

## Charles' Childhood

### His Childhood



Charles Dickens was born on February 7, 1812 in Portsmouth. His parents were John and Elizabeth Dickens. Charles was the second of their eight children .

John was a clerk in a payroll office of the navy. He and Elizabeth were an outgoing, social couple. They loved parties, dinners and family functions. In fact, Elizabeth attended a ball on the night that she gave birth to Charles.

Mary Weller was an early influence on Charles. She was hired to care for the Dickens children. Her bedtime stories, stories she swore were quite true, featured people like Captain Murder who would make pies of out his wives.

#### Young Charles Dickens

Finances were a constant concern for the family. The costs of entertaining along with the expenses of having a large family were too much for John's salary. In fact, when Charles was just four months old the family moved to a smaller home to cut expenses.

At a very young age, despite his family's financial situation, Charles dreamed of becoming a gentleman. However when he was 12 it looked like his dreams would never come true. John Dickens was arrested and sent to jail for failure to pay a debt. Also, Charles was sent to work in a shoe-polish factory. (While employed there he met Bob Fagin. Charles later used the name in *Oliver Twist*.) Charles was deeply marked by these experiences. He rarely spoke of this time of his life.

Luckily the situation improved within a year. Charles was released from his duties at the factory and his father was released from jail.

**Source:** [http://www.perryweb.com/Dickens/life\\_child.shtml](http://www.perryweb.com/Dickens/life_child.shtml)

**Charles John Huffam Dickens (February 7, 1812 – June 9, 1870), pen-name “Boz”**, was a cherished English novelist, whom many regard as the most important of the Victorian era. Dickens was born in Portsmouth, England, to John Dickens, a naval pay clerk, and his wife Elizabeth Barrow. When he was five, the family moved to Chatham, Kent. When he was ten, the family relocated to Camden Town in London.

His early years were an idyllic time for him. He thought himself then as a “very small and not-over-particularly-taken-care-of boy”. He spent his time in the out-doors, reading voraciously with a particular fondness for the picaresque novels (episodic novels about rascally protagonists) of Tobias Smollett and Henry Fielding. He talked later in life of his extremely strong memories of childhood and his continuing photographic memory of people and events that helped bring his fiction to life.

His family was moderately well off and he received some education at a private school but all that changed when his father, after spending too much money entertaining and retaining his social position, was imprisoned for debt. At the age of twelve Dickens was deemed old enough to work and began working for 10 hours a day in Warren's boot-blackening factory located near the present Charing Cross railway station. He spent his time pasting labels on the jars of thick polish and earned six shillings a week. With this money he had to pay for his lodging and help support his family who were incarcerated in the nearby Marshalsea debtor's prison.

After a few years his family's financial situation improved, partly due to money inherited from his father's family. His family was able to leave the Marshalsea but his mother did not immediately remove him from the boot-blackening factory which was owned by a relation of hers. Dickens never forgave his mother for this and resentment of his situation and the conditions working-class people lived under became major themes of his works. Dickens wrote, “No advice, no counsel, no encouragement, no consolation, no support from anyone that I can call to mind, so help me God!”

**Source:** <http://www.spiritus-temporis.com/charles-dickens/childhood.html>

## Law Clerk to Journalist

The start of 1827 found Charles Dickens enrolled as a student at Wellington House Academy. In May, through connections made by his mother, he obtained a position at the law firm of Ellis and Blackmore.

Dickens was a law clerk. His duties included keeping the petty cash fund, delivering documents, running errands and other sundry tasks.

In November of 1828 Dickens took a similar position for the law firm of Charles Molley. However Dickens remained with the firm for only a few months.

The law didn't appeal to him as a career. He found the work of a law clerk tedious. Actually becoming a lawyer didn't appeal to him either. So he left to find another way to make a living.

His next job was as a court stenographer. To qualify for that position Dickens had to learn the Gurney system of shorthand writing. It took most people about three years to master the system. Dickens, no doubt aided by his excellent memory, learned it in about three months. Consequently in 1829 he began work as a freelance court stenographer.

In 1831 he became a shorthand reporter with the *Mirror of Parliament*. The publication gave accounts of the activity in the House of Commons and the House of Lords. Dickens became known for his quick and accurate courtroom reporting.

