert Walser paid homage to Dickens in an essay for the periodical *Pan* in which he describes him as “an all-rounder of the very first order; there is simply nothing he cannot do”. And, just a few years later, Stefan Zweig published an essay entitled *Three Masters – Balzac, Dickens, Dostoevsky*, which also appeared in book form.

The most influential voice of all, however, was surely Arno Schmidt, whose radio feature on Dickens in 1960 put the focus firmly on his later work and hailed *Bleak House* as Dickens’s true masterpiece.

Unfortunately, in recent years, it has been increasingly evident that many of Dickens’s works have fallen into obscurity, because they are available, if at all, only in outmoded translation.

E51 Room 6

“TWO MACBETHS!”

Close reading

Dickens had always loved the theatre. At the age of 46, he found a new outlet for his enthusiasm. Inspired by occasional public readings for charity, he decided to give recitals of his own works on a professional basis. Increasingly strident criticism of his novels and his private life had affected him deeply. Now he wanted to find out whether his readers still remained loyal.

Right from the start, his readings drew crowds of two to four thousand. And the public was no less enthusiastic than Shakespeare actor William Macready, who described Dickens's expressive talent in his diary with the simple exclamation "TWO MACBETHS!".

The success of his readings furnished Dickens with an income he could not possibly have achieved through book sales alone. But more importantly still, these events brought him even closer to the readers he loved, and who loved him. Or, as the distinguished Dickens scholar Kathleen Tillotson once put it: "His lifelong love-affair with his reading public, when all is said, is by far the most interesting love-affair of his life."

Unfortunately, the ardour with which he embraced this project all but consumed his already declining strength. Against all better judgment, he continued to push himself to the limits in his performances and ultimately paid the price with his early demise.

Audio station: In his radio feature from 1960, the German author Arno Schmidt illustrates how Dickens put all his energies into his readings, to the point of utter exhaustion.

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The last mystery of Charles Dickens: File ED – unsolved

The Mystery of Edwin Drood – 1870

Dickens's final exit from the stage with one last mystery offers a highly fitting conclusion to a life full of mysteries. With *Edwin Drood*, he now returned to the site of his happiest childhood years in a literary context as well. The cathedral town of Cloisterham is faithfully modelled after Rochester in the vicinity of Gad's Hill.

Crime had played an important role in the two preceding novels but here it forms the true centre of the action. The atmospherically dense story tale struck an entirely new tone, which opens up speculation about how the author might have evolved had he not died at such an early age. Dickens's profound interest in the detective novel certainly also stems from the success his friend Wilkie Collins had enjoyed with the genre for some years.

The book has two illustrators: The first, Charles Collins, died unexpectedly after having only managed to draw the title page, which readers would later scour for clues. Luke Fildes completed the remaining illustrations and later created the famous painting *The empty chair. Gad's Hill – Ninth of June 1870* after Dickens's death.

No murder without a corpse

Dickens's principal theme was always one and the same: how do I keep a crime concealed for years? (Arno Schmidt)

The final novel remains unfinished. Of the planned twelve monthly instalments, only half were published. Since then, the unsolved murder has preoccupied hosts of passionate riddle solvers and would-be detectives. At the same time, it is not even clear that Edwin Drood is dead. Could he not be the mysterious Dick Datchery who suddenly turns up in Cloisterham after Drood's disappearance? Or, as John Forster later maintained, is the opium addict John Jasper responsible for his nephew Edwin's murder?

No less than two hundred continuations have been published since Dickens's death, including many of a rather curious nature. In 1873, a certain Thomas James sought to clear up the case by channelling the spirit of the deceased author, and in 1914 George Bernard Shaw, Gilbert Keith Chesterton and others engaged in mock court proceedings to try the alleged killer!

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From these garish lights, I now vanish for ever more, with a heartfelt, grateful, respectful, affectionate farewell.

Dickens at the end of his last reading on 15 March 1870

The empty chair

Dickens's health declined rapidly in the closing years of his life. He was troubled by insomnia and severe pain in his gouty left foot. In April 1869, he suffered a stroke and had to cancel the rest of his readings for that year. However, this did not prevent him from continuing to pursue all his other obligations with the usual restless energy: giving talks, editing his weekly journal *All the Year Round* and getting down to a new novel.

Between January and March 1870, he held twelve farewell lectures at St. James's Hall in London, during which, in spite of the misgivings of his manager George Dolby, he also regrettably recited the strenuous murder scene from *Oliver Twist* a further four times.

In April, he published the first instalment of *Edwin Drood*, and continued to work tirelessly on the novel over the course of the next two months. He was still writing on it one afternoon in early June. Returning home from his study in the Swiss Chalet that evening, he collapsed and never regained consciousness.

He died shortly after 6 p.m. the following evening, on 9 June 1870. The diagnosis: brain haemorrhage.

Dickens's last wish was not gratified. Instead of being buried in his beloved Rochester, his final resting place was the Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey, befitting his status. However, the instruction in his last will and testament that he be buried "in an inexpensive, unostentatious, and strictly private manner" was respected. Fourteen mourners were present. Catherine Dickens and Ellen Ternan were not among them.

Longfellow wrote from the USA to John Forster, "Dickens was so full of life that it did not seem possible he could die."

