

PICKWICK PAPERS

BBC Radio Four Classic Serial, December 2004

Dramatized in four episodes by Michael Eaton, produced by Nicholas Newton and directed by Jane Morgan.

BBC Radio Four broadcast a four-part serialization of Dickens's *Pickwick Papers*, in the traditional Classic Novel slot in the run up before Christmas 2004.

Pickwick was Boz's first novel and showed what he was really made of. It's also a landmark in British publishing and presaged the fruits of modern transport, communication and mass production.

Its origins seemed modest enough. He was a twenty three year old parliamentary reporter with a few stories in magazines (*The Sketches by Boz*). A new publishing firm, intending to capitalize on the craze for Jorrocks sporting tales and publish an illustrated monthly serial novel, was looking for a young writer. Serial publication was booming. There was no written contract, but a verbal agreement that Chapman and Hall were to pay Dickens fifteen guineas for each number. Dickens was to get married and the cash would be handy. Payment was to increase with sales. (All in all he was to earn £2,500).

Pickwick launched in March 1836 and sales were unprecedented, reaching a staggering 40,000 a month. Serialization, with advertisements in the parts, was rapidly to become standard. *Pickwick* showed what could be done. Advertising as an element of the mass media was well on the way. It made a deep impact on the country's popular culture – there were *Pickwick* cigars, pincushions, notepaper, toasting forks, gaiters and kitsch of all kinds. Chapman and Hall decided to publish the book cloth bound in volume form after its serial run in 1837 thus conferring the status of literature on *Pickwick*, setting it apart from ephemeral periodical journalism.

A landmark in publishing history. Dickens said:

*"My friends told me it was a low, cheap form of publication, by which I should ruin all my rising hopes, and how right my friends turned out to be, everybody knows".*¹ The novelist was himself fully aware that in *Pickwick Papers* he had somehow created a unique and unrepeatable success, and confessed as much to his publishers: *"If I were to live a hundred years and write three novels in each",* he told Chapman and Hall, *"I should never be so proud of any of them as I am of 'Pickwick', feeling as I do, that it has made its own way, and hoping, as I must own I do hope, that long after my hand is as withered as the pens it held, 'Pickwick' will be found on many a dusty shelf with many a better work"*²

Further than this, it seemed to speak to the heart of the nation and took on a life of its own and went

¹ Charles Dickens, *Preface to the first Cheap Edition of Pickwick Papers*, reprinted in *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*, edited by Robert L. Patten, 1972 p. 45

² Charles Dickens, *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, edited Madeline House and Graham Storey, *Pilgrim Edition*, Volume 1, 1965 p 189.

vigorously on throughout the succeeding years of the century. It enjoyed an alternative life on the stage, which began even before its publication was complete and lasted well into modern times.³ *Pickwick Papers* has always meant more than the sum of its serial parts.

Dickens's created the work to appeal to a wide audience. Drawing on his experience of traveling the country covering elections, he portrayed numerous provincial scenes in Kent, Suffolk, the West Country, the Midlands as well as London. Unknowingly, the young parliamentary reporter and aspiring writer was doing the research and field work that was to shape, texture and condition his first masterpiece, *Pickwick Papers*. The months he spent traveling around early 19th century Britain following the politicking that was eventually to bring about the first great Reform Act of 1832 was to provide vivid and convincing locations for the adventures of his metropolitan sporting gentlemen. On 20 May 1865, four years after the publication of *Great Expectations*, Charles Dickens was in the chair at the second anniversary dinner of the Newspaper Press Fund, held at the Freemason's Tavern. Our greatest novelist was of course a journalist more or less all his life and was certainly a reporter in the gallery of the House of Commons some time before February 1830. He travelled all over the country in following the parliamentary election campaigns before the passing of the first great Reform Bill and was on the staff of the *Morning Chronicle* from August 1834 to November 1836. At the end of his speech he referred to his early days as a parliamentary reporter:

"I hope I may be allowed, in the very few closing words that I feel a desire to say in remembrance of some circumstances rather special attending my present occupation of this chair, to give these words something of a personal tone. ...I went into the gallery of the House of Commons as a Parliamentary reporter when I was a boy not eighteen, and I left it – I can hardly believe the inexorable truth – nigh thirty years ago. I have pursued the calling of reporter under circumstances of which many of my brethren at home in England here, many of my modern successors, can form no adequate conception. I have often transcribed for the printer from my shorthand notes, important public speeches in which the strictest accuracy was required, and a mistake in which would have been to a young man severely compromising, writing on the palm of my hand, by the light of a dark lantern, in a post chaise and four, galloping through a wild country, all through the dead of night, at the then surprising speed rate of fifteen miles an hour. The very last time I was at Exeter, I strolled into the Castle Yard there to identify, for the amusement of a friend, the spot on which I once I once 'took', as we used to call it, an election speech of my noble friend, Lord Russell⁴, in the midst of a lively fight maintained by all the vagabonds in that division of the county, under such a pelting rain, that I remember two good-natured colleagues, who chanced to be at leisure, held a pocket handkerchief over my notebook after the

³See F.Dubrez Fawcett: *Dickens the Dramatist: On Stage, Screen and Radio*, 1952 pp 233-4.

⁴ This would have been the speech at Exeter on 1 May 1835. The journey from London to Exeter by stagecoach would have taken at least seventeen hours. A more rapid manner of transport, that Dickens mentions later, was by post-chaise. This was a light and comfortable vehicle with two or four wheels, drawn by two or four horses ridden by post boys. See Arthur L. Hayward: *The Days of Dickens: A Glance at Some Aspects of Early Victorian Life in London* 1926 pp. 78 and 84.

manner of a canopy in an ecclesiastical procession... I have worn my knees by writing on them on the old back row of the old gallery of the old House of Commons; and I have worn my feet by standing to write in a preposterous pen in the old House of Lords, where we used to be huddled together like so many sheep ... kept in waiting, say, until the woolsack might want restuffing ... I have been, in my time, belated on miry by-roads towards the small hours, in a wheel less carriage, with exhausted horses and drunken postboys, and I have got back in time for publication..."⁵

These few sentences touch on several important threads. At the height of his career as a writer, Dickens is looking back to his early days as a parliamentary reporter. He imagines the action as the period between March 1822 and October 1828 and the main sequences reinforce the shape of the year. Thus the cricket match is played in June. The shooting sequence is in October. The Pickwickians skate on the ice in February. The idyll of Christmas at Dingley Dell appeared in the January issue. The glorious colours of August were invoked in the September number. Sam Weller sent his Valentine in the March issue. Samuel Pickwick sets forth at Grays Inn in a fine October morning -- in the November issue.

The sense of the shape of passing time is firmed up by the author's strict adherence to the Law Seasons.
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Additionally, in *Pickwick Papers*, there is an importance sense of geographical time and space that any attempt at dramatization must encompass.⁷

In the pages of *Pickwick Papers* Dickens takes us on the open road by coach and horses in jolly company⁸. That sense of travelling boisterously over England by horse and coach, trundling along the country roads in all weathers, at the mercy of the various inns and hotels along the way, is essential to the atmosphere of *Pickwick Papers*. He never forgot these experiences. He gave a colourful impression of this kind of travel in a speech at the height of his career when railways had nigh on replaced this mode of travel:

"...I dare say most of us have had experience of the extinct 'fast coaches', 'Wonders', 'Taglionis' and 'Tallyhos' of other days. I dare say most of us remember certain modest post-chaises, dragging us down interminable roads through slush and mud, to little country towns with no visible populations except half a dozen men in smock frocks smoking pipes under the lee of the Town Hall; half a dozen women with umbrellas and pattens, and a washed-out dog or so shivering under the gables to complete the desolate picture... We can all discourse, I dare say...upon our recollections of the 'Talbot', the 'King's Head' of the 'Lion' of those days. We have all been to that room on the ground floor on one side of the old inn yard, not quite free from a certain fragrant smell of tobacco, where the cruets on the sideboard were usually absorbed by the skirts of the box coats that hung from the wall...I have no

⁵ K. J. Fielding (editor): *The Speeches of Charles Dickens*, 1960 pp. 346-7. For an account of Dickens's early days as a reporter and journalist see John L. Drew: *Dickens the Journalist* 2003 pp. 5-35.