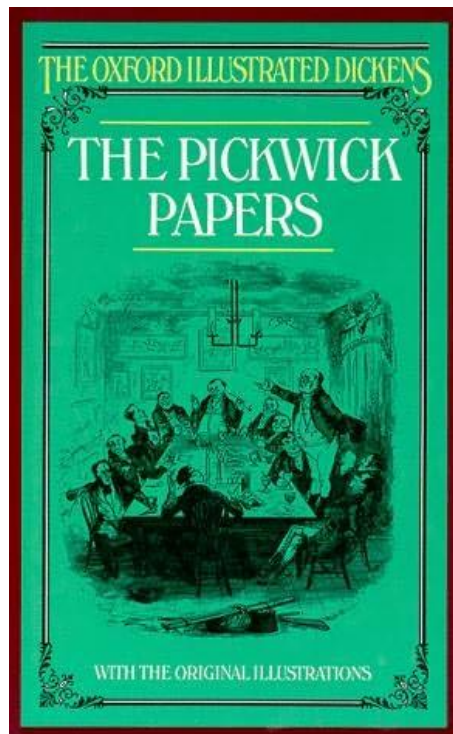
During this time he also considered becoming an actor. He was so serious about the matter that he arranged for an audition at the Lyceum Theater. However he was ill on the day of his audition and could not go. He did have acting skills as proven later by his readings and performances in benefit productions. His life might have been dramatically different if it weren't for his illness on that day.

In 1833 he began writing "sketches" or essays. His sketches continued to grow in popularity. They eventually led to the publication of the *The Pickwick Papers* in 1836.

**Source:** [http://www.perryweb.com/Dickens/life\\_law.shtml](http://www.perryweb.com/Dickens/life_law.shtml)

In May 1827 Dickens began work as a law clerk, a junior office position with potential to become a lawyer. He did not like the law as a profession and after a short time as a court stenographer he became a journalist, reporting parliamentary debate and travelling Britain by stagecoach to cover election campaigns. His journalism informed his first collection of pieces *Sketches by Boz* and he continued to contribute to and edit journals for much of his life. In his early twenties he made a name for himself with his first novel, *The Pickwick Papers*.

**Source:** <http://www.spiritus-temporis.com/charles-dickens/career-and-marriage.html>



## Maria Beadnell

Maria Beadnell was the first love of Charles Dickens. They met in 1830 and he fell madly in love with her. For Charles it was love at first sight. His mind was quickly filled with thoughts of ever-lasting romance and marriage.

However her parents did not approve of the relationship. Mr. Beadnell was a banker. He felt that Charles was too young and lacking in prospects to be considered a serious suitor.

During these years Dickens worked as a court stenographer and shorthand reporter. His own dissatisfaction with his career and a desire to make a more favorable impression with the Beadnells lead him to consider becoming an actor. He even went so far as to schedule an audition. However he was sick on that day and missed his appointment.

We'll never know the nature of Maria's feelings for Charles. She sometimes treated him with indifference and sometimes seemed to encourage his affections. Later in life she claimed that she truly cared for him.

In early 1833, when Charles became twenty one, he threw himself a coming-of-age party. The Beadnells were invited and accepted the invitation. During the evening Dickens was able to speak privately to Maria. He spoke of his feelings for her. She insulted him badly by referring to him as a "boy".

Their relationship ended later that year. Maria Beadnell went on to become Mrs. Henry Winter.

After a twenty-four year separation Maria contacted Dickens. They were both married and Dickens, the man who had been lacking in prospects, had become a famous author.

Dickens was thrilled upon receiving her letter. The letter from Maria brought back the memories of his intense love for her and perhaps fantasies of what might have been.

In 1855 they agreed to a secret meeting without their spouses. Maria warned Dickens that she was not the same young woman that he remembered. Despite her warnings he apparently was surprised at the changes he saw in his first love. His feelings inspired him to base the character of of Flora Finching in *Little Dorrit* on Maria.

**Flora, always tall, had grown to be very broad too, and short of breath; but that was not much. Flora, whom he had left a lily, had become a peony; but that was not much. Flora, who had seemed enchanting in all she said and thought, was diffuse and silly. That was much. Flora, who had been spoiled and artless long ago, was determined to be spoiled and artless now. That was a fatal blow. - *Little Dorrit***

They met once more for a dinner with their spouses. However after that, despite Maria's wishes for further contact, Dickens avoided her.



## The Marriage of Charles Dickens

Catherine Hogarth was the eldest daughter of George and Georgina Hogarth. Catherine was born in Scotland. In 1834 she and her family moved to England where her father had taken a job as a music critic for the *Morning Chronicle*.

