

Charles Dickens in Thirties Sheffield
A talk by Mary Grover, Chair of Reading Sheffield,
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**Charles Dickens in Thirties
Sheffield**

Dickens? Whose Dickens?

Before I tell you about the love of Dickens in 1930s Sheffield I would like to share with you some memories of my father and his love of Dickens. My Dad's Dickens.

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David Yorweth Morgan

Rangoon

1954



From 1950-1957 my father was an English Literature lecturer at Rangoon University, paid by the British Council. Though he lectured on Dickens, in our picture here he clearly has not got in front of him one of the mighty volumes of the novels we had in the home but a slight sheet of paper with his lecture notes perhaps.

I have a very clear image of my father immersed in the novels themselves. It is an image of him standing alone in the concrete garage of our English semi-detached house in 1959, surrounded by piles of books, a cigarette in one hand and a battered copy of one of his favourite Dickens novels in the other, Nicholas Nickleby or Bleak House perhaps. He was a great re-reader.

In the 1960 and 70s, every four years or so, my father was sent by the British Council, at the request of foreign governments, to supervise the writing of national textbook series for the teaching of English. Before every posting my mother would send him into the garage to pack into a black tin trunk the books that would sustain him for the next few years. Dad would always get stuck on Dickens. The trunk would take six weeks to ship so he knew that once packed he would be without the novels for a while.

The summer before he went to Pakistan in 1960 I was sent in to announce supper and found him in the fading light with his last Benson and Hedges in one hand and a copy of Dickens in the other, the other 17 of the set of 18 piled beside him. The reason he had the whole lot to choose from is what unites him with many of Sheffield's Dickens lovers interviewed by the Reading Sheffield project.

My father was Welsh, his father an unemployed haberdasher. There was little money for books when he was growing up in the Thirties. It was his good fortune and the good fortune of similar families across Britain that from 1933 to 1934 the novels of Dickens became just about affordable to a vast number of people. In 1934 the Daily Herald, a left-wing newspaper with a gifted gambling correspondent who contributed to its success, got the ball rolling with the first subscription offer. A circulation war was in full swing. As the competition intensified, other newspapers piled in behind the Herald. The Daily Mail, the Daily Express, the News Chronicle vied with each other in offering a modestly priced subscription to a complete set of Dickens in a uniform edition in a freestanding and purpose-built bookcase. Very few homes in Britain possessed a bookcase of any kind so the case itself was a lure.

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Dickens and the Subscription Wars 1933-34




During the subscription wars of 1933-4, it is probable that six million copies of Dickens' novels were distributed by the Daily Herald, the Daily Mail, the Daily Express and the News Chronicle in these sturdy little cases.

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The News Chronicle Dickens edition 1934

**Daily Herald
Daily Mail
Daily Express
News Chronicle**

**6 million copies of Dickens'
novels distributed in
subscription sets.**



Here is my father's. Delivered to South Wales, to Burma, to Surrey, to Pakistan, to Surrey, to India, to Surrey, to Kenya and back to Britain – still standing.

The legwork which introduced these sets into the home must have been tremendous. [Frank Burgin](#) (b. 1938), who grew up in Mosborough in the Thirties described the process.

A man came round to the house getting you to buy the Daily Herald. My father said, 'We'll never use that newspaper because we don't agree with those politics', but eventually, the man must have been good,

because he signed up so I got the whole of Dickens' works with that newspaper.

The saving was immense even though the cost was significant. Frank's father was a miner, interested in education but unused to spending money on new books. The Herald offered registered readers eighteen volumes for eleven shillings, its market price being four guineas – a saving of 69 shillings. But eleven shillings would have been about a third of a week's wages for Frank's father. Too much for many. [Mary](#) (b. 1921) was tempted by one of the subscription offers but she never acted on it. A Dickens set was advertised in the Woman's Weekly and she kept the clipping till she died.

The Attraction

What was the attraction of Dickens to these readers who had few books of any sort, let alone hefty nineteenth century doorstoppers?

[Jean H](#) was born in 1926 to clever parents who had not had the opportunity to have more than an elementary education. She 'loved Dickens'. Well known in her elementary school for being able to recite poetry, Jean says that the novels of Dickens, 'were the only books that stick in my mind somehow. I just borrowed them either from the library or wherever I could.' Her favourite was A Christmas Carol, a staple of Christmas broadcasting. From 1923 year when the British Broadcasting Company was launched, to 1950, fourteen separate versions of A Christmas Carol were broadcast. So Jean was able to spend nearly every Christmas of her childhood with her favourite author.

[Dorothy](#) responded powerfully to the story of Oliver Twist, 'the way he was treated'. One of eight children, Dorothy, born in 1929, was not brought up in absolute poverty but her father, a butcher in the working-class terraces in north Sheffield, would have negotiated daily the struggles of his customers to purchase enough meat to feed families as big as his own. [Betty Newman](#) is a near contemporary of Dorothy's, born in 1935. She too responded to the 'tangible' or 'credible' in fiction of Dickens' novels so she read Dickens in spite of a dislike for novels in general. She supposes that Dickens 'was the nearest I got to fiction' then adds reflectively, 'I don't think he really is fiction'. This is a reminder that Dickens came nearer to describing the economic realities of the industrial working class than any twentieth century author our Sheffield readers might have encountered. Cheap popular fiction in the Thirties rarely offered a portrait of the harsh economic realities they experienced.