⁶ See A. C. Bennett: 'Chronology of Pickwick' in *Dickensian*, number 19, 1923 and D. M. Bevington: 'Seasonal Relevance in the Pickwick Papers' in *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, number 16, 1962.

⁷ See M. Colwell: 'Organisation in Pickwick Papers' in *Dickens Studies*, Number 3, 1967.

⁸ See Walter Dexter: *Mr. Pickwick's Pilgrimages* 1926 and William Axton: 'Unity and Coherence in the Pickwick Papers' in *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, Number 5, 1965.

*doubt we could all be very eloquent on the comforts of our favourite hotel, wherever it was – its beds, its stables, its vast amount of posting, its excellent cheese, its head waiter, its capital dishes, its pigeon-pies, or its 1820 port. Or possibly we could recall our chaste and innocent admiration of its landlady, or our fraternal regard for its handsome chambermaid...”*⁹

Samuel Pickwick is a plump, naive, philanthropic retired businessman. His companions in the Pickwick Club are Nathaniel Winkle, a sportsman who is far less skilled than he thinks he is; Augustus Snodgrass, a fashionably pretentious Byronic poet (a character type Dickens often satirizes) and Tracy Tupman, a rotund middle aged amoralist, whose rather Regency expertise is somewhat rusty. The sound of snorting horses, of hooves clattering on cobbles, resounding coach horns, the bustle and comforts of warm inn parlours with plentiful food and drink and good company around a blazing open fire -- this is the atmosphere that emerges from its pages as the Club goes about its declared intention of observing cultural and scientific matters.

It is a novel about travelling about England in the gradually dim but by no means forgotten past when life was simpler and humanity more innocent. For all its contribution to that mythical vision of Old England, whose roots go way back through *Tom Jones*, *Joseph Andrews*, and Smollett and ultimately back to Addison and Steele -- that tradition was long in the making. *Pickwick Papers* draws much of its strength from that deep well of mythical Britishness. And the Pickwickians did in fact travel across considerable areas of recognizable England. The narrative is closely associated with the various visited

⁹ Speech the anniversary of Commercial Travellers’ Schools, held at the London Tavern, 30 December 1854. *Speeches of Charles Dickens* edited by K. J. Fielding 1960 p. 172. Such memories would be part of the furniture for many of the novelist’s contemporaries cf C. T. S. Birch-Reynardson recalling his career as a coachman in *Down the Road: or, Reminiscences of a Gentleman Coachman*, published in 1875: “*You will be able to recall the coachman and the guards, and the very horses you have driven; the foggy mornings out of London; the Peacock at Islington; the pretty barmaid who used to give you your glass of rum and milk; the cold, snowy days and nights you have passed on the mail or coach; the guard and his yard of tin on the mail, wakening up the drowsy toll-bar keeper... You will remember the cheery keyed-bugle of the guard on the coach, upon which he played ‘Oh, dear, what can the matter be?’ or some such lively tune, as passed along the different towns in the middle of the night... You will have a lively recollection of the bitter cold that pervaded your half-frozen form, and the dire hunger that had taken possession of your inner man... You will, no doubt, remember the look of the streets as you entered London about six o’clock of a winter’s morning; how dimly the oil lamps used to burn at that time of day. You will remember the smell of the steam from the horses, as you passed under the arch of the Swan with Two Necks or into the yard of the Bull Mouth... You will remember all these little circumstances, and many more that I could name. You will say and think with me, I dare say, that in spite of wet and cold, frost and snow, and all the varieties of temperature that one used to go through on a coach, both by day and night, they were jolly times”.*

locations that Dickens knew so well from his days as a traveling parliamentary reporter.

The geography is fairly specific. Their first tour takes them from London to Rochester (adventures with Jingle and Winkle's duel) and then on to the military field day at Chatham which in turn leads to the idyllic rural Manor House at Dingley Dell¹⁰ where Tupman falls in love with Wardle's spinster sister, Rachael, and Winkle falls in love with Arabella Allen. The famous shooting party takes place. Pickwick hires Sam Weller. Then there's the incident with Mrs. Bardell that is to form the basis of the breach of promise case brought against Pickwick.

A second tour takes them to observe the election at Eatanswill.¹¹ They attend a party organized by the poetess and seeker of the famous, Mrs. Leo Hunter. The third tour takes them to Ipswich, (which we now, of course, are able to assume was close to Eatanswill) where Pickwick again foils Jingle's amorous intrigues. There is an idyllic Christmas with the Wardles at Dingley Dell and then the notorious trial sequence, which is one of the most memorable sequences in *Pickwick Papers*. In films and dramatizations it is seized on as a central episode and actors and actresses give it their best. Donald Wolfitt and Bill Fraser were both unforgettably barnstorming creations of this character.

Before going to the Fleet prison, the fourth tour is to the West Country where they visit Bath,¹² Bristol and Clifton, which include several fine set pieces.¹³ Dickens's account of the Pickwickians' visit to Bath is of particular historic significance as it was at this stage in its history that the magnificent Georgian city was declining from being the absolute centre of fashion visited by the rich and famous during the season, as established by Richard "Beau" Nash in the 18th century and developing into a genteel residential city and haven of military, naval and colonial retirees. *Pickwick* is set in the late

¹⁰ The original of Dingley Dell is probably Standing, in the seven Oaks District of the county of Kent, three miles or so north west of Maidstone. Three upright stones with a capstone, known as Kit's Coty House, are probably the originals of Samuel Pickwick's discovery of the stone dedicated to "Bill Stumps". This area was a particular favourite of the novelist's. He considered the seven miles between Maidstone to Rochester one of England's most beautiful walks. See Frederick Kitton: *The Dickens County* 1911 p. 201

¹¹ This is probably Ipswich, the county town of Suffolk, east England. An industrial town and port situated on the estuary of the River Orwell. It was a thriving wool town in the Middle Ages with links to many European ports and continued its prosperity into Dickens's period in light industry and printing. Politically Ipswich was a tempestuous borough and the scene of several bitterly contested elections immediately previous to the publication of *Pickwick Papers*. Fitzroy Kelly, the Tory candidate, contested the seat several times. He lost the seat in 1832 but in January 1835 he was successful only to be unseated again on appeal. Dickens reported the campaign for the press. Sir Edward Fitzroy Kelly (1796-1880) was a successful barrister and judge who became Lord Chief Baron and Privy Councillor in 1866. He supported the Conservative interest in politics. He stood again for Ipswich in 1841 but was defeated. Between 1843 until 1847 he was MP for Cambridge town and in 1852 he was elected for East Suffolk, where he owned considerable estates (at Sproughton, near Ipswich). This was the constituency he represented for the rest of his parliamentary career. In spite of Dickens's unfavourable portrait of him Kelly was made solicitor-general in Peel's administration and afterwards knighted. He was again solicitor-general in Derby's first administration from February to December 1852. His reputation has remained problematic.

¹² See Percy Fitzgerald: *Pickwick Studies* 1899 pp. 24 ff., and T. J. Bradley: 'How Dickens Wrote his Description of Bath' in *The Dickensian*, Number 23, 1927.

¹³ See T. J. Bradley: 'How Dickens Wrote his Description of Bath' in *Dickensian*, Number 23, 1927.

