

Frederick William Dickens – A Life

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The *Herts Advertiser* printed the following death notice on 31 October 1868:

'Death of Mr Frederick Dickens- on Friday morning the sod closed over the dust of Frederick Wm. Dickens, latest surviving brother of Mr Charles Dickens. Mr Frederick Dickens – who has resided in Darlington during the last twelve months- had for three weeks before his death suffered from an abscess on the lung. On Sunday and Monday last he was considerably better, and no danger was feared. About half-past 3 o'clock on Tuesday morning, however, he became seriously ill, and died shortly after four o'clock. The geniality – it was something more to those who could see below the surface- of Mr Dickens's nature, and his ready fund of humour and anecdote, will not readily be forgotten by those he knew and liked him best.' – *Darlington Times* (Mr Frederick Dickens previously resided at St Albans).



Fig.1: Portrait of Frederick Dickens by his Aunt Janet Barrow in the V & A.

Frederick William Dickens was born on 4 July 1820 in Chatham Kent and was the son of John Dickens and Elizabeth Barrow. Frederick was christened on 4 August 1820. (Fig.1)

In 1822 John Dickens was in financial difficulty and decided to move the family to London where he took up a new position in the Navy Pay Office in Somerset House. Frederick attended school in Hampstead for two years and Charles Dickens used to collect him from school. However, the family fell on hard times and he was withdrawn from school. He spent a brief period as a four-year-old child in the care of his family in Debtors' Prison, as his father had been placed in the Marshalsea in Southwark for unpaid debts in April 1824.

After John Dickens's release from prison the family moved to North London and lived in Camden Town, Somers Town and areas around Fitzroy Square and Manchester Square. In 1827 Frederick age seven was at school with his younger brother Alfred age five, in Brunswick Square. By 1834 Charles Dickens was working as a reporter for the *Morning Chronicle*. John Dickens was again falling into debt and Charles must have doubted that his father would be capable of planning for the future of his younger brothers Augustus six, Alfred twelve and Fred fourteen.

In August 1834 Charles achieved financial security for the first time as his *Morning Chronicle* position gave him a salary of five guineas a week. Charles established himself in his own rented unfurnished chambers at 13 Furnival's Inn in Holborn, London.

He was paying £35 for a year's lease, for which he had three rooms on the third floor, the use of a cellar and a lumber room on the roof. Charles invited Fred to join him, and instead of being glad to be rid of his younger brothers he was eager to have Fred, who had a ready laugh and wish to please. A celebratory party was held at Furnival's Inn on 21 December to honour the birthday of Charles and Fred's mother.

After his marriage to Catherine Hogarth on 2 April 1836, Charles Dickens had a brief honeymoon in Chalk, Kent, before returning with his bride to the larger chambers at No. 15 Furnival's Inn. (Fig.2) Fred lived happily with Charles and Catherine and on 6 January 1837 he became "Uncle Fred" when Charles Dickens junior (Charley) was born.



Fig.2: No. 15 Furnival's Inn Holborn. Drawing by F. G. Kitton.

By October 1836, 15 Furnival's Inn saw Charles negotiating with John Macrone his first publisher with "scotch whisky and cigars". Earlier in the Summer of 1836 Macrone gave sixteen-year-old Fred his first job in Macrone's accounts department.

After the birth of Charley, Catherine's sister Mary moved in for a month at Furnival's Inn helping and cheering Catherine. Charles decided it was time to move to more appropriate premises and on the last day of March 1837 they all moved into No.48 Doughty Street. The house was on a three-year lease at £80 a year. Although Fred did not live permanently with Charles, Catherine and Mary it became his second home. Fred was a very trusted and well-liked member of the family.

However, tragedy struck the Dickens household in May 1837 when Mary died suddenly, probably from heart failure or a stroke at just seventeen years. Mary died in Charles's arms and this greatly affected him for the rest of his life and influenced his creation of characters in his novels.

On 6 March 1838 Charles's second child Mary or Mamie was born. He was concerned about Fred's future and succeeded in getting Fred a job in a government office as clerk in The Treasury, by applying to the Patronage Secretary, Edward Stanley.

There appears to be some confusion as to when Fred started work. The *Pilgrim Edition*, Volume One, of Dickens's letters has the footnote "in 1838 through E.J. Stanley CD secured Fred a clerkship in the Secretary's Office of the Custom House". By 1839 Fred was working in The Treasury.

Fred would often join Charles and family on holiday visits to Broadstairs. During a September visit in 1840 Charles was working hard on The Old Curiosity Shop and Fred joined the family for fun and games. Eleanor Picken, just nineteen, met Charles and Fred at this time and later wrote a memoir of the merriment in Broadstairs. (Fig.3) Eleanor recalled fun and games when the Dickens brothers were fooling about on the pier. They invited Eleanor and her chaperone Amelia Thompson to dance a quadrille to music provided by Fred whistling and Charles playing on his pocket-comb. After the dance they walked to the end of the pier to watch the evening light fade as the tide came in. This incident illustrates how close Charles and Fred were at this time, and indeed their joint attraction to fine looking young women. This attraction led to dramatic changes in later years to the lives of both Charles and Fred.



Fig.3: Eleanor Picken

During the Autumn of 1841 Charles decided he wanted to make a tour of America as a break from constant writing and also to generate more income from his experiences. In a letter to Fred on 26 September 1841 Charles informed Fred of his intentions and also congratulated Fred on his recent promotion at The Treasury.