Charles Dickens, young and unattached, was also employed by the *Morning Chronicle*. His first romantic relationship, with [Maria Beadnell](#), had ended badly. However he was quite recovered and was quickly taken with Catherine.

They met in 1834, became engaged in 1835 and were married in April of 1836. In January of 1837 the first of their ten children was born.

The early years of their marriage were apparently quite happy. Dickens was in love with his young wife and she was very proud of her famous husband. In 1841 the couple traveled to Scotland. In 1842 they traveled to America together.

After the 1842 trip to America, Catherine's sister Georgina came to live with the couple. Catherine was becoming overwhelmed the the duties of being the wife of a famous man and mother of ten children. Georgina stepped in to fill the gaps and eventually ran the Dickens household.

Dickens grew unhappy with Catherine and his marriage. He resented the fact that he had so many children to support. (Somehow he saw this as Catherine's fault.) He did not approve of Catherine's lack of energy. He began to indicate that she was not nor had ever been his intellectual equal.

In 1855 his discontent lead him to accept an invitation to meet with his former girlfriend, Maria Beadnell. Maria had married and had become Mrs. Henry Winter. However Mrs. Henry Winter did not live up to Dickens' romantic memories and nothing ever came of the reunion.

In 1857 Dickens met the woman who was to be his companion until his death, Ellen Ternan. Ellen, her mother and her sister were hired to act in a benefit presentation of *The Frozen Deep*. The event was sponsored by their co-star, Charles Dickens.

Dickens' life with Catherine seemed even more insufferable after meeting Ellen. Dickens wrote to his friend John Forster, "Poor Catherine and I are not made for each other, and there is no help for it. It is not only that she makes me uneasy and unhappy, but that I make her so too---and much more so."

In 1857 Charles and Catherine took separate bedrooms.

In the spring of 1858 a bracelet that Dickens bought as a present for Ellen was accidentally delivered to the Dickens household. Catherine discovered the bracelet and accused Dickens of having an affair. Dickens denied the accusation and said it was his custom to give small gifts to people that acted in his plays.

In June of 1858 Catherine and Charles were legally separated. Days later Dickens published a notice in the *London Times* and *Household Words* that tried to explain the separation to the public. In the notice he stated, "Some domestic trouble of mine, of long-standing, on which I will make no further remark than that it claims to be respected, as being of a sacredly private nature, has lately been brought to an arrangement, which involves no anger or ill-will of any kind, and the whole origin, progress, and surrounding circumstances of which have been, throughout, within the knowledge of my children. It is amicably composed, and its details have now to be forgotten by those concerned in it."

While an announcement of this sort seems extreme Dickens was motivated to do so by some of the rumors circulating about the breakup. There was some gossip about an actress and some stories even suggested that Dickens was having an affair with his sister-in-law, Georgina. The second rumor was particularly upsetting because in those times such a relationship would have been viewed as incestuous.

Despite assurances that things were "amicably composed" Dickens and Catherine were never again on pleasant terms. Catherine was given a house. Their oldest son, Charley, moved in with her. Dickens retained custody of the rest of the children. While the children were not forbidden to visit their mother they were not encouraged to do so.

Catherine lived for another twenty years after the separation. Deprived of both the role of wife and mother, she never seemed to recover from the breakup of her marriage.

## The Home of Charles Dickens - Gad's Hill Place

When he was a boy Charles Dickens and his father took a walk through Kent. On Gravesend Road they passed a house called Gad's Hill Place. Young Charles was very impressed.

His family was plagued with financial problems. However this imposing structure seemed to be part of a different world. His father noted his interest and told Charles that if he "were to be very persevering and work very hard" he might one day live there.

He did. He bought the house in 1856 and lived there until his death in 1870.



## Bonfire at Gad's Hill Place

In September of 1860, behind his home at [Gad's Hill Place](#), Charles Dickens tried to cover his tracks. He gathered "the accumulated letters and papers of twenty years" and set them ablaze in his backyard.

What moved him to such drastic action? There seem to be two factors in his life that drove him to make a bonfire of his correspondence.

The first is fear of the press. He was concerned that his personal letters would be published and details of his life would become public knowledge. What did he have to hide?

In 1858 he had a very public [separation from his wife](#), but it was not widely known that he had a mistress. Ellen Ternan, his mistress, was an actress who was much younger than Dickens. If his relationship with Ellen were public knowledge it would have created a scandal.