1820s and Dickens's portrayal of genteel Bath at that stage of transition from seasonal resort to genteel residence is perfect. It was no longer the resort of fashion and becoming more the residential city of choice renowned for its social amenities, excellent shopping, courteous tradesmen and delightful entertainments. The *Bath Guide* of 1830 listed the city's facilities and entertainments and put aside all modesty to declare: "*From a perusal of the forgoing scenes of amusement and recreation, it will be readily conceived that in a full season, no place in England affords a more brilliant circle of polite company than Bath*".¹⁴ The novelist's acute observation of Bath at play is demonstrated in several witty and charming set pieces among which feature a memorable evening at the Assembly Rooms and Sam Weller's enjoyable evening in the jolly and hospitable company of Bath's splendid footmen and butlers at the "leg o' mutton swarry". (Chapter 37).

Pickwick then goes to prison. Sam Weller contrives to accompany him. When Pickwick leaves the Fleet he journeys to the midlands to reconcile Winkle with his father, who opposed his son's marriage to Arabella. This fifth tour has the travellers returning to Bob Sawyer at Bristol and thence to Gloucester, Tewkesbury, Worcester, Droitwich, Bromsgrove, Birmingham, Coventry, Dunchurch, Daventry, Towcester and finally back to London.

Sales continued throughout Dickens's lifetime and it sold all over the world in numerous translations. Pickwick also developed a life of its own on the stage, which began even before its serialization was completed. It appeared at a propitious moment. Changes were afoot following the great Reform Bill that presaged all manner of possible changes in society.

Britain was changing from an agricultural economy to a commercial and industrial economy. The passing of the Great Reform Bill seemed to mark a significant moment of change. The country had so long been governed by its landed interests that the changes demanded in Chartism -- universal suffrage, the secret ballot, annual parliaments -- seemed nothing short of revolutionary. It's a very English masterpiece, yet simultaneously universal, enshrining as it does, a last, longing, lingering look back at all that was best in the world before the mad, Gadarene rush into global industrialism and mass consumerism.

Charles Dickens was always torn between his affection for the Old England of inns, byways, rural peace and the intense excitement of modern city life. The intention to portray the English countryside, coaches, inns, waterways, country fairs etc. was made clear in the Advertisement which appeared promising an account of journeys "*to Birmingham in the depth of winter*" which would show the beauties of nature and penetrate "*to the very borders of Wales in the height of summer*". That spirit of hope that first animated *Pickwick Papers* continues to pervade its pages.

British readers have always held Pickwick Papers in great affection, especially the older generation. My father was always reading it. He had three copies. One by his bedside. One in the sitting room and one permanently in his suitcase to take with him on his travels representing his firm, Bath Cabinet

¹⁴ See Graham Davis and Penny Bonsall: *Bath: A New History* 1996 pp. 71-73.

Makers. Since the turn of the 19th and 20th century (when my father was growing up) Dickens's reputation has gone up and down and up again. Victorian readers, on the whole, preferred his earlier novels, and *Pickwick Papers* was regarded very highly indeed. At the close of the 19th century, William Samuel Lilly asserted that *Pickwick Papers* was his masterpiece and that Dickens was at his best in his earlier works, "where he makes small pretence to art" (*Four English Humourists* 1895). Later Victorians found Dickens attempts at large scale social-problem novels -- the very kind we are called upon particularly to admire as being socially aware -- "unreal". In this respect Lilly is a very interesting witness, as he had heard Dickens read his works, and he stressed the equal success with which Dickens conveyed burlesque, caricature and pathos. He wondered whether anything bearing less appreciable relation to life was ever written than parts of *Our Mutual Friend*. This would seem a wayward point of view today, where we are called upon to admire the later, more serious and socially satirical novels. By the end of the nineteenth century the reaction against Dickens had hardened, and, significantly enough, the later novels alone were considered worth serious attention. The age felt itself superior to Dickens's vulgarity, and his rather bourgeois appeal. Apart from a few mavericks, such as George Gissing, Bernard Shaw and Gilbert Keith Chesterton, Lilly's views were shared by most critics at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Leavis thrust Boz firmly out of doors in his influential tome, *The Great Tradition* 1948. Leavis's influence was considerable and Dickens's novels fell out of favour and academically were not taken seriously for several generations. To several generations of English Honours undergraduates, Boz was a closed book. For example, Andrew Davies, now Britain's leading exponent in dramatizing classic English novels for the screen, told me when I interviewed him about his new television version of *Bleak House*:

*"I never really thought of myself as a Dickensian – never really thrilled to him in school, and at university in the fifties I was rather under Leavis's spell, and Leavis didn't have much time for Dickens, except Hard Times. In my thirties I realised how wrong Leavis was. Read a lot of Dickens – my favourites were Little Dorrit and Our Mutual Friend. But I always had reservations. I was never quite sure about the manic exuberance of his comic characters; and I was quite sure I didn't like the insipid sentimentality in the characterisation of his heroines"*¹⁵.

There was a big sea change during the early 1970s in Britain, following the centenary of Dickens's death, after the exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum and the publication of Frank and Queenie Leavis's book, *Dickens the Novelist*. Frank Leavis now publicly confided that he had admired Dickens *all the time really* (surely the greatest *volt-face* since Robert Peel repealed the Corn Laws). The 1970s saw a flood of books on Dickens by various scholars and critics and Dickens's novels crept back into academic favour. There was also a marked revival in productions of Dickens novels for BBC Television and radio.

¹⁵ Interview with Andrew Davies, January 2 2005

There were outstanding television versions of *Dombey and Son*, *Great Expectations*, *David Copperfield* and *Nicholas Nickleby*¹⁶. BBC Radio Four transmitted a series of very fine productions of the novels in the Classic Serials slot of the schedules.¹⁷

Dickens's novels had regularly been given the Classic Serial treatment on BBC radio, since these drama serials were initiated by the BBC radio drama department in 1939, but these productions by Jane Morgan (written by Constance Cox, Barry Campbell and Betty Davies) had a particular style that almost became a brand name for Dickens on the radio -- *Pickwick Papers*, *Bleak House*, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, *Little Dorrit*, *Our Mutual Friend* and *Dombey and Son* – all had an unmistakable style and tone. Her production of *Pickwick Papers* is particularly admired – with several star performances – Freddie Jones and Douglas Livingstone were the definitive Mr. Pickwick and Sam Weller; Paul Chapman was Alfred Jingle to the flesh and Christopher Benjamin a memorable Revd. Stiggins. But in general, I don't think these productions have ever been equaled. It's regrettable they were not all made available on audiocassette.

Jane Morgan knew her Dickens and understood the nature of his imaginings, that unique mixture of drama, comedy, pathos and the grotesque. She also made sensitive use of the authorial narrative voice. Casting was beautifully realized. Jane Morgan recognized that the novelist's authorial voice is omnipresent and wide-ranging in ways that the specific ness of moving pictures could never emulate and the absorbing quality of the drama was greatly enhanced by extended use of Dickens' narrative voice, by Simon Cadell, (wonderfully darkly modulated in the later tenebrous London based novels, *Bleak House*, *Little Dorrit* and *Our Mutual Friend*, but wittily and busily bouncing along in *Pickwick Papers*) and Simon Russell Beale (in *Dombey and Son*).

This producer grasped the essential point about Dickens, that it is not so much the stories as the way Dickens tells you the story. She fully realized the potential of radio to render Dickens's novels as audio dramatic experience. She had served a long apprenticeship in BBC drama from the days when she worked on the radio soap opera, *Mrs. Dale's Diary*.¹⁸ In these classic novel Dickens serials Jan Morgan achieved a kind of ensemble quality (wholly suitable to the material she was handling), a house-style, similar in kind to John Ford Westerns.

Bearing all this in mind it was very interesting to note that Jane Morgan produced BBC Radio 4's recent version of *Pickwick Papers* in the autumn of 2004. In the light of the previous splendid radio

¹⁶ See Robert Giddings and Keith Selby: *The Classic Serial on Television and Radio*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2000 pp.46 ff. and pp. 159 ff.