Writing from Broadstairs Charles stated "Kate and I are going to America, for five or six months (but don't tell her how long) and we sail on the Fourth of January". He asked Fred to look after the four children and even gave him the key to the wine cellar in Devonshire Terrace now the family home.

During the American trip in 1842 Fred acted on Charles's behalf for many business affairs and was in constant touch by correspondence. On 22 March 1842 Charles sent a great batch of letters to his

closest friends and business contacts. His letter to Fred thanked him for his "affectionate care of our dear darlings". Later, on 4 April, Charles wrote again to Fred from Cincinnati Ohio describing the long Ohio River and saying how much he and Catherine missed the children. He also thanked Fred for his letter describing how the children were coping with the parental absence. Charles also reminded Fred that he had the key to the cellar and that he was looking forward to returning home to Devonshire Terrace and drinking beer with Fred. Charles left a small space in his letter for Catherine to add a few words: "Dearest Fred, Charles has not left me too much paper I find, therefore I shall only be able to add a very few lines to his epistle to say how delighted we were to receive our long wished for letters (very) behindhand as the Columbia had a dread[ful] passage and how easy and happy we feel about our treasures as we hear from all such accounts of their health and happiness. God grant it may be so til we return. The time will soon be here – don't forget dear Fred to drink my health on the 19th of May which is my birthday". Catherine concluded her letter with the words " I am looking for a long letter from you by the next parcel. God bless you dearest Fred. (Believe me ever Yours truly attached sister) Kate".

On 26 February 1844 Charles addressed the Mechanics Institute in Liverpool. He got himself up in a 'magpie waistcoat' for his evening speech before an audience of 1,300. He scored a triumph and fell in love, with Christiana Weller, a nineteen year old pianist who performed at the reception. Charles shared his infatuation with his close friend T.J. Thompson who married Christiana on 21 October 1845 in Barnes.

Although Charles went to hear Christiana play in London, and spoke at her wedding, once Christiana had become 'Mrs Thompson' her turned against her and the whole Weller family. Fred met Christiana's sister Anna, just fifteen years old, in 1845 and started a relationship with her.

Earlier in September 1844 Fred went on holiday with Charles and the whole family in Genoa, Italy. Charles met Fred in Marseilles in the second week of September for a fortnight's holiday in Genoa. Poor Fred nearly drowned on the trip in the bay at Albaro. He swam into too strong a current, and was narrowly saved by the accident of a fishing boat preparing to leave the harbour at the time. "It was a world of horror and anguish" wrote Charles to John Forster, his biographer. Forster continued "crowded into four or five minutes of dreadful agitation; and to complete the terror of it, Georgy, Charlotte (the nurse) and the children were on a rock in full view of it all, crying as you may suppose, like mad creatures".

Charles was back from Genoa on 5 July 1845 in Devonshire Terrace feeling restless for a new challenge. He threw himself into amateur theatricals with the help of Forster. They chose Ben Johnson's *Every Man in His Humour* and recruited Fred and his brother Augustus along with T.J. Thompson, Douglas Jerrold and Mark Lemon. Charles had always held an ambition to be a stage manager and actor. Retired actress Miss Fanny Kelly gave them access to her theatre at 173 Dean Street in Soho, London. (Fig.5) The theatre was full on 20 September 1845 and Tennyson and the Duke of Devonshire were present much to the delight of Charles. A charity performance took place at St James's Theatre on 15 November followed by performances in Manchester and Liverpool in 1847 and a return to London in May and June 1848. Charles played Bobadil, Fred played Edward Knowell and Augustus Thomas Cash. On 27 June 1848 Fred appeared in a production of the *Merry Wives of Windsor* at the Theatre Royal, Birmingham playing the role of The Host of the Garter Inn. (Fig.4) However, Fred and Charles argued over Fred's intention to marry Anna Weller and he subsequently disappeared from the cast.