In 1843 he'd written about workhouses and prisons in *A Christmas Carol*. However very few people knew that Dickens's father had been sent to Marshalsea prison for failure to pay a debt and that Charles Dickens, then only twelve years old, was [sent to work in a shoe-polish factory](#). Dickens was deeply scarred by these incidents and rarely spoke of them.

A second inspiration for the bonfire at Gad's Hill Place could have been that Dickens was at a turning point in his life. The destruction of his private papers might have been his way of coming to terms with his past.

In 1860 he was still coming to terms with the separation from his wife and his relationship with Ellen. Also in July of that year his favorite daughter, Katie, married and left Gad's Hill Place. Ten days after the wedding Dickens's brother, Alfred, died. Additionally Dickens's mother had become senile and needed constant care. All of these items could have motivated Dickens, at least on a subconscious level, to try to free himself from the demons of his past.

Whatever his motivations we can only imagine the things we might have learned about the era, Dickens's life and the lives of famous Victorians. Burned on that day were letters from authors like Wilkie Collins, George Eliot and William Makepeace Thackeray.

Dickens's two youngest sons, Henry and Plorn, carried out baskets and baskets of letters to feed into the fire. His daughter Mamie begged him to reconsider and save some of the letters. However Dickens was determined that the task be completed. As they were finishing it began to rain. Dickens said, ". . . I suspect my correspondence of having overcast the face of the Heavens."



## The Staplehurst Railway Accident

In June of 1865 Charles Dickens was involved in the Staplehurst railway accident. Dickens was returning from a trip to Paris. In the coach with him were Ellen Ternan and her mother.

The train track was being repaired near Staplehurst. Workmen did not signal to oncoming trains that there was a gap, 42 feet long, in the tracks over a bridge. The train's engineer spotted the problem at the last minute, but it was too late. Momentum carried the engine and the first part of the train across the breach. However the coaches in the center and the rear of the train fell into the river bed below. All but one of the first-class coaches went into the ravine. That was the coach that carried Dickens, Ellen Ternan and Mrs. Ternan.

While their carriage did not fall into gap, it was hanging off the bridge at a steep angle. Dickens and Mrs. Ternan were uninjured. Ellen had only minor injuries. Others weren't as lucky. Ten people were killed and about fifty were injured.

Once Dickens helped the Ternans from the coach he went about the work of assisting his fellow passengers. He retrieved a flask of brandy from the train as well as his top hat. He filled the hat with water and then did what he could to aid and comfort the injured. Later he said that the scene was unimaginable.

One poor man was visible to the rescuers, but there was no way to help him escape. The man later died, still pinned under the train. At one point Dickens gave an injured lady who was resting under a tree a sip of brandy. The next time he passed her she was dead. For three long hours Dickens did what he could to lessen people's pain and suffering.

When help finally arrived and the accident scene was being evacuated Dickens remembered something. There was still something in his train compartment that he needed. He made his way back into the wrecked train one last time to retrieve the latest installment of *Our Mutual Friend*, the novel he was writing at the time.

For years afterward Dickens would sometimes suffer from sudden feelings of anxiety when he was traveling by rail.



Scene of the fatal accident at Staplehurst, on the South Eastern Railway — from a sketch taken next day.

Charles Dickens survives as carriages tumble over railway bridge: 10 killed





Victoria and Albert  
decorate the Christmas tree

Charles Dickens has probably had more influence on the way that Christians celebrate Christmas today than any other single individual in human history except Christ himself.

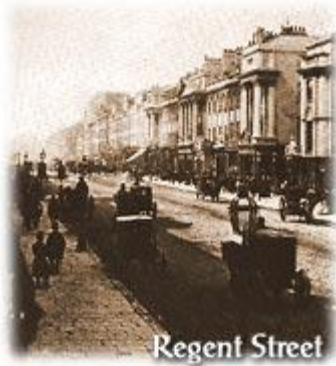
At the beginning of the Victorian period the celebration of Christmas was in decline. The medieval Christmas traditions, which combined the celebration of the birth of Christ with the ancient Roman festival of Saturnalia (a pagan celebration for the Roman god of agriculture), and the German winter festival of Yule, were being harshly criticized by the Puritans. The Puritans were a religious group that placed a high value on hard work and strict religious discipline. The Industrial Revolution, in full swing in Dickens' time, allowed workers little time for the celebration of Christmas.