¹⁷ See Robert Giddings and Keith Selby op.cit. pp. 49-51

¹⁸ A long running soap opera about a doctor's family, supposedly written by his wife. *Mrs. Dale's Diary* began on the Light Programme in January 1948 and ended on Radio 2 in April 1969, by which time it was called *The Dales*. The Queen Mother's comment amply sums it up: "*It is the only way of knowing what goes on in a middle class family*".

productions of Dickens's fiction that she had so memorably brought to life as radio drama, much was anticipated.

In the event, it was altogether a disappointing production and certainly came nowhere near eclipsing the memories of Jane Morgan's previous production of the same novel in 1974. The main impression was simply lack of vitality. And in *Pickwick Papers* that is fatal. It was dramatized in four episodes and thus a fair amount was inevitably cut. That in itself might not have mattered all that much – or rather, might have been forgiven – had what remained been so dazzling as to compensate. But this was not to be.

It was dramatized for radio by Michael Eaton, a writer of considerable experience and reputation. His work has been described 'award-winning' or 'controversial' (*Fellow Traveller; Shoot to Kill; Why Lockerbie? Signs & Wonders; Flowers of the Forest; Angels Rave On*). He has regularly for such journals as *The Movie, Screen, and Sight & Sound* (in which he once had a regular column).¹⁹ And he confessed that *Pickwick Papers* was among his most favourite novels. Although I regret the loss of considerable marvellous stuff in Michael Eaton's script for radio, I don't really consider the major flaw in this production lies in the script. There is something seriously undernourished about the production itself.

This might well be the result of the fundamental changes in house management/production arrangements in the BBC resulting from much lauded "reforms" initiated by the first Thatcher government but continued by successive governments since the early 1980s. The economic imperative behind these "reforms" was to get the BBC to cuts, slim down and generally seek to justify its licence fee more or less by competing with commercial broadcasting. This has resulted in cuts in staffing and resources, encouraging the British Broadcasting Corporation to go for sales of its products. The BBC began to change into a publishing rather than just production. Instead of the majority of its programmes being produced in house by BBC staff in BBC studios, the Corporation began a policy of buying in many productions made for the BBC by independent production companies. Their names may be read as they roll up on the credits of many programmes -- Granada, Talk Back Productions, Aardman, Working Title Films, Wall to Wall, Hat Trick Productions -- broadcast on the BBC. Such fundamental changes in the deep structures of the Corporation have affected programming, scheduling as well as the nature and quality of broadcast productions. It is not so much a matter of quality, but of style. There is now a definite sense of political correctness, populism and a tendency to go for perceived market appetites rather than in terms of traditional BBC integrities.

Listening to this recent radio version of *Pickwick Papers* I sensed that the striking house-style that Jane Morgan had made her own for her Dickens serials from her first radio production of *Pickwick Papers*

¹⁹ He published a much-admired book on *Chinatown* for the BFI in 1997.

in 1974, through *Bleak and House*, *Our Mutual Friend* and *Little Dorrit* was no longer taken for granted.

This new 2004 production of *Pickwick Papers* was made for the BBC by Promenade Productions. This company was created in 1994 by producer, Nicholas Newton, director Bill Bryden and leading television executive, the late Brian Wenham,²⁰

Since 1996 Promenade, based in London, has produced a number of dramas for BBC Radio 4. But it does not seem to me to quite the ensemble that Jane Morgan had at her disposal for her previous, in house, Dickens productions for the BBC Classic Serial slot. And this was noticeable from the very start. The production she made for the BBC in 1974 was in twelve, one-hour episodes. This new dramatised version radio version by Michael Eaton was in four one-hour episodes. The sense of space and tone was entirely different. Much of the comic and ironic “Dickens” narrative voice over (mainly by Simon Cadell in previous productions) was cut. This immediately led to severe reduction in comic atmosphere.

Despite a few star performances, this was a disappointing production. I’m aware that my disappointment must be in proportion to my expectations. The considerable change of style and tone was obvious from the start, though difficult to define. I had expected much, as I yield to no one in my

²⁰ The company was formed in 1996 to produce *The Big Picnic*, an epic theatre musical production, with music, that followed the lives of young Govan men who went to France and fought in the First World War and died there. This was recorded live for BBC Television and broadcast on BBC2 in 1999. This was followed by numerous productions: *Sacco and Vanzetti* **adapted** for the radio from their letters and trial testimony by Bill Bryden; *Volunteers* by Donna Franceschild; *Daisy Miller* by Henry James also adapted by Bill Bryden; *The Nativity*, broadcast on Christmas Eve, 1999, based on Bill Bryden's Royal National Theatre production and *The Passion* and *Doomsday* to complete the recording of all three of *The Mystery Plays*. In June 2000 Promenade presented The Birmingham Rep/Royal National Theatre production of Tennessee William's *Baby Doll* at the Albery Theatre, in London's West End, directed by Lucy Bailey. This was followed by Samuel Beckett's *All That Fall* for BBC Radio 3 and John Osborne's *The Charge of the Light Brigade* for BBC Radio 4 and an original play for radio, *Voyages*, by Michael Hastings. It produced a two-part adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night* adapted by Michael Hastings, a short story by Charles Dickens, *George Silverman's Explanation* and recently *The Bride's Chamber* from Dickens's *The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices* both adapted for radio by Michael Eaton. This summer it has produced a new play by Ben Steiner, *A Brief Interruption*. This company, therefore, has considerable and very wide ranging experience.

affection and admiration for Jane Morgan's previous Classic Serial radio productions of Dickens's novels. Additionally I had expected a very great deal from the star of this production, Timothy Spall, one of Britain's finest and most acclaimed character actors. What added considerable zest to my expectation was this actor's public declaration of his personal lifelong affection for *Pickwick Papers*. He appeared as Sue Lawley's guest in the BBC Radio Four show, *Desert Island Discs*, in which a weekly guest is interviewed about their life etc. and chooses the eight gramophone records they would take with them if they were to be marooned on a desert island.²¹ At the end of the show the guest is always invited what book they would take with them to the island, apart from the bible and the complete works of Shakespeare. Timothy Spall answered "*Pickwick Papers*" and said that this had always been his favourite read. Timothy Spall is one of our most experienced²² and beloved character actors. He has superb histrionic abilities and a remarkably flexible voice that he deploys to present numerous tones and accents. Over and above these professional qualities he would obviously bring his love of the Dickens novel to his assumption of this role. Nevertheless his well earned professional reputation for creating memorable characters of a particular sort – put upon, often rather boorish, class conscious but secretly socially aspiring working class types – rather went against qualities usually associated with Samuel Pickwick.

Here he is, as recorded by the secretary of the Pickwick Club, when we first see the great man:

"A casual observer...might possibly have remarked nothing extraordinary in the bold head, and circular spectacles, which were intensely turned towards (the secretary's) face ... to those who knew that the gigantic brain of Pickwick was working beneath that forehead, and that the beaming eyes of Pickwick were twinkling behind those glasses, the sight was indeed an interesting one. There sat the man who had traced to their sources the mighty ponds of Hampstead, and agitated the scientific world of with his Theory of Tittlebats, as calm and unmoved as he deep waters of the one on a frosty day, or as a solitary specimen of the other in the inmost recesses of an earthen jar. And how much more interesting did the spectacle become when, staring into full life and animation. As a simultaneous call for 'Pickwick' burst from his followers, that illustrious man slowly mounted into the Windsor chair, on which he had been previously seated and addressed the club himself had founded. What a study for an artist did that exciting scene present! The eloquent Pickwick, with one hand gracefully concealed behind his coat tails, and the other waving in air, to assist his glowing declamation; his elevated position revealing those tights and gaiters, which, had they clothed an ordinary man, might have

²¹ *Desert Island Discs* is held in particular esteem in Britain and being invited to appear is an accolade somewhat in the same league as having one's biographical details in *Who's Who*. The programme was founded in 1942 by Roy Plomley and has featured celebrities of all kinds among its guests – politicians, royalty, scientists, sports personalities, philosophers, stage and screen performers, musicians, writers, statesmen, explorers etc. etc.