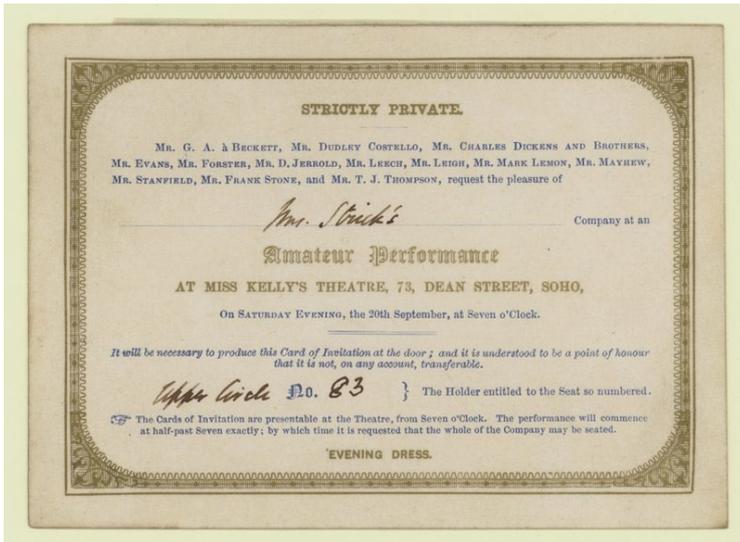


Fig.4: Invitation to Miss Kelly's Theatre in Dean Street Soho

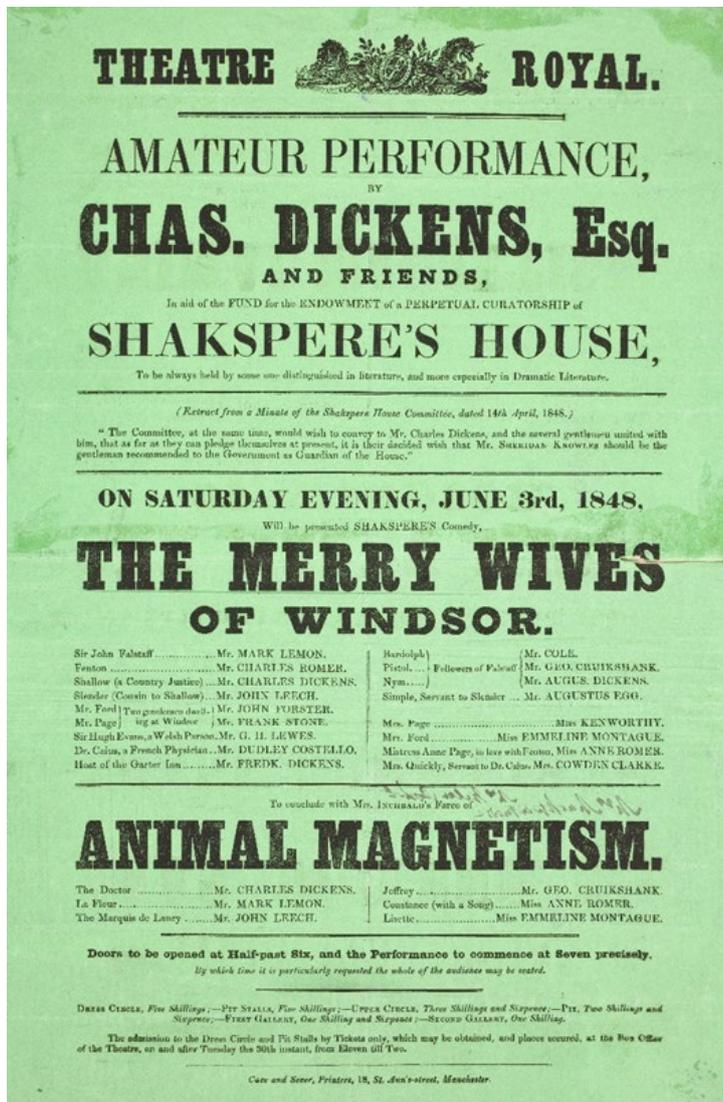


Fig.5: Fred appears as the Host of the Garter Inn Theatre Royal Stratford-upon-Avon

In 1847 Fred wrote to Charles to say that he was engaged to Anna Weller and desperate to marry her. Anna's father, Thomas Edmund Weller, was opposed to the idea of marriage. Thomas had also opposed the prospect of Anna's sister Christiana marrying T.J. Thompson who was a close friend of Charles. At this time Fred was still only a junior clerk at The Treasury and not in a strong financial position to marry Anna. Thomas Weller had tried to discuss Fred's engagement with Charles but Charles kept his distance and was embarrassed by Fred's relentless pursuit of Anna.

Fred met Anna at this time at the home of James Crescent Shaw, the husband of Betsy Weller the elder sister of Anna. Shaw was working in a shipping and canal company at Bishport near Bristol, and he was not happy with Fred's visits to his home in Bristol. In a letter of January 1847 Charles suggested that Fred should meet Anna away from the Shaw household and wait two years before contemplating marriage. Thomas Weller also objected to Fred's regular visits to see Anna; he was concerned about her pianist's career and Fred's financial prospects.

Charles said that if Fred could wait for two years he would speak to Thomas Weller and that Fred's one hundred and twenty mile regular visits were crazy. Charles concluded his letter to Fred with "Take time to consider, or take time until we can talk". There was further correspondence between Charles and Fred on 5 February 1847 when Charles was in Paris. He pointed out to Fred that he was not in a position to start a family. If Fred's engagement was to proceed, he had to conciliate Thomas Weller or that Anna had to do so.

Fred was writing constantly to Christiana Weller at this time. Christiana recorded in her diary on 7 February "Letter from Fred" and another on 9 February. Fred was making poor decisions at this time in his desperation to marry Anna by returning a letter from Thomas Weller unopened. Charles told Fred that it was a bad move and concluded his letter by telling Fred to stop his visits to see Anna at the Shaw household.

On 12 October 1847 Charles wrote again to Fred from Devonshire Terrace. He told Fred that Anna had visited him with her sister Christiana and her family at Broadstairs and that he did not like Anna. However, Fred continued his pursuit of Anna and met her in July, August and late September 1847.

Charles decided to help Fred at this time by proposing him for a job as Secretary to the Amateur Theatrical Company. The position would add to his Treasury salary and that he had the approval of Mark Lemon, Douglas Jerrold and John Forster at the Company. This provided Fred with a further £50 per annum and he agreed to accept the position. Charles also probably thought this would provide a distraction from Fred's persistent visits to Anna.

Charles wrote to Fred again on 14 October 1847 saying that he objected to Anna's character and her "breeding, education and weakest parents on this globe". His views were obviously influenced by his obsession with her sister Christiana and his rejection of Christiana and her family after her marriage to his close friend T.J. Thompson in October 1845. In his letter Charles changed the subject by discussing the needs of the Amateur Theatrical Company and of Fred's duty to send out letters on behalf of the Company in his role as Secretary. Charles concluded his letter by saying that he would not comment any more about Fred's engagement.

