

# Charles Dickens

## The author and his work



© Corbis/Bettmann

**C**harles John Huffham Dickens was born near Portsmouth, on the south coast of England, on 9th February 1812. Charles's father, John Dickens, worked for the British Navy, in offices in Portsmouth, Chatham and London. From 1822, the family lived in northwest London. They were very poor and soon John Dickens owed money to several people. He could not repay this money – his debts – and he was sent to prison. When this happened, young Charles had to leave his school and earn money. He worked in a factory. He hated the work and was very unhappy there. John Dickens was later released from prison, and Charles was able to return to school for a time. But by 1827, when he was fifteen, Charles was working again. This time he worked in an office. He worked hard but he also read many books when he had the time. He began to enjoy writing as well as reading, and by 1829 he had a job as a newspaper reporter.

Dickens soon began writing stories for magazines, which were very popular at that time. These weekly magazines published short stories as well as novels as serials. Every week, a new chapter was printed. In 1836, Charles's first novel was published – *The Pickwick Papers*. This very funny book was a great success and it

made Dickens a famous writer at the age of twenty-four. Dickens began to earn a lot of money as a writer and two years later he got married. His wife's name was Catherine Hogarth. Charles and Catherine had ten children – seven sons and three daughters – but the marriage was not always happy. Charles was not an easy man to live with. He wanted everything in his house to be clean and tidy. He wanted to talk to clever people with quick minds. He wanted everything in his life to be perfect. Catherine was a rather untidy person, and she did not think very quickly. She often made her famous husband angry.

In 1857, after nearly twenty years of marriage, Dickens fell in love with a young actress called Ellen Ternan. The following year, Dickens and his wife separated. They decided to live apart from each other. Catherine lived in London, while Dickens moved to a large house in Kent called Gad's Hill Place. One of Catherine's sisters helped Dickens to look after some of his children there.

Dickens worked hard all his life. He spent most of his life writing novels and stories. But he also enjoyed travelling. He visited France and Italy, and he visited America twice. He loved the theatre and he was himself a good actor. In the later years of his life, he often gave readings from his books to audiences in theatres. He read the most exciting scenes from his novels and he gave complete readings of his shorter stories too. He gave these readings to make money, although they often made him tired and ill. But he always needed money for his large family.

Charles Dickens died on 9th June 1870. He had been working hard until the day before his death. He was buried five days later in Westminster Abbey – the famous church in London – and thousands of people came to see his grave and to leave flowers there.

### Dickens and social reform

Dickens wrote nineteen novels and many short stories and magazine articles. His last novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, was unfinished when he died. Victoria was the Queen of England for almost all the time that Dickens was writing and

there were great differences between the lives of her people. The people that we call 'upper class' were very rich. They owned land and houses and they did not have to work. They were usually well educated. The people of the 'working class' were very poor. They worked very hard and they earned very little money. They lived in small houses or in crowded, dirty apartments, where many people lived in a single room. Often, their children did not go to school – they had to work too.



A street in London during the 1800s.

Dickens wrote about all these people. But many of the people in his books – the people he was most interested in – belonged to the 'middle class'. These people were neither very rich, nor terribly poor. But their lives could change very quickly. They worked hard to make their lives better. They sent their children to school. Money was very important to middle-class people. If they continued to earn it, their lives and their children's lives could be comfortable. But if they lost their money, their lives quickly became terrible. Charles Dickens never forgot the problems that his father had with money. Many

people in Dickens's novels lose their money, or people steal it from them.

Dickens often took ideas from social reformers. These were people who wanted to improve the lives of the poorest members of society and they wanted to improve peoples' education. Dickens made these reformers' ideas popular by putting them into his novels and plays. Few people read the articles that these social reformers wrote, but hundreds of thousands of people learnt about these reformers' ideas from Dickens's extremely popular stories. As a result of this, there were some good changes in society. *Oliver Twist*, was written in 1838. In this novel, the hero is born in a workhouse in the country. His mother dies when he is born. Workhouses were places where the poorest people in society lived and were made to work. In the early nineteenth century, people were treated very cruelly in workhouses. Children were beaten and were not given enough to eat. In the novel, young Oliver Twist runs away from the workhouse and goes to London. He is forced to join a gang of thieves and murderers. After this novel was published, powerful people began to think about workhouses, and the lives of the people who lived in them became a little better.

Another famous story about the cruel treatment of the poor is *A Christmas Carol*. This story, published in 1843, is about a horrible miser – an old man who hates spending money. The man's name is Ebenezer Scrooge. This story is so famous that, even today, British people often call misers 'Scrooges'. In *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge treats the people around him very badly because he hates everybody. But he has some terrible dreams which change his life, and at the end of the story, he becomes kind and friendly. He helps the poor people who live near him and work for him. This story, too, changed the way that everyone thought about the working people of London and their families.

### Dickens today

Charles Dickens is probably the most popular of all British novelists. His books are read by people all over the world – in their own languages as well as in English. Many of these books have been made into great movies, plays and TV films. A few of these are: *Great Expectations* (UK, 1946. Directed by David Lean. Starring John Mills, Valerie Hobson, Bernard Miles, Jean Simmons, Alec Guinness); *Oliver Twist* (UK, 1948. Directed by David Lean. Starring John Howard Davies, Alec Guinness, Robert Newton, Kay Walsh, Anthony Newley,

Kathleen Harrison); *David Copperfield* (US, 1935. Directed by George Cukor. Starring Freddy Bartholomew, W.C. Fields, Basil Rathbone, Maureen O'Sullivan) and *A Christmas Carol* (UK, 1951. Directed by Brian Desmond-Hurst. Starring Alastair Sim, Jack Warner, Kathleen Harrison). Several books have been made into popular musicals too. *Oliver!* (written by Lionel Bart) is a musical play version of *Oliver Twist*, and is the best known of these.

### A selection of works by Charles Dickens

#### Novels

1837 *The Pickwick Papers*

1838 *Oliver Twist*

1839 *Nicholas Nickleby*

1841 *Barnaby Rudge*

1841 *The Old Curiosity Shop*

1844 *The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit*

1848 *Dombey and Son*

1850 *David Copperfield*

1853 *Bleak House*

1854 *Hard Times*

1857 *Little Dorrit*

1859 *A Tale of Two Cities*

1861 *Great Expectations*

1865 *Our Mutual Friend*

1870 *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*

#### Short Stories

1843 *A Christmas Carol*

1865 *The Trial for Murder*

1866 *The Signalman*

(For a list of Charles Dickens's stories that have been simplified for the Macmillan Guided Readers Series, see a copy of the current Readers catalogue.)