²² Timothy Spall OBE is a graduate of RADA, formerly a member of the Royal Shakespeare Company and a distinguished member of the ensemble associated with the plays and films of Mike Leigh. His numerous credits include leading roles in TV drama series including *Auf Wiedersehen Pet*, *Our Mutual Friend*, films such as Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet* (Rosencrantz) and the recent *Nicholas Nickleby* (Cheeryble), *Topsy Turvey*, *The Sheltering Sky* and several Mike Leigh productions including *Home Sweet Home*, *Life is Sweet* and *Secrets and Lies*. He was a memorable Lieutenant Hibbert in the 1988 television production of *Journey's End*.

passed without observation, but which, when Pickwick clothed them – if we may use the expression – inspired voluntary awe and respect". (*Pickwick Papers*, Chapter One).

This then, is the character of Samuel Pickwick as he appears on the page. In spite of his worldly innocence, lack of guile and childish curiosity about all and everything, he is a commanding figure, standing on a chair, the centre of attention in the club he has himself founded, and holding forth in an oracular manner about the subject in hand. He's an original, to be sure. He's quaint and slightly old fashioned but by no means faded. It may seem that the world has passed him by, but Samuel Pickwick is a man determined to keep up with it. There's a quality of something large, vital, positive, generous and animated about him. Pickwick is a mixture of the gentle and the barnstorming. A benign Life Force. He is willing enough to take the world on, even though he does not realize how prepared the world will be to hit him below the belt. How is this character to be realized in radio drama? Well, it will depend upon the actor to project these qualities entirely vocally. One thinks of one of those old fashioned British actors, who've served a long apprenticeship on the boards, probably through the repertory theatre route and having successfully played some of the important but secondary roles at Stratford – Benvolio, Horatio, Bassanio and John of Gaunt graduating to play Brutus and later Menenius eventually followed by delivering amore than acceptable Falstaff. We'll tend to think, I believe, in terms of Sir Ralph Richardson, (or latterly Arthur Lowe, Joss Ackland, Freddie Jones), rather than Timothy Spall. There's some hint of the querulous in this actor that willy-nilly undermines all his efforts to realize this vital role.

His fellow Pickwick Club companions are well cast – Toby Jones (Tupman); Robert Portal (Snodgrass) and John McAndrew (Winkle). Burn Gorman takes a good stab at Sam Weller but somehow lacks the confident, saucy, Cockney optimistic and slightly sarcastic qualities of Dickens's great comic creation. He fails to erase memories of Douglas Livingstone in Jane Morgan's previous production. Tony Weller is pretty well turned out (if slightly under malevolently) by Michael Jayston. It was a shame that the killingly funny Tony Weller/Revd. Stiggins counter-plot just failed to ignite. This was a shame, as Jack Shepherd did a good job in creating the star turn at the Brick Lane Temperance meetings. On radio Shepherd actually did present that: "...*prim-faced, red nosed-man, with a long, thin countenance, and a semi-rattlesnake sort of eye – rather sharp but decidedly bad*". And not enough was made of his final, unexpected second-baptism in the horse-trough – of the most felicitous examples of climactic banality.

Although there are one or two other flaws in the casting of this new BBC *Pickwick Papers*, this is not really where the trouble lies. The major shortcoming is a marked lack of energy to the whole proceedings. This novel is about movement, travel, bustle, and sightseeing and is full of escapades and adventures. There should be an all-pervading sense of animation and bustle in *Pickwick*, in the golden age of the stagecoach²³. *Pickwick Papers* is really a novel about the age of the stagecoach or it is

²³ See Thomas Burke: *Travel in England* 1942 pp. 90-114

nothing. B. W. Matz, writing at the beginning of the 20th but nostalgically recalling the glories of the previous century, believed that Dickens's work somehow preserved the golden age of the stage-coach and the coaching inn in the nation's memory bank, and that in this respect, *Pickwick Papers* was supreme:

*"There are, as a fact, innumerable reasons why 'Pickwick Papers' is so popular, so necessary today. The one, which concerns us more at the moment, is its appeal as a mirror of the manners and customs of a romantic age, which has fast receded from us. It is, perhaps, the most accurate picture extant of the old coaching era... No writer has done more than Dickens to reflect the glory of that era, and the glamour and comfort of the old inns of England, which in those days were the havens of the road to every traveller. All his books abound in pleasant and faithful pictures of these times, and alluring and enticing descriptions of those old hostelries where not only ease was sought and expected, but obtained; 'Pickwick' is packed with them".*²⁴

According to William Cobbett this was the finest sight in England next to a foxhunt:

*"...just ready to start. A great sheep or cattle fair is a beautiful sight; but in a state-coach you see more of what man is capable of performing. The vehicle itself; the harness, all so complete and so neatly arranged, so strong and clean and good; the beautiful horses, impatient to be off; the inside full, and outside covered, in every part, with men, women and children, boxes, bags, bundles; the coachman, taking his reins in one hand and the whip in the other, gives a signal with his foot, and away they go, at the rate of seven miles an hour – the population and the property of a hamlet. One of these coaches coming in, after a long journey, is a sight not less interesting. The horses are now all sweat and foam, the reek from their bodies ascending like a cloud. The whole equipage is covered perhaps with dust and dirt. But still, on it comes, as steady as the hands of a clock".*²⁵

This new radio version of *Pickwick Papers* should have been full of the sounds of horses on cobbles, pounding over the countryside, across the English landscape; of the sounds of coaches pulling into courtyards, trumpets blaring as ostlers rush to attend the steaming teams of horses as travellers unwrap themselves, climb down and pile into inn parlours with crackling, roaring fires to be served hot food by busy waiters. The magic of modern stereo radio production (with more boisterous music) could so wonderfully have realized these sounds Old England that meant so much to Dickens!

Indeed you get some of the description of landscape preserved in dialogue here, but it is by no means enough. In addition, there's no sense of our travellers considerable mileage ever actually taking them anywhere different. There is no attempt to establish any sense of regional variant or quality, even though the Pickwickians travel right across Southern England and up to the Midlands and back. Now

²⁴ B. W. Matz: *The Inns and Taverns of 'Pickwick'* 1921 pp. 5-6.

²⁵ William Cobbett: *Rural Rides*, quoted in Burke, see Note 30 above.

this is another muffed radio opportunity as the country, even now, is rich in the variety of English accent, tone and dialect. Kentish is still a noticeable accent even today so must have been well marked at the early 19th century and at Ipswich, for example, you would have heard (and for that matter, still may hear) quite an idiosyncratic style of English, that has an odd but characteristic up and down intonation. The slightly whining English still to be heard in the West Midlands was surely a marked feature of speech in Dickens's time²⁶. A general Mummieset will not do here, we are talking about traversing a little country, where you only have to travel about ten miles, to be somewhere different. Despite most High Streets looking more or less the same -- with their Pizza Huts, Boots, W. H. Smiths, British Home Stores, Starbucks, Marks and Spenser -- this is still true of England.

The other weakness in this production is the failure to work the major sequences up into anything spectacular. And yet spectacular is what they are. This is how you actually recall your readings of *Pickwick Papers* in your memory. These big set pieces remain in one's memories long after reading the novel. But in this radio version there's actually been some complete removal -- such as the glorious scenes of the Pickwickians' visit to Bath²⁷ -- these have been completely omitted. Most of the "big" scenes have been kept but very little has been made of the tremendous production opportunities that they individually offer a modern skilled stereo radio production. The hunting and sporting scenes are rather down played (yet think what stereo sound effects could really do!); there was a failure of nerve in grasping grotesque comedy possibilities at girl's school elopement. The impressive (and frequently admired) sequence in the Fleet was modestly unpleasant, instead of the nightmare mixture of terror and pathos that Dickens created. But for me, the two really serious disappointments were Dingley Dell and Mr. Pickwick's trial.