Fred married Anna on 30 December 1848 and Charles did not attend the wedding. He had written to Fred on 2 September advising him not to proceed with the wedding. Charles's grounds for concern were Anna's youth (she was just eighteen on 9 March 1848) and her persistent bad health. Anna had written to Fred at this time making it clear that she did not wish their marriage to be postponed. Emotions within the Weller family were mixed as the wedding approached. Christiana recorded preparations for the wedding with great enjoyment; her father recorded it with malice against Charles.

Thomas Weller wrote of Anna to Christiana on 7 December 1848: "Health is all she wants and then I can calculate she will do herself honour as a pianiste as the great 'Boz' does as a writer – and cut rather a higher figure in the intellectual world than Mrs Boz! Mrs F.D. will be a greater personage than Mrs C.D. – which will no doubt be very annoying – Had Anna been an ordinary young Lady all would have been well but she is too talented to be tolerated. I am so glad the wedding comes off at Cheltenham- that will be another dig into their importance".

Charles was totally against the marriage and described the Weller family as: "feverish, restless, flighty, excitable, uncontrollable, wrong-headed; under no sort of wholesome self-restraint, and bred to think the absence of it a very intellectual and brilliant thing".

The wedding of Fred Dickens and Anna Weller took place on 30 December 1848 at St Mary the Virgin Church, Prestbury, near Cheltenham. (Fig.6) T.J. Thompson's family owned property in Prestbury Green and it was no doubt organised by Christiana Weller Thompson.

Charles did not attend the wedding as already stated but he did reluctantly pay off Fred's debts of over £80 just before the wedding. This was probably to protect the good name of Dickens.

John Dickens, Fred's father, was the sole representative of the Dickens family. It was reported that Fred appeared in a white satin waistcoat with velvet flowers and silver ornaments: he evidently shared his elder brother's taste for dressing up. The wedding was announced in *The Guardian* on Wednesday 3 January 1849.



Fig.6: The church of St Mary Prestbury where Fred and Anna married

After the wedding Fred and Anna left in a poste-chaise for Stratford-upon-Avon where they stayed for their honeymoon. Unfortunately this happy start to the marriage didn't last.

Fred and Anna were constantly on the move in the early years of their marriage in a variety of rented accommodation and money was always a problem. The Weller family and Charles helped out on occasions. Charles paid a bill on 14 February 1850 for £250 believed to be for furnishing Fred and Anna's home.

Charles had softened in his attitude towards Anna and wrote an affectionate letter to Fred on 7 February 1850 from Devonshire Terrace:

"My dear Fred,
Many thanks for your affectionate letter. I am safe to be at home to dinner tomorrow, and in the evening.
Love to Anna, whom Kate is coming to see.
In haste ever affectionately
Charles Dickens."

In 1851 there were rumours of Fred's adulterous and poor behaviour at this time in London. He met Jonathan Feetum at the White Hart Tavern, 169 Regent Street, where Jonathan was the licensed victualler. There were reports that Fred, now 31 years old, was not ready to settle down to married life and he continued to enjoy a good drink with his friends and had adulterous affairs.

Fred was in constant need of money early in 1851 and was using Charles's name to obtain credit from various sources ... "rasping at my very heart" Charles said.

Anna was in poor health during the 1850s and in constant need of support from Christiana and other family members.

In June 1854 Anna left Fred and moved back to her parents' house, "in consequence of ill treatment", and her husband's "neglect to supply her with food and other necessities" as Christiana's letters to friends and family revealed. Although Anna returned to live with Fred again in January 1855 their relationship was always chaotic. They were constantly moving from place to place in a succession of ten different addresses mainly in London and Surrey. Anna finally left Fred for good in October 1857 and she obtained a judicial separation in 1858 on the grounds of his adultery.

Christiana's letters reported that Anna was badly treated by Fred, who bullied his wife, in part by opposing her artistic pursuits of music and painting. Anna described Fred's "spirit against" her art, in a letter to Christiana in January 1852 and Fred's "violent and disgusting treatment – unreasonable as cruel". He not only called her an unfit companion but also threatened to get medical "advice" that would justify "put[ing] a stop to [her] Painting".

Anna applied for a Petition of Judicial Separation on 30 October 1858, in the new Matrimonial Court of Probate and Divorce. Charles was most concerned about the publicity the hearing attracted as revealed in his letter to Christiana's husband T.J. Thompson on 22 November 1858. Charles had

hoped to keep it quiet but *The Times* gave daily reports of the hearing contrary to Charles's hope that there would be a Deed of "Voluntary Separation". Fred denied adultery and suggested it was "condoned" as they had returned to live together in 1855.

In the months leading up to the hearing Fred was desperate for money and tried to reconcile his relationship with Charles. He travelled to Dublin where Charles was giving readings on a tour of Ireland in August 1858, and surprised Charles with a visit to Morrison's Hotel in Dublin where Charles was staying. Charles wrote to Georgina Hogarth on 9 August saying "Fancy Frederick presenting himself here, in this house, to me, last Thursday a few minutes before Dinner. I was dreadfully hard with him at first; but relented". Charles never supported Fred at this time.

On 26 July 1859 Anna applied to the Court of Probate and Divorce for divorce. The hearing heard details of "that astonishing Dorking business" that Charles had mentioned to T.J. Thompson in a letter of 27 October 1858. Anna's discovery of Fred's adultery was reported in the national and regional press. The *Daily News* reported lurid details on 27 July 1859. Apparently whilst reconciled with Fred early in 1857 Anna made a trip to Jersey without Fred. That October she finally left Fred to live with Christiana in the neighbourhood of Dorking. Anna visited the Red Lion Hotel whilst arranging a musical fete for Crimean Soldiers. One of her servants told her that she had been to the Red Lion Hotel before with Fred. Anna then questioned Fred about this visit and she decided to investigate the incident further. She learned that on Saturday 25 April 1857, whilst she was in Jersey, Fred had taken a young woman to the hotel and spent two nights with her at the hotel. The *Daily News* reported "Mrs Dickens having discovered this, left her husband".

