

DICKENS'S VICTORIAN LONDON

1839–1901

ALEX WERNER
AND
TONY WILLIAMS



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INTRODUCTION

‘What an amazing place London was to me when I saw it in the distance, and how I believed all the adventures of all my favourite heroes to be constantly enacting and re-enacting there . . . I made it out in my own mind to be fuller of wonders and wickedness than all the cities of the earth . . .’

David Copperfield’s initial reaction to London in Charles Dickens’s 1849 novel paints a picture of a wondrous, enticing metropolis promising a world of possibilities to the young boy. The magnet that is our capital city has always provided unlimited scope for the imagination, and few observers or writers took so much advantage of that as did Dickens.

For Copperfield, however, the city became a place of suffering, first at school at Salem House, and later when he is sent to work at Murdstone and Grinby’s wine business, washing and labelling bottles: a thinly-disguised account, though no one knew it at the time, of Dickens’s own childhood sufferings pasting labels at a blacking factory shortly after his arrival in London. The factory where Dickens worked was initially near the river at Hungerford Stairs (see page 11), just as Copperfield describes Murdstone and Grinby’s Blackfriars building, ‘A crazy old house with a wharf of its own, abutting on the water when the tide was in, and on the mud when the tide was out, and literally overrun with rats.’

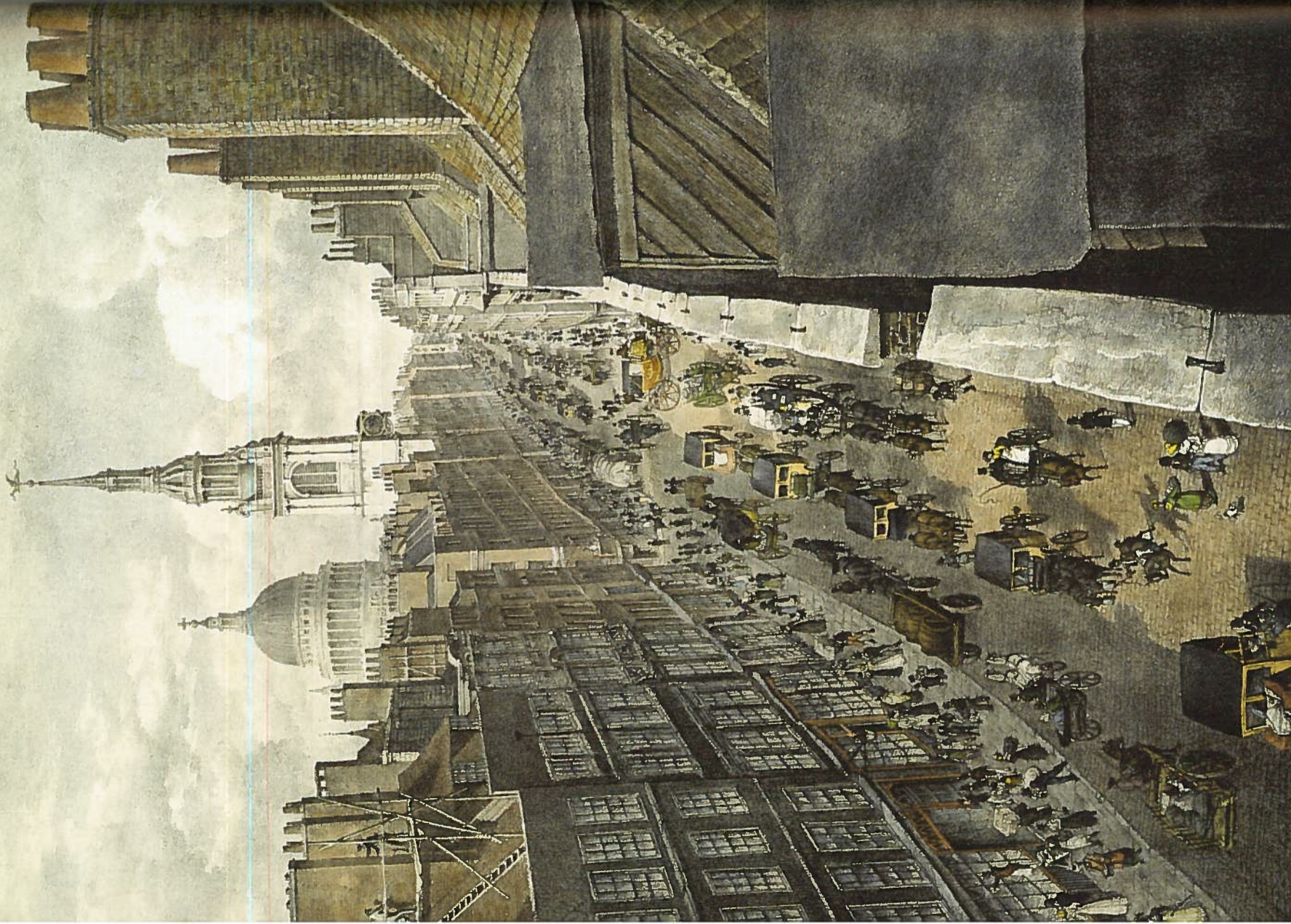
Dickens’s word-pictures of London did not simply describe a backdrop, a stage set, upon which the novelist’s artfully-drawn characters would play out their lives, loves, hates and fears. London itself is a central presence in the novels, a character in its own right. The early photographic pioneers – and when Dickens penned *David Copperfield* the new art form was very much in its infancy – may have found difficulties in capturing the landmarks and streetlife