These several weak spots in the casting and the tendency to deflate the magic in bigger sequences unfortunately mark this production. *Pickwick Papers* could so easily have been a shapeless construction, but it holds well together as a series of tours on which are strung, like glistening jewels, some splendid moments of high jinks and great excitement. On the face of it, a novel so constructed, would lend itself fairly easily to radio serialization. But this version has epitomized the novel so much that the essence of *Pickwick Papers* evaporates.

What I had anticipated in this radio dramatization was plenty of atmosphere, but it was atmosphere that was particularly lacking. The Christmas idyll at Dingley Dell, for example. Now the world knows that Christmas was a big thing with Dickens. John Forster records that the novelist liked to take a walk on

²⁶ This is a curious aside here, but this was the accent that actually made Bermondsey (London) bred Timothy Spall famous! He brilliantly used a Birmingham accent when he played Neville in *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet* on Channel Four in 19

²⁷ Bath is my hometown and I particularly feel the loss of this sequence in the spa town, but especially so as it has always seemed to me that Dickens describes Bath so vividly at the stage when it was fading from its splendid position as the resort for the season for best and the brightest into a well appointed residential/retirement location for the genteel classes, especially colonial administrators, the officer class and clergy. See John Wroughton: *Bath in the Age of Reform 1830-1841*, 1972; Graham Davis: *Bath Beyond the Guide Book: Scenes From Victorian Life*, 1988 and Graham Davis and Penny Bonsall: *Bath: A New History* 1996 pp.63-86.

Christmas Eve:”...to see the marketings for Christmas down the road from Algate to Bow; and he had a surprizing fondness for wandering about in poor neighbourhoods on Christmas Day, past the areas of shabby-genteel houses in Somers or Kentish Towns, and watching the dinners preparing or coming in”.²⁸

But Forster does not describe the Dickens family’s seasonal festivities. We may glean much information about these from his own correspondence and accounts by various friends, but the season would include good food and drink, visits to Christmas shows and pantomimes, parties, family games and on Twelfth Night, the last night of the season, the Dickens children performed plays.²⁹ We may also assemble much additional information as to the personal Dickens Christmas phenomenon with the evidence to gain from his publications.³⁰ These sequences obviously show Dickens’s love and debt (unconscious or otherwise), to Addison’s account of Sir Roger de Coverley’s celebration of Christmas in the *Spectator*:

“I have often thought (said Sir Roger)...it happens very well that that Christmas should fall out in the middle of winter. It is the most dead an uncomfortable time of the year, when the poor people would suffer very much from their poverty and cold, if they had not good cheer, arm fires and Christmas gambols to support them. I love to rejoice their poor hearts at this season and to see the whole village merry in my great hall...”³¹

The *Spectator* essays were very popular and widely read in the generation to which Dickens’s father belonged and indeed were in his library. We know that the novelist read them avidly as a boy.

Additionally there is much owed to Washington Irving’s accounts of Christmas at ‘Bracebridge Hall in *The Sketch Book* 1820 (‘Christmas Eve’, ‘Christmas Day’ and ‘The Christmas Dinner’).

What Dickens seems to be describing is a semi-feudal social event in which the squire, Mr. Wardle, of

²⁸ John Forster: *The Life of Charles Dickens* 1872, Fireside Edition ND p. 925

²⁹ See Edgar Johnson: *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph* 1952 pp. 293, 467-468; 483-9; 751; and 828-967.

³⁰ Over and above *A Christmas Carol*, we have: ‘Christmas Festivities’ in *Bell’s Life in London*, 27 December 1835 (this appears as ‘A Christmas Dinner’ in *Sketches by Boz*); ‘A Christmas Tree’ in *Christmas Stories (Household Words* 1850) and he wrote regular Christmas pieces for his journal *Household Words* 1850-8 and *All the Year Round* 1859-67 (these may not principally have featured Christmas but they all championed the Christmas spirit). He often uses this idealized Christmas satirically to show man’s inhumanity, for example, in *Great Expectations*, the Christmas feasting at Mrs. Joe’s party is contrasted with the dismal time spent on the marshes by the starving convicts. 38 Addison, ‘Sir Roger comes up to town to see Prince Eugene: he tells the *Spectator* the news of the country’. This in Number 269 of *Spectator*, dated Tuesday, 8 January 1712. This celebration of traditional rural Yuletide jollifications seems to me part of a very strong English way of celebrating the season that finds expression in Shakespeare and miscellaneous prose writings of the 16th and 17th centuries e.g. Thomas Tusser: *Hundreth Good Pointes of Husbandie* . Chapter 12, 1557; George Herbert *Jacula Prudentum*; Robert Herrick: *Ceremonies for Christmas etc*. The tradition ran on through Scott, see *Marmion*, Canto vi, Introduction “Heap on more wood! – the wind is chill;/But let it whistle as it will,/We’ll keep our Christmas merry still” etc.

Manor Farm in Kent, works to achieve the happy festivity he believes his servants, guests and relations all deserve. Wardle is here played by Gawn Grainger, but he scarcely generates the overflowing, big-heartedness and warmth of the squire of Dingley Dell. The emphasis is on eating, drinking, dancing and generally having a good time. In fact, Dickens is drawing on the long English memory of the Festival of Midwinter. Britons had hearty midwinter festivals long before Christianity reached these shores. The winter season meant there was a lack of fodder that led to the slaughter of stock. Consequently there was a lot of meat to be eaten. Hence the gormandizing. Pope Gregory warned St Augustine not to come over here and zealously replace old existing traditions with Christian ways and destroying all our rituals and customs, but to engraft the new beliefs onto to the old.³²

Young Dickens would have known the festival for eating, drinking, singing, dancing and family jollifications at Christmas and New Year -- so redolent of the Medieval, Elizabethan and 18th century traditions. This is the kind of Christmas Scrooge remembers as a young clerk with Old Fezziwig. These celebrations gently echo the Roman Saturnalia.³³

As Dickens grew up the emphasis was shifting from New Year to Christmas, (Christmas cards first appeared in 1841) together with a revival of gifts on Christmas Day, a Box on St Stephen's Day, and lots of family fun and games.³⁴ If we look at the basic ingredients of the "Dickensian" Christmas – eating, drinking and frolicking apart – it's the central teaching of the Christian message, plus a considerable emphasis on awareness of the past, the present and the future. These are the age-old elements of the season.³⁵ And this is the kind of Christmas Mr. Pickwick enjoys at Dingley Dell.³⁶

³² Easter (OE Oestre) isn't even a Christian word. Early scholars put the Savior's birth in spring. The 25 December date isn't found until the *Calendar* of Philocalus 354 AD – and not accepted at Jerusalem until two hundred years later...

³³ This was the festival of Sol Invictus. The first of January was sacred to the two-headed god Janus (for whom January is named) who looked back to the past Year and forwards to the future, celebrated with gifts of fruit, wine and cakes – signifying the sweet things to come. (*"His revers'd face may show distaste, /And frown upon those ills are past;/But that which this way looks is clear, /And smiles upon the New-born Year"*. Cotton). The big event was the return of the Sun to its strength, from early January, associated with new foliage and the lighting of festive candles. These early festivities of memory and hope are prototypical of our modern Christmas/New Year festivities. (Hence Christmas candles and carols by candlelight).

³⁴ Dickens loved Lamb's essay 'New Year's Eve'.

³⁵ Past and future and strong themes in Dickens: "... my point is that bad and good are inextricably linked in remembrance, and that you could not choose the enjoyment of recollecting only the good. To have all the best of it you must remember the worst also". Letter to John Forster 21 November 1848. The theme is basic in the plot structure of *A Christmas Carol*.