The lengthy article went on to report that Anna left Fred in October 1857 and never lived with him again. A long correspondence had followed, in the course of which Fred expressed himself in very penitent terms, and implored his wife to return to him.

Fred's defence team told the hearing that Mr and Mrs Alfred Dickens, Fred's younger brother, proved that Anna and Fred had in fact stayed at their house in Haverstock-hill for several days in November 1857; and that Anna left Fred there.

The jury without hesitation, found a verdict for the Petitioner (Anna) on all that had been raised. Sir C. Cresswell pronounced the Separation (Divorce).

There was further bad news for Fred and Charles in the coverage of the hearing in the *Morning Post*. The newspaper reported that the marriage of Fred and Anna was not a happy one. It was alleged that early in the marriage Fred pursued a system of conduct towards his wife which, although it did not amount to legal cruelty, was such as to render their cohabitation of the most wretched description. There were two separations, one in June 1854, and another in January 1855. After these occasions, Mrs Dickens had thought it her duty to return to her husband on his promising better behaviour for the future.

The *Morning Post* then gave its account of the "Dorking business". Mr Dickens and a friend went to Dorking on Saturday 25 April with two persons of notoriously bad character, and cohabited with them from Saturday until Monday. Mr Dickens passing off one of these females as his wife at the Red Lion Hotel.

The newspaper went on to say that once Anna had heard about this visit she questioned Fred about the affair, and on 28 November 1857 she withdrew cohabitation, and had since resided with her father at St Aubyn Cottage in Putney, Surrey.

The court was shown letters from Fred to Anna trying to settle the whole matter out of court, but that they had all failed. It was not denied by Fred's counsel that the adultery had been committed, but it was submitted that his wife had full and fair knowledge of her husband's offence for some time before she withdrew from cohabitation, and had therefore condoned the adultery. His Lordship summed up. The Jury returned a verdict for the Petitioner (Anna) and decreed a judicial separation. Fred was living at 9 Woburn Square at this time.

This extensive press coverage must have taken its toll on Charles. He responded by maintaining his profile with his admiring public by increasing his public readings of his works. Fred's reaction was rather different and he disappeared abroad to avoid paying alimony to Anna and the money he owed his many creditors.

However, Fred was known to be back in England in 1861. On 4 November Charles was giving a public reading of *David Copperfield* at the Theatre Royal in Canterbury. Fred turned up at the door asking for a free pass for his friend Dr Sankey stating that he was "Dickens's brother". Fred did not attend the reading.

The Canterbury incident appears to be the only known record of Fred's movement from July 1859 and his arrest in January 1862 in London.

Anna was going through the Courts during this period seeking alimony and Fred was officially declared bankrupt. The British Newspaper Archive offers details of the many hearings. In 1861 Anna was granted permanent alimony of £60 per annum by the courts. Fred was on the run during this time but was arrested on 1 January 1862 and imprisoned in the Queen's Bench Prison in London.

The *Morning Chronicle* reported from the Court of Bankruptcy on 27 January 1862. The article stated there had been an application for release from custody by Fred. He was described as late of the Red Lion Hotel, Cranbourne Street, Leicester Square but now of the Queen's Bench Prison of no profession or employ but formerly a Clerk in the War Office. Fred petitioned for release from custody on 22 January 1862 and stated that the cause of his inability to meet his engagements to be "loss of my employment at the War Office. I was superannuated on account of ill health, and my income thereupon became reduced from £365 per annum to £126." The *Morning Chronicle* continued that Mr Dickens seems also to have had the misfortune to be made a party to suit in the Court of Divorce and Matrimonial Causes. And that Court had on the application of his wife made an order for alimony against the bankrupt. She was now returned as a creditor on the statement of accounts. From the return made it seems that Frederick William Dickens was taken in execution on 1st January in the present year, by virtue of a writ of attachment issued by the Court of Divorce and for Matrimonial Causes. There were other detainers also lodged against him. It appeared that the bankrupt had not made alimony, and was liable to necessaries supplied by his wife. It was stated that in consequence of the reduced state of his circumstances he was unable to comply with the order of the Court of Divorce. It was asked that if liberated the bankrupt should give some security for the payment of £60 per year which had been awarded to the wife. The Commissioner said that

the parties, if they wished to make any arrangement, must settle the matter among themselves. He granted the order of release as prayed. Fred was released from prison in April 1862.

It would appear that after Fred's release he moved to Darlington to live with his old friend Jonathan Feetum. Feetum first met Fred as mentioned earlier in 1851 in London at the White Hart Tavern. Feetum was the victim of a financial fraud in 1859 when a fraudulent cheque was cashed against the White Hart Tavern business. The amount was £200 and after conviction of the fraudsters Feetum headed back to his Darlington roots. Fred continued to live with Jonathan Feetum until his death on 20 October 1868 at 3 Elton Parade, Darlington. Fred died of asphyxia caused by an abscess of the right lung and had lived a destitute life in Darlington.

George Dolby, the tour manager for Charles's public readings from 1866-1870, got to hear of Fred's death and Charles dispatched him to Darlington to review the sad affair. Charles at this time had had no contact with Fred.

