Dickens's Legacy

Today, 200 years after his birth, Charles Dickens is acknowledged as the first, and arguably greatest, modern urban novelist. His works form a giant atlas of the life of the metropolis. Dickens and London are indelibly bound together.

Dickens tracks a changing society in an industrial age. Many aspects of his work are profoundly unsettling, especially his insistent descriptions of the terrible living conditions of the poor, whose sufferings were largely ignored. Dickens's ultimate aim was to reform and improve society. He attacked financial fraud, Government incompetence, 'red tape' (a term that he invented) and inadequate education. Sadly, inequalities and poverty still exist in London, still blighting lives. Dickens's words still challenge us today:

"I saw that not one miserable wretch breathed out his poisoned life to enrich any other. \...\ the town. Swallowed up in one phase or other of its business, I was not conscious of a single thing which, however they resented it, however they seem to have resisted; for the hospitals, the churchyards, the prisons, the new fainthearted, the aged, and the few, faint, shallow, vice and death, almost they passed on the remotest railing in the distance, and were lost."

—Dickens and London, Chapter 35

The Houseless Shadow – a film by William Raban

Inspired by one of Dickens's finest essays, "Night Walks", first published in 1860, this film portrays London at night and explores the rhythms, sounds and shadows of today's city. "Not being a creature of the night myself, I was challenged by the task of retracing the great man's footsteps, setting off after midnight and returning in the small hours" to observe and capture London districts and their insomniac communities. The first task was to become invisible so that I could film without people becoming affronted by the camera. I carried the equipment in a large supermarket bag, pulling the tripod behind me strapped to a luggage trolley. I blended with the other homeless people of the night and soon they became my friends. Filmed over five months, when luck was on my side, I returned with good shots; at other times, I came back with nothing – such are the fortunes of street cinematography."

—William Raban, October 2011

Dickens's Victorian London book

Over 200 archive photographs – most of which have never been published before – illustrate this mesmerising guide to Victorian London as seen through the eyes of Charles Dickens. The book is available from the Museum shop or at www.museumoflondonshop.co.uk

Dickens and London app

Created by illustrator David Foldvari, this graphic novel follows Dickens on his night walks of Victorian London as seen through the darker side of Dickens's London. Beautifully imagined by Foldvari, Dickens and London app brings the 19th century city to life as Dickens described it. The Houseless Shadow – a film by William Raban

The Museum of London has launched a new iPhone and iPad app which takes users on a journey through the darker side of Dickens's London. Beautifully animated by illustrator David Foldvari, this graphic novel follows Dickens on his night walks of Victorian London as seen through the eyes of Charles Dickens. The first edition is available now free of charge from iTunes.

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www.museumoflondonprints.com

Dickens and London prints

A series of selection of photographs, featured in the exhibition and the accompanying publication Dickens and London, can be purchased from our print-on-demand touch screen in the shop foyer and from www.museumoflondonprints.com

Exhibition guide

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Dickens and London

Charles Dickens was a strong supporter of the capital city. In this city, he developed an encyclopaedic knowledge of London's geography. Dickens felt that he was living in a special age of progress and improvement. He believed that he was a special correspondent for posterity. He revealed it in all its complexity, movement and energy. We hear its hum and lively chatter. We are shown its space, everything with its opposite extreme and contradiction, close beside.'

Dickens burst onto the literary scene in the mid 1830s. His work stood out from the rest. It seemed to capture the mood of the period. As a young reporter he travelled so frequently that the jarring and shaking of the carriages made him ill. He was the first author to describe the railway's impact on society, the city and the countryside.

As a prolific letter-writer, Dickens made full use of the Penny Post, which was introduced in 1840. He kept in touch with friends and family by letter and handled his manuscripts, accents and dialects audio transcriptions, dioramic viewers, manuscript, accents and dialects audio transcriptions, dioramic viewers, manuscript, Newgate prison door, Bleak House writing desk and chair, Dombey and Son manuscript, first edition of A Christmas Carol, Astley's amphitheatre panel, Grimaldi clown outfit, toy theatre model, Highlights: A City of Imagination

Amusements of the People

Above all, Dickens set out to amuse his readers. This he certainly did: his dynamic and exuberant way with words made him the most popular writer since Shakespeare.

Dickens described the London theatre as an escape from the toil and drabness of everyday urban life. It was a 'fairy land', a place full of enchantment, excitement and colour. As a boy, Dickens saw the London theatre as an escape from the loneliness and homelessness of his childhood. Dickens had a great sense of the Victorian theatre and the use of theatres in education. He believed that his work could be used to educate and to teach. He was a master at word pattern, a skill that made the voices of his characters ring true.

A City of Imagination

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As a prolific letter-writer, Dickens made full use of the Penny Post, which was introduced in 1840. He kept in touch with friends and family by letter and responded to fans or people asking for money. His mission was to instil a sense of Christian charity and compassion for the poor. His own charitable works included a visit to the workhouse, a home for destitute young women.

In Life and Death

It was only after Dickens's death that the traumatic events of his childhood became known. Dickens's own lost childhood, as well as the death of his much-loved sister-in-law, Mary Hogarth. In his final years, Dickens embarked on a series of well-paid reading tours. He loved performing in front of his public. But the readings took a terrible toll on his health. Nightly, he was exhausted from the scenes of Oliver Twist where Bill Sikes murders Nancy. The intensity left him physically drained and probably contributed to his early death in the age of 58.