

Charles Dickens and Malton

Introduction



Malton can claim at least two connections with the author Charles Dickens. The first being through a friend, Charles Smithson, the youngest son of Richard Smithson, proprietor of a Malton legal firm. The second connection is through the York

to Scarborough railway line where Charles' brother Alfred was an engineer and for a period lived in Malton.

However, there is a third connection, through the creation of the Malton Dickens Society which had strong links to the Woodhams Stone Collection.

Charles Dickens meets Charles Smithson

Charles Smithson was the youngest son of Richard Smithson, owner of a Malton legal firm in Chancery Lane (just off Malton market place). When Charles was 21 years old he was sent to the family's London offices to continue his legal training. During some business transactions there, he met, and established what would become a lifelong friendship with Charles Dickens.

Smithson and his wife were introduced to the cream of London's intellectual class e.g. Wilkie Collins, Mary Evans (pen-name George Eliot), William Makepeace Thackeray, Thomas Carlyle. However, in those days lifespans were often short and in 1840, following the deaths of his father and brother from tuberculosis, Smithson was compelled to leave London and return to Malton. His homecoming cannot have been a particularly happy event.

After leaving London, Smithson and his wife regularly corresponded with Dickens, who sent her copies of his books e.g. in January 1842 he sent her a copy of *'The Old Curiosity Shop'*



The site in Chancery Lane, Malton, of Charles Smithson's Office

When Dickens's pet raven Grip swallowed a couple of pounds of white lead and died, Smithson sent him a replacement. Dickens wrote *'While I was uncomfortable, a friend of mine in Yorkshire (Smithson) discovered an older, more mature raven in a village public house (in Flamborough) which he prevailed upon the landlord to part with for a consideration, and sent up to me'*

Charles Dickens Visits Easthorpe Hall



Smithson was living at Easthorpe Hall, Malton, (sadly destroyed by fire in the 1960s) and Dickens visited there in July 1843.

remarkable of its size in England and immeasurably the most beautiful'. Whilst staying there, Dickens, whose pen was never idle, wrote part of 'Martin Chuzzlewit' and the character of Sairey Gamp is a portrait of a housekeeper (fond of a tippie), who

Dickens described the house as *'the most*
Charles Dickens and Malton

was in the temporary employ of Smithson at the time of his stay.

The Yorkshire Gazette of 8th July 1843 records 'We understand that Charles Dickens Esq., the admired and talented author of 'Pickwick' etc., is now on a visit with his lady at Easthorpe, the hospitable abode of Charles Smithson Esq. Solicitor, Malton, and that he has visited Old Malton Abbey and other

The Death of Charles Smithson



In the autumn of 1843 Smithson moved to the Abbey House in Old Malton, behind St. Mary's Priory Church and it was to this house which Dickens hurried on 5th April 1844 to attend Smithson's funeral. He had been hard

pressed to get there, having arrived in York by train at 7.00 a.m. and the funeral was at 9.30 a.m. It must have been a very quick journey by coach as the railway from York to Scarborough, via Malton, had not been built.



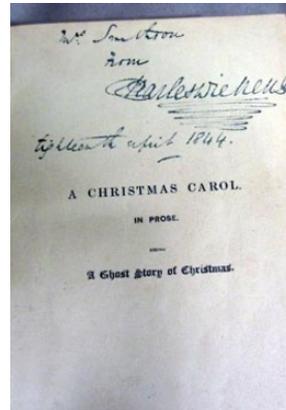
Smithson was buried in St. Mary's churchyard in a plot of newly consecrated land which had been recently acquired from Smithson's own garden. Smithson was

the first to be interred there. His gravestone is in the top right-hand corner of the front grave yard. A geranium is placed on it each year as it was one of Dickens's favourite flowers.

Dickens did not forget his friend. Charles Smithson lives on as Mr. Spenlow, of *Spenlow and Dorkins*, in 'David Copperfield'. Like Mr. Spenlow, Smithson died without leaving a will, a serious omission for a man of the law and a family history of male relatives dying young. Dickens, with his brother Alfred (who was an executor) and Smithson's brother-in-law, helped search the home and Chancery Lane office for a will, but without success. The family friendship continued after Smithson's death with Dickens offering accommodation to Mrs. Smithson in

remarkable places in the vicinity'. Dickens certainly enjoyed 'forfeits, picnics, rustic games and inspections of monasteries at night when the moon was shining', during his stay with his wife Catherine. During the years of their friendship Dickens became godfather to Smithson's daughter Mary and the two friends and their families spent holidays together, such as their visit to Broadstairs in 1840.

London, when she left Yorkshire and was deciding where she would settle next. She refused his kind offer.



He continued to send her copies of his books, one of which was a signed copy of 'A Christmas Carol', sent in 1844, with a letter stating "I send you the long awaited Carol". Although the book was not written in Malton, Dickens had told the Smithson family that the office in Chancery Lane was

the template for Scrooge's office and that the famous church bells in the story echoed those of St. Leonard's Church on Church Hill, Malton.



This copy of the signed book, after it was recovered from a skip outside a brownstone house undergoing renovation, was bought at auction in New York in November 2012 by the Dickens Gift to Yorkshire group, led by a local entrepreneur, Stephen Joll. For a while it was displayed at The Talbot Hotel but at the time of writing this article, its future is unsure.

Alfred Lamert Dickens

Charles Dickens made other visits to Malton, sometimes to see his brother Alfred Lamert Dickens, the fifth of his seven siblings. He was a civil engineer engaged on the construction of the York – Malton – Scarborough railway and who lived at Hillside

The Woodhams Stone Connection

On a cold, windy and rainy night in October 2008 several people, including John Stone and Sid Woodhams, the founders of the Woodhams Stone Collection, attended a meeting at The Lodge Hotel, advertised in the Gazette & Herald. The meeting was to invite volunteers to begin a Dickens Society, with a museum which would celebrate Dickens's friendship with Charles Smithson, a local solicitor. His family's law practice in Malton had an office in Chancery Lane and they also had a London firm, Smithson and Dunn.

The premises had been acquired by two local business men, Malcolm Chalk and Stephen Joll, who would fund the initial setting up of the museum. This was done and up until December 2018, the Counting House Museum flourished, with many hundreds of visitors from all over the world and the U.K. The visitors' book from the museum is held in the Woodhams Stone archive.



Volunteers manned the museum for which John and Sid provided many period artefacts and photographs of Malton to enhance the other displays and models. This created a realistic solicitor's office similar to that of Scrooge's in 'A Christmas Carol'.

References

For more detailed account of the Dickens connection with Malton see:

Cottage in Greengate, Malton. By 1851 Alfred was engaged as the deputy engineer on the construction of the Malton - Driffield railway and had moved to Derwent Cottage on Scarborough Road.



Sid and John performing at Scarborough Magistrates Court 2011



Funds for the upkeep of the museum e.g. rents, were raised by members, including John and Sid, performing talks and plays to a wide range of clubs, schools and societies, from

donations made by visitors and the sale of souvenirs. Regrettably the museum had to close in December 2018, due to the onerous responsibility of finding funds, although the society continues to meet monthly.

Today, the offices in Chancery Lane are marked by a commemorative plaque but the famous lion's head knocker has been removed.

<https://smithson.org.uk/2017/07/charles-dickens-the-malton-connection/>