Charles had written to Fred in 1865 after Peter Cunningham, writer and his close friend, told Charles that Fred was unwell and living in poverty in Darlington. Charles wrote to Fred in February 1865 to express his hope that he was doing well while not offering any help. Claire Tomalin, biographer of Charles Dickens, writes the "Fred had been in prison, and bankrupt; and he lived in grim poverty, living on a "penny bun a day and a glass of ginger beer" for his breakfast and otherwise mostly cold gin, according to George Sala, and not even able to afford to smoke". She also concluded that "when Dickens cast someone off he did not relent".

During the last months of Fred's life he was in the care of Dr James Howison, former House Physician and House Surgeon, Royal Infirmary, Edinburgh. Charles wrote to Dr Howison on 23 October 1868 from his office in Covent Garden at All The Year Round, his publishing company, to express his gratitude for the way Dr Howison looked after Fred. Charles stated that Fred could not have been in kinder or abler hands. He went on to say "In reference to the estrangement between him and me, I am glad to remember that it never involved, on my side, the slightest feeling of anger". The letter ends with the following paragraph:

"You will, no doubt, have seen and been consulted by my eldest son. I have instructed him to see you as soon as he possibly could, after his arrival in Darlington. I may assume that he guided himself by your advice in preparing for the funeral, and that he told you how strictly I charged him to those who had been kind to Frederick. As I have already written, I am truly grateful to you, in remembrance of him, and I heartily thank you. How tenderly I write these words you can scarcely imagine, unless you know that he was my favourite when he was a child, and that I was his tutor when he was a boy.

Believe me, my Dear Sir
Faithfully Yours always
Charles Dickens.

Dickens was always very careful to protect his public image by putting very eloquently his spin on any subject. Clearly, he must have felt a degree of guilt about Fred's final years.

It was in a letter from George Sala, journalist and one of Charles's circle of young men working for Household Words from 1851 to Edmond Yates another journalist friend of Dickens, dated 26 October 1868 that we learn of Fred's true position in his final years.

Sala reported "I suppose you have heard that Fred Dickens is dead. And I suppose he was a bad egg; but assuredly a most miserable [sic] life had he led since 1858. One hundred and twenty pounds a year superannuation from the War Office and out of that £60 per ann. set aside by the Divorce Court as alimony for his wife, and £20 by the Bankruptcy Court for his creditors. F.D.'s habitual breakfast was a penny bun and a glass of ginger beer. The remainder of his diet was mainly gin; cold".

Dickens did not attend Fred's funeral in October 1868 in Darlington but sent his eldest son Charley to represent him. He did however contribute to the cost of the funeral.

Fred was buried in the West Cemetery in Darlington. [Fig.7] His loyal friend Jonathan Feetum died on 3 December 1868 age 49 years and is also buried in the West Cemetery very close to Fred.

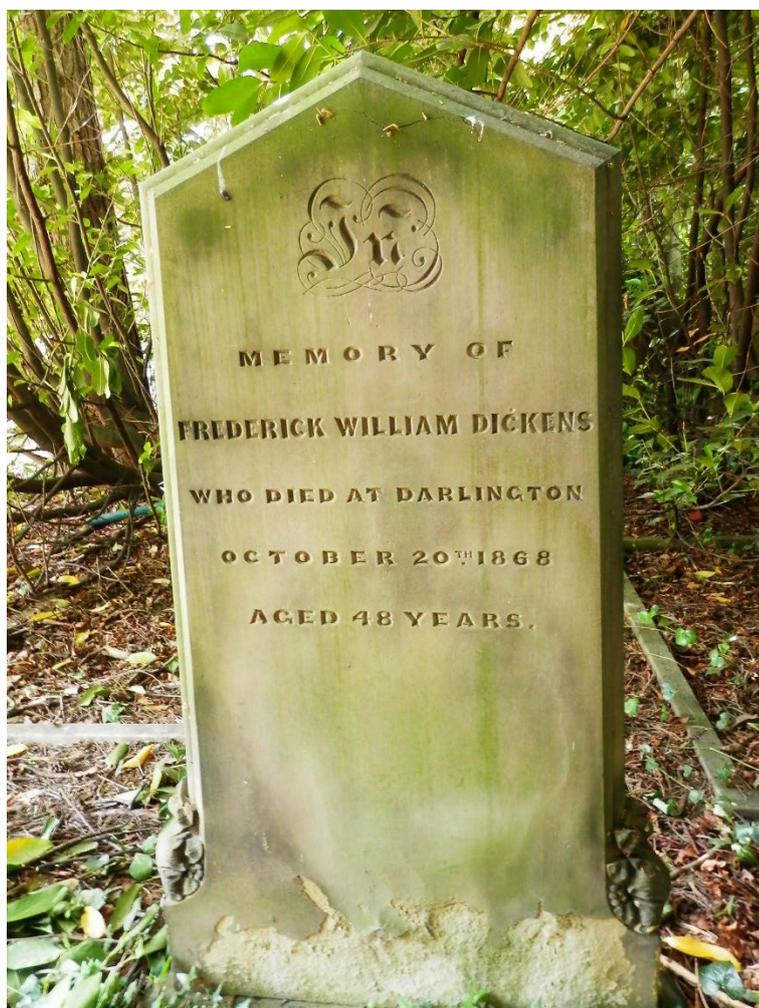


Fig.7: The West Cemetery, Darlington

It is not until 1893 that we learn more about Frederick William Dickens and his St Albans connections, through the writing of Henry Vizetelly (1820-1894).