And of course, Dickens piled up the detail to dramatize the vulnerability of the poor. This detail was to some a burden and to others wealth. Unfortunately Frank did not appreciate his father's investment in the Daily Herald Dickens:

I couldn't stand three pages of, you know, a fellow started with what somebody ate for breakfast and then going on for the whole of his political opinions and prejudices and all the rest of it before we got on to the story again.

[Ted](#) (b. 1919) as a teenager in the 1930s had the same kind of response as Frank in the late 40s.

I wasn't fussy on the really weighty novels, you know like the Dickens and stuff like that. I am sure the stories were splendid but they were buried in a lot of print and to me I wanted it quick and easy, something that I could do.

Like Frank, Ted presented his negative response as purely personal, not a dismissal of Dickens himself. These non-judgemental expressions of taste are entirely typical of all the Sheffield readers we interviewed.

Both Frank and Ted clearly found the perceived realism a barrier. But for two of our readers it was precisely the wealth of descriptive detail that was revealing. [Peter Mason](#) (b. 1929) valued this feature of Dickens' writing because the social descriptions 'covered all facets of the Victorian period very well'.

It gave you an insight into just how unfortunate some people were and how they lived. You get Oliver Twist, you get all the books. The class distinctions are very clear in those books.

[Malcolm Mercer](#) (b. 1925) too, headmaster and historian, mined Oliver Twist, with a particular purpose. In the 1990s, while a mature postgraduate student he had read it to compare with other sources

because I've researched a fair amount about the Sheffield Workhouse in what I was writing about Sheffield and there were schools in the workhouse in Sheffield.

For those who had got the reading bug, Dickens was a godsend because his books were so fat. [Adele](#) (b. 1942) describes herself as ‘an avid reader of very big books’.

I read all the Dickens. You know, when I think about my appetite for reading at sixteen, it was just amazing. And you’ve got the time, haven’t you? Well, a lot more time in bed, for a start, as a teenager. So, you know, you just have an appetite and nothing else much to do really.

The size of each book, the number of volumes, were ideal fodder for the book addict. For some it was the Abbey School series, for others Dickens. Adele got her copies through the municipal library. [Eva](#) (b. 1925) had a subscription set at home. Neither child went to grammar school and both fathers worked in manual trades: Adele’s a painter and decorator Eva’s a turner. Neither girl was educated to revere or to enjoy Dickens. But Eva was hooked on David Copperfield from the age of seven in 1933 (the year of the Daily Herald offer) and then read the lot. ‘I was more interested in those sort than fairy tales and those sorts of books.’

Realism and length were attractions but, perhaps above all, the hold of Dickens on the popular imagination in the Thirties was linked to the electrifying immediacy of his characters, many of whom, especially the villains, have entered British folklore.

The first Dickens’ character discovered by [Bob W](#) (b. 1940) was David Copperfield. The novel was a childhood favourite; the central character still

fascinates him: 'I had to be interested in people. I mean, you can't get a more interesting character than David Copperfield, you see'.

Radio had much to do with introducing these characters into the homes of our readers. Throughout the 1930s the voices of Mr Micawber, Fagin and Magwitch could be heard on the radio, in every kind of programme. Dickens featured on Children's Hour, schools' programmes and the early evening serial. In 1934 Oliver Twist was dramatized on both children's and adult programmes. These are the novels that figure most regularly:

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The links between Dickens and the Music Hall are explicit in a 1930 programme entitled 'Vaudeville' which advertised Bransby Williams ('the Famous Portrayer of Dickens Characters') in a musical extravaganza, 'A Pickwick Party' subtitled 'A Dickens Dream Fantasy' with a 'Chorus of Dickens Dogs and Dainty Ducks'. Just a touch of Disney.

Dickens on the Radio in the 1930s

Vaudeville:

BRANSBY WILLIAMS: 'crowns a well-assorted programme with more of his deathless impressions of the Dickens characters'.

'A musical extravaganza: 'A Pickwick Party' subtitled 'A Dickens Dream Fantasy' with a 'Chorus of Dickens Dogs and Dainty Ducks'.

Bransby Williams' performances were clearly stagey romps.

Music was often a part of a Dickensian entertainment: The Magic Fishbone was set to music in 1931 and in 1939 Dorothy Hogben and her singers featured in a 'Music Anthology to celebrate the anniversary of the birth of Charles Dickens'. The absence of the darker works by Dickens in the schedules suggests that the BBC promoted the image of the writer chiefly as entertainer. So Bleak House or Little Dorrit would not have done.

Devalued status

You might think that Dickens on the radio in every home, and his books enshrined in solid oak bookcases in 300,000 subscribing households established Dickens as a classic. The reverse was true. During the Thirties

contempt for him amongst intellectuals grew. Many of him dismissed him as an author simply for the uneducated masses.

