

Charles Dickens in Camden

by Emma Jolly

London Historians reported in November that the Charles Dickens Museum had received a £2 million grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund for its *Great Expectations* project. This is intended to restore the Doughty Street house, where Dickens wrote *The Pickwick Papers* and *Oliver Twist*, and to increase exhibition space in the Museum there. The grant is timely, coming as it does just a year before the bicentenary of the author's birth in February 2012. Number 48 Doughty Street held unhappy memories for Dickens as it was where his wife's sister, Mary Hogarth, died in his arms in 1837. This tragedy became the inspiration for the death of Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop*.

Although this Georgian house is the only surviving of Dickens' main London homes, many other streets where he lived are a short walk away; and all are in the modern borough of Camden. Also, just around the corner from the Museum is Holborn Library on Theobald's Road - home to Camden Local Studies and Archives and a small collection of Dickens' private papers.

Charles John Huffam Dickens was born in Portsmouth on 7th February 1812, but lived in London for two years from 1815, and then from 1822 after his father was transferred back to the Navy Pay Office.

The Dickens family's first home in the capital in 1822 was at 16 (later 141) Bayham Street in Camden Town – then a rural area. Their four-roomed house backed onto meadows, across which Charles' father, John Dickens, walked to reach his job at Somerset House. A few months later, after finishing school in Chatham, Charles joined the family in Camden. He was a mere 10 years old. A plaque marks the spot of this house, which was demolished in 1910, but which lives on in the description of the Micawber's home in *David Copperfield* and that of the Cratchit family in *A Christmas Carol*.



48 Doughty Street today. © The Charles Dickens Museum.



Charles Dickens by Ary Scheffer, 1855. © National Portrait Gallery, London.

On Boxing Day 1823, the family moved to 4 Gower Street North in Bloomsbury, where Dickens' mother set up a school, 'Mrs Dickens's Establishment', in a vain attempt to stay the family's increasing money troubles. After this failed, Elizabeth Dickens decided her eldest son should support the family, and sent him to work at a shoe-blackening firm at Hungerford Stairs by the Thames. Charles began walking to work there from Bloomsbury just two days after his twelfth birthday in 1824. He never forgave Elizabeth, and later immortalised her as the hero's ineffectual mother in *Nicholas Nickleby*.

The inspiration for the father in *Little Dorrit* was Dickens' own father, John, who was imprisoned in the Marshalsea in early 1824. John's wife and four of the children moved in shortly afterwards, and Charles visited regularly. Whilst Charles continued to work in the factory, he lodged in Camden Town at 112 College Place (Little College Street) with Mrs Roylance in April and May 1824. When the separation from his family proved overwhelming, he was allowed to move down to Lant Street, Southwark to be near the prison.

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Charles Dickens in Camden (cont.)



After John's release from prison, the family moved back to the Camden area to the run-down 29 Johnson Street, Somers Town, in June 1824. Eager to return to education and to escape from work at Warren's Blacking Factory, Charles attended Wellington House Academy on Hampstead Road (near Granby Terrace) happily from April 1825 to March 1827.

In 1827 the family moved to a more respectable part of Somers Town - 17 The Polygon, (later Clarendon Square). Not far from here stands St Pancras Old Church, whose churchyard was the scene of the burial of Roger Cly in *A Tale of Two Cities*. Between May 1827 and November 1828, Dickens worked just south of Somers Town, as a clerk at the law office of Ellis and Blackmore, Attorneys of 5 Holborn Square, Grays Inn (later 1 South Square). He moved again around this time to 10 Norfolk Street, Fitzroy Square, and by 1830, he had an office at neighbouring 5 Bell Yard.



Tavistock House, the Dickens' home 1851 - 60. © The Charles Dickens Museum.

Dickens' first published piece of writing appeared in 1833, and from 1834 he took rooms in Furnival's Inn (demolished 1897) whilst working as a journalist. He refers to the nearby Bleeding Heart Yard (near Hatton Garden) in *Little Dorrit*. Several other places in his novels are also based on the surrounding area – Saffron Hill, for example, inspired Fagin's Den in *Oliver Twist*, and the legal area around Holborn is detailed in *Bleak House*.

From Furnival's Inn, Dickens and his wife, Catherine, moved slightly north into 48 Doughty Street in 1837, where they lived until the end of 1839. Two of his daughters were born in the house and he wrote several novels, including *Nicholas Nickleby* - the novel which propelled him to great fame.

Another blue plaque is found on the headquarters of the British Medical Association in Tavistock Square, only a short walk from Charles' unhappy home at 4 Gower Street North. This commemorates Tavistock House where Dickens lived from 1851-60 at the height of his popularity, and where he wrote *Bleak House*, *Hard Times*, *Little Dorrit*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and the journal *Household Words*. He

also began *Great Expectations*. It was in this house that Dickens established a small theatre, the activities of which are described in *Forster's Life*. His love of the theatre led, in 1857, to his meeting the actress Ellen Ternan, whose relationship with Dickens resulted in the eventual separation from his wife. Just over forty years after the Dickens family had left its walls, this grand house was demolished in 1901.

48 Doughty Street would have been demolished too if it were not for the fund-raising campaign of The Dickens Fellowship, a group founded in 1902. They bought the house and enabled the Museum to open on 9th June 1925 – the 55th anniversary of the author's death. Today, the Museum hosts the finest collection of Dickens material in the country and, thanks to the grant, should become "the world's most accessible centre for the enjoyment and understanding of Dickens and his legacy" (David Wootton, Chair of the Charles Dickens Museum). And, of course, it enables Charles Dickens to retain a presence in Camden, just as historic Camden continues to live on in his eternally popular works.

We thank The Charles Dickens Museum for their kind assistance. Images in this essay where stated are © The Charles Dickens Museum and may not be reproduced without their explicit permission.

Please consider making a donation to the Museum to help promote the life and work of Charles Dickens to the audience of today, and to ensure that we can preserve this national treasure for the future. Please call 020 7405 2127 ext 213 to make a donation or to request information about the **Great Expectations** project.

About Emma Jolly

Emma Jolly runs the London based Genealogic research service <http://www.genealogic.co.uk/>, with particular interests in London social history and the British in India. In 2008 she was awarded Your Family Tree magazine's Beginner Book of the Year Award for her first book, Family History for Kids, and is a regular writer for several publications, including Discover my Past England, and the Genealogists' Magazine. Currently, Emma is writing Tracing Your British Indian Ancestors, her first book with Pen & Sword.