There were other people along with Charles Dickens who contributed to bringing back the tradition of celebrating Christmas. Prince Albert brought the German custom of decorating the Christmas tree to England, the singing of Christmas carols (which had all but disappeared) began to grow again, and the first Christmas card appeared in the 1840s. But it was the Christmas stories of Dickens, particularly his 1843 masterpiece *A Christmas Carol*, that reignited the joy of Christmas in Britain and America. Today, after more than 160 years, *A Christmas Carol* continues to be relevant, sending a message that cuts through the materialism (gift buying and overspending that sometimes happens during the season) and gets to the heart and soul of the holidays.

Dickens' describes the holidays as "a good time: a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time: the only time I know of in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of other people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys". This was what Dickens described for the rest of his life as the "Carol Philosophy".

Dickens' name had become so synonymous with Christmas that on hearing of his death in 1870 a little costermonger's girl in London asked, "Mr. Dickens dead? Then will Father Christmas (Santa Claus's name in England) die too?"

## DICKENS'S LONDON



Dickens applied his unique power of observation to the city in which he spent most of his life. He walked the city streets, 10 or 20 miles at a time, and his descriptions of nineteenth century London allow readers to experience the sights, sounds, and smells of the old city. This ability to immerse the reader into time and place sets the perfect stage for Dickens to weave his fiction.

Victorian London was the largest, most spectacular city in the world. While Britain was experiencing the **Industrial Revolution**, its capital was both reaping the benefits and suffering the consequences. In 1800 the population of London was around a million souls. That number would grow to 4.5 million by 1880. Perhaps the biggest impact on the growth of London was the coming of the railroad in the 1830s which displaced thousands and accelerated the expansion of the city.

The price of this explosive growth and domination of world trade was great poverty and filth. In his excellent biography, *Dickens*, Peter Ackroyd notes that "If a modern day person were suddenly to find himself in a house during this time, he would be literally sick - sick with the smells, sick with the food, sick with the atmosphere around him".

Imagine yourself in the London of the early 19th century. The homes of the upper and middle class are right next to areas of unbelievable poverty and filth. Rich and poor walk together in the crowded city streets. Street sweepers attempt to keep the streets clean of manure, the result of thousands of horse-drawn vehicles. The city's thousands of chimney pots are belching coal smoke, resulting in soot which seems to settle everywhere. In many parts of the city raw sewage flows in gutters that empty into the Thames River. Street vendors are shouting out their items for sale adding to all of the street noises. Pick-pockets, prostitutes, drunks, beggars, and vagabonds of every description add to the population.

Personal cleanliness is not a big priority, nor is clean laundry. In close, crowded rooms the smell of unwashed bodies is stifling. It is unbearably hot by the fire, numbingly cold away from it.

At night the major streets are lit with dim gas lamps. Side streets may not be lit at all and link bearers are hired to guide the traveler to his destination. Inside, a candle or oil lamp struggles against the darkness and blacken the ceilings.

### SANITATION AND DISEASE

Until the second half of the 19th century London residents were still drinking water from the very same source that the open sewers were dumping into. Several outbreaks of Cholera in the mid 19th century, along with The Great Stink of 1858, when the stench of the Thames River caused Parliament to end early, brought a cry for action. The Victorians slowly realized there was a link between drinking water dirty with sewage and the incidence of disease slowly

In 1875 adequate sewers were finally constructed to serve the city. In addition, laws were put in effect which prevented companies supplying drinking water from taking water from the most polluted parts of the Thames and required them to provide some type of filtration.

### ANIMALS AND TRAVEL IN DICKENS'S LONDON

By 1900 3000 horse-drawn buses were carrying 500 million passengers a year. All of this added up to an incredible amount of manure which had to be removed from the streets. In wet weather straw was scattered in walkways, storefronts, and in carriages to try to soak up the mud and wet. Cattle were driven through the streets until the mid 19th century.



## THE POOR IN DICKENS'S LONDON



The Victorian answer to dealing with the poor and indigent was the **New Poor Law**, enacted in 1834. Previously it had been the responsibility of local neighborhood churches, or parish, to take care of their poor. The new law required parishes to band together and create regional workhouses where the poor could apply for assistance. The workhouse was little more than a prison for the poor. Civil liberties were denied, families were separated, and human dignity was destroyed. The true poor often went to great lengths to avoid this relief.

Dickens, because of the childhood trauma caused by his father's imprisonment for debt and his job at the blacking factory to help support his family, was a true champion to the poor. He repeatedly pointed out the horrors of the system through his novels.

With the turn of the century and Queen Victoria's death in 190, the Victorian period ended. Many of the problems of the 19th century were fixed through education, technology and social reform and by the social consciousness raised by the themes in the immensely popular novels of Dickens.