His status was undoubtedly compromised by his very omnipresence. When three film adaptations came out in 1937, Ethel Mannin, herself a popular novelist, sneered at 'The Dickens Racket'. In 1935, the East End author and Communist, Simon Blumenfeld uses possession of a newspaper set of Dickens AND the novels of Ethel Mannin, to suggest the shoddiness of lower middle class culture.

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A communist responds to the *Daily Mail* Dickens

In Simon Blumenfeld's *Jew Boy* 1935 (p. 133) the protagonist enters an empty room and scans the bookshelves of their absent owner.

'Nothing very interesting. The usual stuff, middle to three-quarter brow. Amongst others, Warwick Deeping, Ethel Mannin, David Garnett, . . . A Dickens set (probably from the *Daily Mail*).

One of the earliest of Cambridge doctorates in the newly founded Department of English Studies was awarded to a brilliant young woman in 1932. Q.D. Leavis, like Simon Blumenfeld, found the popularity of Dickens yet another

example of the debasement of British taste. The flood of available sets in the homes of miners and decorators both promoted Dickens and devalued him. For years Q.D. and her husband, F.R. Leavis argued that Dickens was not worthy of his 'classic' status. Even before the tide of cheap editions of Dickens broke into the homes of the less than affluent, Q.D. asserted that those in possession of an 'alert critical mind' should check the easy emotion prompted by Dickens' scenes of pathos. In her pioneering work *Fiction and the Reading Public*, one of the first studies of popular reading habits, Q.D. Leavis sternly warns the serious reader of literature that Dickens is not quite grown-up.

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A response from Cambridge

His originality is confined to recapturing a child's outlook on the grown-up world, emotionally he is not only uneducated but also immature.

Q.D. Leavis 1932. *Fiction and the Reading Public*. London: Bellew, 1965, 157.

Both Leavises inspired many English undergraduates to go into grammar schools to teach in the Forties, Fifties and Sixties. Their crusading zeal and contempt for mass culture attracted committed and gifted English teachers but they cultivated a habit of contempt for what was reckoned to be sub-standard. In my experience as an English teacher in secondary school this sheep and goats approach can be extremely unhelpful. When a teenager is, with any luck,

beginning to establish a regular reading habit why stop her in her tracks? Even if she is reading *Flowers in the Attic*, over and over again.

In the 1960s I went to university in the city from which Q.D. and her husband F.R. Leavis had thundered their denunciations of Dickens in the Thirties.

Fortunately for me, they had in the intervening thirty years discovered that *Hard Times*, and then, ah yes, *Bleak House*, *Dombey and Son* and others were not fairy stories but Great Novels (in capitals). Dickens was now judged not to be wholly uneducated because *Hard Times* is evidence that he had read the founder of Utilitarianism, Jeremy Bentham. Though Q.D. never apologised for her earlier misjudgement, in 1970, while I was an undergraduate, she and her husband brought out an unacknowledged recantation of their own original valuation ending with an essay titled 'How we Must read *Great Expectations*'. The Leavises may not have lost their bossiness but they were now part of a cohort of academics who judged Dickens a legitimate object of academic study.

An even greater good fortune for me than having Dickens on the university syllabus at all, was that for eighteen years Dickens had been a constant physical companion and, in my teens, an imaginative one. My father, an early and powerful influence on my reading, never warned me off Dickens. He was a stubborn and open-minded man, extremely wary of cults, snobbery and general modishness. So as an English undergraduate in London in the Thirties studying from home with 6d a week pocket money and small resources for books, he was never inclined to adopt a superior attitude to the *News Chronicle* set that remained available to him every evening on his return to New Malden. The Red Circle commercial library just off the Moor advertised, in

the 1930s 'Reading, your cheapest pleasure'. For my father and thousands like him Dickens made reading and rereading, affordable and pleasurable. And it was the pleasures he delivered that enabled many unschooled children to get the reading habit.

I am going to end with the story of the first Sheffield reader I interviewed 23 years ago, in Norfolk Park. [Jessie Robinson](#) was born in 1906. From 1920 to 1925 she was a cleaner for Canon Greenwood, a Londoner. She rarely saw him but she was supervised by the housekeeper. Jessie found her harsh; 'a proper giant to me. . . . She resented me reading the papers, the London papers.'

I am going to say nothing about Jessie's story but would like to know what you make of it. I end with her words.

[The Canon] he used to take the Sunday papers and of course I had a field day with them because we used to have an hour for lunch and the Housekeeper she used to go to sleep and . . . she seemed to resent me reading the newspapers. I don't know why. . . . He had some fantastic books. He had all Dickens books and she had all these in the kitchen in her bookcase. She said to me one day. 'Now I think you will get more education, child,' (she never called me my name, always 'child') 'with Dickens' books' which when I did start I was a real Dickens fan, and I am now you see. Anything . . . of Dickens or Shakespeare [and] I'm there, but it was through her, even her resentment gave me a gift and I love Dickens' characters. . . . she let me take them home.

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Any thoughts on your
experience of reading
Dickens?

Do get in touch with me.

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