



THE DICKENS BICENTENARY

'IT WAS THE BEST OF TIMES, IT WAS THE WORST OF TIMES'

MARK CHARLES DICKENS

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During the bicentenary of the birth of my great great grandfather Charles Dickens in 2012 there were indeed many wonderfully good times, but I have to be honest and say that there were few if any bad times. It truly was an amazing year of activities around the world, and as President of the International Dickens Fellowship I was fortunate to participate in so many of these events.

The highlight was certainly the week of 7-14 February 2012 in London starting with a powerful and moving service in the presence of HRH Prince Charles in Westminster Abbey where he laid a wreath on Charles Dickens' grave, followed by a sumptuous banquet that evening hosted by the Lord Mayor of London in the opulent and impressive Mansion House in the heart of the financial district of the City. Even this very special day was surpassed a week later when my wife and I were invited to an audience with Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II in one of the private rooms in Buckingham Palace followed by a reception of 150 celebrities of the stage and screen – a real galaxy of stars. If there was a down side to these events, it was that I had to give 9 speeches in 5 days and a large number of television interviews. Nerve wracking definitely, but rather like banging your head against a brick wall – it was wonderful when it stopped!

I had two experiences that gave me a feeling that I was in the presence of my famous ancestor. The first was giving exactly the same speech in the same building that he himself had given in the City of Birmingham. At first it was difficult to master the old fashioned language and much practice was needed before I got the hang of it, but when I stood up to deliver the speech I could feel that he was in front of me listening to his own words. The other experience was a visit to Gad's Hill Place, the only house he ever owned, which had been converted back from a school into his house for a few weeks. There in the famous study was his original desk and chair that had been brought back for the first time in 140 years. His presence was definitely



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there and it needed little to imagine him concentrating on one of his novels. Amazing and exciting experiences.

I was particularly honoured to be invited to the Sorbonne this January to speak at a conference on '*A Tale of Two Cities*' and was able to highlight the strong links Charles Dickens had with France. He was a frequent resident, sometimes with his mistress, Nellie Ternan, but also with his wife and children. Indeed most of his ten children were educated in Boulogne-sur-Mer. In preparation for my talk I was fascinated to discover that Dickens wrote in a letter to a friend that '*of all the literary men I saw in Paris I liked Victor Hugo best*'. This led to inevitable similarities with *Les Misérables* and *A Tale of Two Cities*, two of the most renowned stories about Parisian revolution. They have both become more famous with the passing of time, *Les Misérables* is now an Oscar-winning movie and the longest-running musical ever in England, and *A Tale of Two Cities* has been named the most popular novel of all time with over 200 million copies sold worldwide.

I was hosted in style and after a short talk enjoyed an animated question and answer session. You never know what PhD students who have studied the author in much more detail than a mere member of the family are going to ask! However I survived this delightful interrogation and I hope was able to assist in their research in a small way. Yes indeed, the bicentenary year has been one of the best of times for me.