³⁶ The trimmings we all recognize as typically Christmas and "Dickensian" – the tree, snow, Father Christmas in red trimmed with white fur, tons of presents, greetings cards, pantomime, turkeys – are additions from later in the century. It is so often asserted that "Dickens invented Christmas" but it's my view that Christmas invented him, for he lived and worked matured during the period when the industrial revolution and mass production and modern communication created the modern festival of midwinter consumer indulgence we disguise under the term "Victorian" Christmas". *Enquire Within*, the standard guide to Victorian domestic and household management (published at the time of *David Copperfield*) has no entry for "Christmas" in the index. Its successor, *The Best of Everything* 1870, (the year Dickens died), has an interesting comments on the way Christmas was constructing, including the

However, the Dingley Dell Christmas we had in this BBC Radio 4 version was simply not lively, or hearty or boisterous enough. You should feel you are there, the food and the drink are going round and you would just long to join in the dancing. Little good cheer was generated and the warmth of the fire and jollity of the company simply not projected. Even when this production was repeated in the UK on Christmas Day, the mood was just not infectious enough.

But the really dampest squib in this box of disappointing fireworks, was the great trial scene. This was seriously missed opportunity as there is so much evidence as to the considerable effort and energy Dickens brought to bear on his realization of the whole case involving Pickwick and Mrs. Bardell.³⁷ Again, he would be drawing on his own experiences. These had early beginnings, as he saw the inside of debtors prison when his father was arrested for debt in February 1824 and imprisoned, initially at the King's Bench and later transferred to the Marshalsea, from whence he was released at the end of May the same year. What the young Dickens saw here doubtless provided the basic materials for the scenes in the Fleet that appear in *Pickwick Papers*. We should also remember that when he left school he was first employed at the age of fifteen he was employed in the office of Charles Molloy, an attorney at Symond's Inn, and later as a solicitor's clerk in the offices of Ellis and Blackmores (in Gray's Inn) in March 1827. Within a year he had learned shorthand and was working as a freelance legal reporter at Doctor's Commons, where he would observe the law in action until he was eighteen.

The whole proceedings in the case are detailed and are recognised as an accurate account according to legal practice of the day.³⁸ Pickwick's remarks to Mrs. Bardell are incautious, ambiguous and enigmatic. Mrs. Bardell, as created by Sue Johnstone, is a rich and subtle portrayal of a woman who is not quite so crafty as she sincerely believes herself to be. This was one of the star performances of this production. Her crafty lawyers agree to take her case in terms of contingent fee basis, bringing a suit for damages against Samuel Pickwick for Breach of Promise. Matters are commenced with a petition for a *capias ad respondendum* (a "body warrant") that enables the court officer (usually a sheriff) to take Pickwick into custody or put up bail.³⁹ Then, according to custom, Mrs. Bardell's solicitors employ a barrister, Serjeant Buzfuz, red-faced, bullying fellow who dominates the court and wows the jury. He is played in this radio production by Gerald Murphy in a performance that simply fails to generate the bullying fire, demonic energy and ringing, brassy rhetoric of Buzfuz. What this part needed was an actor of the Donald Wolfit type, who could summon up the bow-wow style the role

novelty of the German "Christmas Tree", family parties, playing on the ice, decorating the church with evergreens, and laments the decline of mumming, wails and carols. With ne'er a mention of presents. The fact is that what we now recognize as the "traditional" Christmas was made possible, if not inevitable, by those imperatives of modern capitalism that produced and sustained our commodity consumerism that became entwined with our cultural customs and conventions. Advertisers and the mass media become the sirens and minstrels of commerce. Thus previous alternative cultural and social purposes are supplemented and replaced.

³⁷ In this section I am considerably indebted to the discussion of the trial in *Pickwick Papers* in William S. Holdsworth: *Charles Dickens as Legal Historian*, New Haven 1928 pp.117-148.

³⁸ I am here considerably indebted the article, '*Bardell v. Pickwick*' in *The Lawyer*, June 1938 pp. 16-17, by Abe J. Goldin, Attorney at Law, Philadelphia. Pa.

³⁹ This may still be resorted to in cases of personal injury, fraud, breach of promise, slander and libel.

cries out for. Pickwick's solicitor, Perker, (played by Philip Voss, who seems to project a rather worldly and professional quality for the ultimately bungling lawyer Pickwick employed) duly brief their barrister, Serjeant Snubbin, a feeble and ineffective member of his profession (well played here by Philip Fox). The judge is one of Dickens's finest satiric caricatures, Justice Stareleigh: "A most particularly short man, and so fat, that he seemed all faced and waistcoat..." (who is based on Mr. Justice Gazelee, a member of the British bench in Dickens's time, and notorious for his pomposity, eccentricities and comicalities? It has even been claimed that his retirement was expedited by Dickens's portrayal of him.

The case is opened by Mr. Simpkin, junior counsel, who clears the way for Buzfuz to take the stage, which he subsequently does. Buzfuz plays the court well, particularly working on the feelings and prejudices of the jury. He flatters and cajoles them and histrionically affects indignation and pity. He seems almost overcome by his emotional involvement in the case. He convinces them that Mrs. Bardell was naïve and innocent, an ideal victim of the vile and calculating Pickwick, whom he presents as a demon in human form. His performance is a masterpiece of burlesque rhetoric. Dickens has taken liberties in this account for this kind of emotional outburst would have been more likely in a closing address to the jury, whereas it would be the norm for counsel's opening address for the plaintiff to be an outline of the case they then intended to prove. Buzfuz should have been halted in midstream by the presiding judge, probably after interjection by the defence, but he delivers the opening address without interruption. The evidence he introduces by way of Pickwick's letters to Mrs. Bardell -- with the famous references to "chops and tomato sauce" and "the warming pan" -- seems ridiculous.

Unfortunately the witnesses are either manipulated by Buzfuz or inadvertently put the wrong complexion on events they witnessed. Mrs. Cluppins, who was planted so as overhear the conversation of Mrs. Bardell and Pickwick, asserts that she just happened to be near and "overheard" what was said. She is not even cross-examined by the defence. Winkle accidentally provides damaging evidence of Pickwick's character by his unfortunate turns of phrase in recounting the incident in the lady's bedroom in the Ipswich hotel room. Tupman and Snodgrass are equally ineffectual witnesses. A neighbour testifies that she'd heard Pickwick as Mrs. Bardell's young son whether he would like another. Sam Weller gives a spirited account of himself, but is so anxious in deploying his wit so as not to be put upon, that he is little help to Pickwick's case.

Had Samuel Pickwick himself been put in the box, he might have defended himself, although his temper under stress could not be relied upon. But under the law at the time, neither of the parties in such a case could be witnesses on their own behalf for fear they might be tempted to perjure themselves. It was changed later in the 19th century in both civil and criminal cases. The entire case lasts about fifteen minutes and then the jury bring in a verdict against Pickwick with damages of £750. It might be considered that a case such as this should have been non-suited -- taken out of proceedings by the judge because the plaintiff did not provide enough evidence for the jury to return such a verdict.

But examination of the care the novelist has taken in creating this wonderful sequence will show how close to realities farce can be.

This major sequence in the novel was based on the sensational trial in June 1836 in which the Hon. George Norton brought a suit for “Criminal Conversation” against Lord Melbourne, the Prime Minister. The action implied misconduct between Caroline Norton, George Norton’s wife, and Lord Melbourne and had it succeeded it would have been the first step towards his divorcing Lady Caroline Norton for adultery with Lord Melbourne. Lord Norton also hoped to gain damages of some £10,000.