of a grimy, mid-nineteenth century London. But the novelist’s detailed, pin-sharp recollections of places and characters, of sounds, smells and sights, help to bring to life a London that would otherwise be all but lost to us.

To speak of Dickens’s London as if it was one constant thing is, of course, misleading. During his lifetime – not a long one, for he died in 1870 at the relatively young age of fifty-eight – Dickens shared the experience of all those born in the early years of the nineteenth century; he lived through decades of sweeping change in the city’s size, fabric and social structure. Dickens was twenty-five years old when Victoria became Queen on 20 June 1837 and the age became known as Victorian. His childhood and early adult life were spent in Georgian and Regency London and it is this world upon which he draws for his novels. Dickens was alive to the fast-moving changes which were going on all around him, and when we read his works we witness the growth and development of the modern city, with all its associated problems. His descriptions evoke a lost world for us, in the same way that contemporary photographs provide us with a visual record of the city that he knew and which has changed so markedly since his time. It is that world which the photographs in this volume recreate for us, two hundred years since Dickens was born.

Like several of his best-known characters, Dickens was not a native Londoner, but one of the masses whose families moved to the growing metropolis for work. Charles John Huffam Dickens was born

Left: Cheapside, 1823, W Duryer and T M Baynes



General Coach Office CROSS KEYS INN, WOOD STREET, CHEAPSIDE.

Wm. HORNE, Proprietor.

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RIGGTON Light Coach, (the ROYAL CHARLES) through Hingham and Heathfield, every Morning at 8, except Sunday.

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OVER New Light Coach (The CHAMPION) in Nine Hours, every Morning at 7.

DINBURGH and NEW CASTLE Highways Coach, through Alnwick, Durham, Dunblington, and Northallerton, every Morning at 6.

AKENHAM Light Coach, through Cambridge, Newmarket, Brandon and Swaffham, Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday, and Sunday Evenings at 4 past 6.

AKENHAM Light Coach (The PARROT) through Newmarket, Brandon, and Swaffham, Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday Mornings at 6.

ASTINGS Royal Mail, through Tonbridge and Battle, every Evening at 4 past 7. Parcels forwarded by the Mail to Lye.

ASTINGS Post Coach, (the ACCOMMODATION) every Morning at 6.

IGHWORTH and FARMINGDON Light Coach, through Heading, Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday Mornings, at 4 past 6.

OLYHEAD, SHREWSBURY, BIRMINGHAM, and COVENTRY superior, travelling Tontine-Light Coach, (the SHARON) every Evening at 6, by which Passengers, Parcels and Goods are forwarded to Dublin daily by the Post Office Steam Packet.

OLYHEAD and CHESTER Royal Mail, through Hincley, Litchfield, and Stafford, every Evening at 4 past 7.

FEWICH and COLCHESTER new Light Coach, (the IMPROVED) every Morning at 4 past 8, and Evening at 6.

YNN, ELY, and DOWNHAM Light Day Coach, every Morning at 4 past 6, except Sunday.

YNN Post Coach, through Brandon and Stoke Ferry, Monday, Wednesday and Friday Evenings at 4 past 6.