Vizetelly was an artist, journalist and publisher of Italian extraction. He trained as a wood engraver and later started the publications *Pictorial Times* and *Illustrated Times* while working in Paris and Berlin as the correspondent for the *Illustrated London News*, and between 1880 and 1890, ran a publishing house in London, Vizetelly & Company.

In 1893 Vizetelly wrote a volume of autobiographical reminiscences called *Glances Back Through Seventy Years*, a graphic picture of literary Bohemia in Paris and London between 1840 and 1870. He was a convivial friend of Alfred and Frederick Dickens.

From *Glances* we learn that a lot about the lives of Peter Cunningham, Fred Dickens and renowned actor John Reeve. Cunningham and Reeve both retired to St Albans from London life. Peter Cunningham lived at 59 New London Road and John Reeve lived in Spencer Street.

In 1861 Charles visited Knebworth House the home of Edward Bulwer-Lytton to discuss the final draft of *Great Expectations*. Whilst at Knebworth House Charles decided to visit the Hertfordshire Hermit, James Lucas, who lived in Redcoats Green a hamlet between Stevenage and Hitchin. (Fig.8)

In the Christmas edition of *All The Year Round*, Dickens wrote 'Tom Tiddler's Ground' based on the reclusive Lucas thereby making Lucas a celebrity that others wished to visit.

From Vizetelly's *Glances* we learn that Cunningham, Fred and John Reeve made several visits to James Lucas who resided on a pile of soot, surrounded by scraps of stale bread and wearing nothing but a filthy blanket, even though he was a wealthy man.

Henry Vizetelly reported "the three congenial spirits made the acquaintance of Charles Dickens's famous hermit whom they used periodically to visit at his cinder-bestrewn den, mainly to tippie fiery sherry and bitters, of which the nineteenth century recluse seemed to possess a never-failing supply. Finding the hermit so generous with his liquor they thought he might be equally liberal with his cash – it was known he had a banking account, and that the publican who sent him his periodic supplies cashed his cheques – so one day they tried to obtain a loan from him on the strength of their joint note of hand. Strange to say, although our anchorite friend had been almost isolated from mankind for many years, he still had sufficient worldly wisdom to disapprove of the proffered security and the artfulness to assure his impecunious acquaintances that it was solely shortness of the "ready" which prevented him from placing his banking balance at their service.

Those were merry times had it not been for certain gloomy days when, racked with sharp twinges of gout, these three unhappy mortals were accustomed to hobble with the aid of stout walking sticks from one "public" to another, each bitterly complaining of his individual ailments at every step he took, but invariably meeting no kind of sympathy from his similarly afflicted fellows. It is not surprising that these poor victims of convivial indulgence found the bracing air of Hertfordshire too keen for their broken constitutions, and that this trio of clever men dropped off one after the other, sincerely pitied and regretted by shoals of friends, who had known them in happier days cordially liked them for their genial natures". Expressed in simpler terms John Reeve died in 1867, Fred Dickens in 1868 and Peter Cunningham in 1869.

Vizetelly summed up Fred's life at this time very succinctly: "While Fred, another slave to late hours, firmly believed that matutinal rum and milk was the specific for all ailments misguided flesh is heir to". *Glances Back Though Seventy Years* was published in London by Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner + Co.



Fig.8: James Lucas, the Hertfordshire Hermit, 1903 postcard

Frederick Dickens inspired several characters in Dickens's novels. *The Old Curiosity Shop*, published between 1840 and 1841, featured the dissolute brother Fred of little Nell. This character resembles the darker side of Fred's later life. (Fig.9)

The more jovial qualities of Fred are featured in *A Christmas Carol* published in 1843. Fred is the cheerful, generous nephew of Ebenezer Scrooge. He serves as a foil to his uncle, demonstrating the spirit of Christmas and the joy of family, despite his lack of wealth.

In the hope of avoiding bad publicity Charles tried to coach Fred for his divorce hearing in 1859 in the Court of Divorce and Matrimonial Causes which was widely reported in the press. *The Times* reported the hearing in great detail. The courtroom scenes in *A Tale of Two Cities* are based on Charles's counselling of Fred which sadly failed to help his case. For more detail see Professor Lillian Nayder's essay 'A Tale of Two Brothers' published in 2019.

Lillian Nayder is Professor and Chair of English at Bates College Maine. I had the good fortune to meet her on her research visit to London in August 2025. I asked her about *Barnaby Rudge* and the fraternal dynamics of the Dickens brothers. Lillian summarised this dynamic as follows: "As for my point about Fred and *Barnaby Rudge* – the basic idea is that the novel is about the status of the second son, and how being placed in that position impacts fraternal dynamics – in Dickens's own relation to Fred and in the depiction of the male figures in that novel. There are a number of second sons in *Barnaby Rudge*, and also a number of first-born sons who are effectively deprived of their privileges and treated as if they were not the eldest; among the younger sons are Sir John Chester and Geoffrey Haredale. It wasn't one specific figure but a number of figures who fall into that category".



Fig.9: Charles Green Illustration 1876 Edition of *The Old Curiosity Shop* – Fred Trent right, Dick Swiveller centre and Grandfather left.

During the early years of 1857 Charles staunchly refused all Fred's requests for money. Here is a letter from February 1857:

"Office of Household Words
Thursday Fifth February 1857

My Dear Frederick,

I am sorry to be obliged to reply to you as before.