The trial, held on 23 June 1836, was a farce. The prosecution produced no credible witnesses but only a feeble array of disgruntled previous employees who had obviously been generously wined and dined and rehearsed for their court appearances at the expense of his lordship’s family. At the close of the first day’s proceedings the jury brought in a verdict in favour of Lord Melbourne.⁴⁰

This was one of the most talked of events of the season and there can scarcely have been a reader of *Pickwick Papers* who did not relish the novelist’s wickedly satirical version of contemporary events⁴¹. The fact is that Dickens himself had been in court during the Melbourne versus Norton case and reported it for the *Morning Chronicle* in June 1836.

The immortal Serejeant Buzfuz was based on the renowned blustering barrister, Charles Carpenter Bompas (died 1844), who had been called to the bar in 1815 and was a leading figure in the profession.

Caroline Norton was one of the granddaughters of Richard Brinsley Sheridan and was herself a lively and flirtatious young charmer with a modest literary talent established by such publications as *The Sorrows of Rosalie, A Tale with Other Poems* 1829.

Caroline had social contacts and her lawyer husband urged her to use them to obtain him preferment. She established contact with Lord Melbourne, at that time Home secretary in the Whig government and Melbourne began, with Lord Norton’s permission, to visit Lady Caroline Norton regularly and thus gradually established the reputation of a Whig political salon. Through Melbourne’s influence Norton obtained an appointment as a magistrate with a stipend of £1000 a year.

For a while things seemed settled and Caroline continued to dabble in literature as Lord Norton went about his duties on the bench. But the marriage was stormy and Norton earned the reputation of a violent bully. She was so badly beaten on one occasion that she miscarried a child she was carrying. She left the marriage home in May 1836. Norton then seized her goods (as he was entitled to under existing property laws).⁴² There was a political element in the case that added to its gossipy relish – a

⁴⁰ Dickens reported the Melbourne-Norton divorce case on 22 June in the same year.

⁴¹ See Percy Fitzgerald: *Bardell versus Pickwick, With Notes and Commentaries* 1902

⁴² The case has considerable importance in legal history. Caroline took legal advice to see if she could divorce Norton. But at that time only a husband could sue for divorce, not a wife. The only grounds for adultery were adultery by the wife. But the trial of June 1836 had established that Caroline Norton was

faction of the parliamentary Tories hoped that should Melbourne be discredited it would certainly damage the credibility of his Whig administration: “*The town has been full of Melbourne’s trial; great exultation at the result on the part of his political adherents, great disappointment on that of the mob of Low Tories, and a creditable satisfaction among the better sort...*” wrote a political observer at the time.⁴³

Studying accounts of the *Melbourne versus Norton* case reveals how closely Dickens modeled his version of the *Pickwick versus Bardell* trial on these scandalous contemporary proceedings. Dickens has exactly caught the rhetoric, style and sly implications of the way the lawyer, Sir William Follett,⁴⁴ represents matters in his speech for the plaintiff, Lord Norton. Follett asserted that there had been letters passed between Lord Melbourne and Mrs. Norton, but that only three had survived:

“These three notes, which have been found, relate only to his hours of calling on Mrs. Norton, nothing more; but there is something in the style even of these trivial notes to lead at least to something like suspicion. Here is one of them: ‘I will call about half past four or five o’clock. Yours, Melbourne’. There is no regular beginning of the letters; they don’t commence with ‘My dear Mrs. Norton’, or anything of that sort, as is usual in this country when a gentleman writes to a lady. Here is another ... ‘How are you? I shall not be able to call today, but probably shall tomorrow. Yours, &c., Melbourne’. This is not the note of a gentleman to a lady with whom he may be acquainted. The third runs: ‘There is no house today. I shall call after the levee, about four or half past. If you wish it later let me know. I shall then explain to you about going to Vauxhall. Yours, &c., Melbourne’ ... They seem to import much more than the words convey. They are written cautiously, I admit – there is no profession of love in them, they are not love-letters, but they are not written in the ordinary style of correspondence usually adopted ... between intimate friends”.⁴⁵

The rich genius of Dickens’s tour de force becomes immediately apparent when you recall Buzfuz address on behalf of the plaintiff:

innocent of adultery and thus ensured that the Norton’s had no grounds for divorce. Lord Norton retained complete legal custody of the children and refused Caroline access to them. She canvassed support through friends in the legal profession and parliament and eventually her efforts were instrumental in bringing about the Infant Custody Bill of 1839

⁴³ See *The Greville Memoirs: A Journal of the Reigns of King George 14 and King William IV* by Charles Greville, volume 3 1874, pp.349-51. Cf Philip Ziegler: *King William IV* 1973 p. 281.

⁴⁴ Follett was considered one of the best advocates of the day. His best-known cases at the bar were the action of Norton against Lord Melbourne in 1836, in which he appeared for the unsuccessful plaintiff and his defence of Lord Cardigan for his duel with Captain Tuckett in 1841, in which he obtained an acquittal on technical grounds. He was renowned for pouncing upon technicalities. ‘*Perhaps no man ever defeated a greater number of important cases by unexpected objections of the most technical character*’ *Blackwood’s Magazine*, 59, 1846, 9.

⁴⁵ Quote by Theobald Mathew, *Law Quarterly Review* XXXIV pp. 325-26. Another possible source of Buzfuz’s oratory has been proposed, that of the eloquence of Charles Phillips on behalf of the plaintiff in Guthrie versus Sterne, an Irish case printed in 1822. See J. B. Atlay: *The Victorian Chancellors*, 1906, volume 2 p. 163. 1906,

“...Two letters have passed between these parties, letters which are admitted to be in the handwriting of the defendant, and which speak volumes indeed. These letters, too, bespeak the character of the man. They are not open, fervent, eloquent epistles, breathing nothing but the language of affectionate attachment. They are covert, sly, underhanded communications, but, unfortunately, far more conclusive than if couched in the most glowing language and the most poetic imagery – letters that must be viewed with a cautious and suspicious eye – letters that were evidently intended at the time, by #Pickwick, to mislead and delude any third parties into whose hands they might fall. Let me read the first: ‘Garraway’s, twelve o’clock – Dear Mrs. B. – Chops and Tomato sauce. Yours, Pickwick!’ Gentlemen, what does this mean? Chops and Tomato sauce. Yours, Pickwick! Chops! Gracious heavens! And Tomoto sauce! Gentlemen, is the happiness of a sensitive and confiding female to be trifled away by such shallow artifices as these? The next has not date whatsoever, which is in itself suspicious. ‘Dear Mrs. B., I shall not be at home till tomorrow. Slow coach’. And then follows this very remarkable expression: ‘Don’t worry about the warming-pan’. The warming-pan? Why, gentlemen, who does trouble himself about a warming-pan? When was the peace of mind of a man or woman broken or disturbed by a warming-pan, which is in itself a harmless, a useful, and I will add, gentlemen, a comforting article of domestic furniture. Why is Mrs. Bardell so earnestly entreated not to agitate herself about this warming-pan, unless (as is no doubt the case) it is a mere cover for hidden fire – a mere substitute for some endearing word or promise, agreeably to a preconcerted system of correspondence, artfully contrived by Pickwick with a view to his contemplated desertion, and which I am not in a condition to explain. And what does this allusion to the slow coach mean?” (Pickwick Papers, Chapter 31)

Little of this hilarious grotesque comedy is realized in the trial scene in this production. But the failure of nerve here is characteristic of this production. To sum up: Pickwick is boisterous, bustling, busy novel, packed with character and incident. Its construction is, on the face of it simple – a series of adventures strung out over a series of travels. A string of jewels strung out one spangled thread. But the energy and comicality of the travels sparkle in their own right and the major sequences are clusters of sparkling gems. This production, four one-hour episodes, was altogether on too small a scale to do justice to the hugeness of what the genius of Dickens brought forth. And its failure of nerve at the big sequences muffed its opportunities for striking acting and stereo radio production effects. This production achieved the impossible: made *Pickwick Papers* seem dull.

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