I cannot lend you £30. Firstly because I cannot trust you, and because your bad faith with Wills and Austin make the word "lend" an absurdity. Secondly because if this were otherwise it would do you no real good and would not in the least save you against creditors who have already power of taking you in execution.

Affectionately, CD."

Fred's constant need for money further alienated Charles from his brother, especially in the years leading up to Fred's divorce from Anna. In response to the above letter Fred showed his command of the English language:

"WAR DEPART. Seventh February 1857.

My dear Charles. I cannot help saying that the tone of your letter is as cold & unfeeling, as one Man could pen to another – much less – one Brother to another – this too – in the face of all your protestations of affection & regard for me in years gone. With respect to Wills & Austin I say most emphatically, that you have misjudged me upon an ex parte statement – & that if they carried out

their part of the Contract, I should have been enabled to perform mine. It is very easy to sit in Judgment on others – nothing more so – The World I fancy from your writings that you are the most Tolerant of men – let them individually come under your lash – (if one is to judge from your behaviour to your own flesh & blood) & God help them! For a quarter of a century you have had the world at your foot – such a blessing ought at any rate to make you charitable in respect to the shortcomings of others – instead of placing yourself upon a Pinnacle, upon the assumption that poor human nature is perfection – (or ought to be so) – & you her Judge when e'er she errs! Yrs Affectionately FREDERICK DICKENS. Many happy returns of the day".

1857 was a very turbulent time for both Fred and Charles. Fred's marriage was reaching its end in the Divorce Court and he was desperate for money being heavily in debt with creditors demanding money. Charles had just met Ellen Ternan, having seen her in the play *The Frozen Deep* acting with her mother and sister. A year later he separated from Catherine and started his relationship with Ellen "Nelly" Ternan.

Fred had shared in much of Dickens's early married life, looking after the children during the first American trip by Charles and Catherine, and joining them for holidays in Italy as well as Broadstairs; but as mentioned earlier by Claire Tomalin in her biography when Dickens casts someone off he did not relent.

The women in Charles's life impacted badly on his relationship with Fred in the main. Charles's early infatuation with the young pianist Christiana Weller in 1844 was central to his relationship with Fred thereafter. Once T.J. Thompson had married Christiana in October 1845 then Charles became hostile towards the Weller Family and wrote them off in his usual style. Fred's timing was poor as in 1845 he fell in love with Christiana's fifteen year old sister Anna who was also a fine musician and artist.

In a series of letters from 1846 when Fred became engaged to Anna we observe Charles warning Fred that they are both too young to marry and Fred is in no financial position to start married life. Charles urged caution and did not attend their wedding in 1848 in Prestbury near Cheltenham.

In the early years of Fred's marriage to Anna, Charles was seen to be more accepting of the situation but Anna's poor health and mental instability complicated matters.

Fred was also a bad husband and already involving himself with other women and drinking heavily by 1851.

However, through this period Fred did extremely well with his job at The Treasury and later The War Office. A series of promotions led to a salary of £365 per annum at the time of his retirement in poor health and heavy debt in 1859.

After his Divorce from Anna in July 1859 Fred was bankrupt and disappeared abroad we are told. It is likely that he may have gone to Boulogne having become familiar with this location through the family holidays with Charles.

However, we know that Fred was in Canterbury in November 1861 asking for a free pass for Dr Sankey to attend Charles's reading of *David Copperfield*.

1861 was also the year that Charles visited the Hertfordshire Hermit James Lucas in Redcoats Green between Stevenage and Hitchin. Fred visited Lucas with Peter Cunningham and John Reeve. Perhaps this was later in 1861 after Charles's visit in June of that year. This would imply that Fred was living somewhere in Hertfordshire perhaps with Cunningham in St Albans.

Fred's death notice in the *Herts Advertiser* in October 1868 stated that Fred "previously resided in St Albans". Census details from 1841 to 1861 reveal nothing of Fred's time in St Albans. We know he was in Prestbury near Cheltenham with his wife Anna at the time of the 1851 census. She was listed as staying with the Thompson Family in Prestbury Green and Fred rather typically was registered in a pub nearby in Prestbury village.

Frederic Kitton in his book *The Dickens Country* reported that Fred and Peter Cunningham lived in St Albans in 1852 when Dickens visited for material for *Bleak House*. However, Cunningham only moved permanently to St Albans in 1860 when he retired from employment in London.

Henry Vizetelly links Cunningham, Fred and actor John Reeve at this time when the three drinking companions were seen going from "public to public".

My conclusion is that Frederick William Dickens probably lived from time to time with Peter Cunningham at 59 New London Road. He may also have spent time with John Reeve in Spencer Street where Reeve resided and died in 1867.

Fred's lack of money and a permanent home when married to Anna Weller indicates a man constantly on the move. He pursued Charles for money in Ireland in 1857 but Charles never supported Fred financially after 1856.

It is also known that Peter Cunningham was in touch with Fred in Darlington in 1865 because Cunningham wrote to Charles and asked him to write to Fred because of Fred's dire situation in Darlington at this time. Charles did indeed write to Fred in February 1865 but offered no help with his desperate situation financially. Charles's failure to attend Fred's funeral in 1868 bears witness to his inner feelings towards Fred.

Fred had all the failings of his father John Dickens but received no help from Charles in those final years.

Frederick William Dickens leaves a legacy of Dickens characters in four novels but died almost alone at the age of 48 years.

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Pilgrim Editions Volumes One to Twelve

Charles Dickens – A Life by Claire Tomalin

The Other Dickens – A life of Catherine Hogarth by Lillian Nayder
The Dickens Country by Frederic G Kitton
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