LANGESTER Light Coach, (The TELEGRAPH), every Afternoon at 4 past 9, through Leicester, Derby, Ashbourne, Leek, and Macclesfield.

MARGATE SAFFRY Coach, every Morning at 7 during the Season.

ORWICH four-horse Superior Travelling Day Coach, (the TELEGRAPH) in 13 Hours, through Newmarket and Thetford, every Morning 4 before 7.

ORWICH Coach, (The EXPEDITION) through Newmarket and Thetford, every Afternoon at 6.

XFORD Light Coach, (The DEVIANS), through Maidenhead and Henly, every Morning at 7.

ORTSMOUTH Coach, Evenings at 7.

OUTHAMPTON Light Coach, (The TELEGRAPH), through Basingstoke and Winchester, every Morning at 7.—The Life of Light Packet set out on the arrival of this Coach.

FANTAGE New Light Coach (The DEVIANS), through Maidenhead, Reading, Pangbourne and Strately, Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday Mornings at 4 past 6.

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ARMOUTH Royal Mail and Telegraph Coach, through Colchester, Ipswich, Melton, Woodbridge, Saxmundham, Yoxford, Blythburgh, Wangford, Wrentham, Kes-singham, and Lowestoft, every Evening at 6.

ORK Highflyer Coach, every Morning at 9, through Newark, Doncaster, and Ferry-bridge, at which places it meets the various Branch Coaches to Leeds, Sheffield, Halifax, Huddersfield, Harrogate, Carlisle, and all the other principal Towns of the North.

The Public are respectfully requested to notice that this is the only Inn in London from whence Carriages set out to all the principal Towns and Fashionable Places of Resort in the Kingdom; the Proprietors of which will not be answerable for any Parcel or Package above Five Pounds Value, unless entered as such, and Insurance paid accordingly.

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on 7 February 1812, in Portsmouth, where his father John worked as a clerk in the Navy Pay Office at the Royal Dockyard. He came to London as a ten-year-old child in September 1822, when his father's job was transferred from the navy's office in Chatham, Kent, to its headquarters at Somerset House on the Strand. For the rest of Dickens's life, the city would be his muse.

Dickens describes his arrival from Chatham (which he renamed Dullborough) in one of his *The Uncommercial Traveller* essays which appeared in his weekly journal, *All the Year Round*, in June 1860.

'As I left Dullborough in the days when there were no railroads in the land, I left it in a stage-coach. Through all the years that have since passed, have I ever lost the smell of the damp straw in which I was packed – like game – and forwarded, carriage paid, to the Cross Keys, Wood-street, Cheapside, London? There was no other inside passenger, and I consumed my sandwiches in solitude and dreariness, and it rained hard all the way ...'

The coach journey from Kent to London would have taken about five hours and after crossing the Thames at London Bridge, ended at The Cross Keys in Wood Street, one of London's former coaching inns (demolished in 1865), just off Cheapside (see timetable, left).

The Dickens family had moved to the city in June, but young Charles had remained behind in order to complete his current term's education at William Giles's school in Chatham. Although John Dickens and his family, including the three-year-old Charles, had lived briefly in London in 1815, the period of their more significant residence in the metropolis dates from John Dickens's return to Somerset House. The family moved in to 16 Bayham Street in Camden Town. Properties like those on Bayham Street, some three miles north of the centre of the city, had been built about ten years before, when Camden was still a rural area. This changed during the 1820s and 1830s as the burgeoning city began to sprawl outwards to encroach on the surrounding farms and fields (see Cruikshank illustration, page 13). The new suburb was criss-crossed with the developing canal system

Coach timetable, c.1830

Building the Stationary Engine House, Camden Town, 28 April 1837, John Cooke Bourne

nineteenth-century London life which made his writing crackle. They also have proved an enduring legacy to later generations; Dickens lends sound, smell and colour to the monochrome photographs of the nineteenth-century streets.

Dickens began his writing career in 1833 at the age of twenty-one as a writer of sketches of London life, which later were collected and published as *Sketches by Boz*. In them he describes scenes, places, activities and characters with a wicked eye for humorous observation and a depth of detail. His words were further supported by the illustrations of George Cruikshank, who was already a well-established artist with a reputation for London scenes; Dickens's later works were enlivened by the work of his main illustrator, Hablot Knight Browne, known as Phiz.

Sketches by Boz was followed by *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-7), *Oliver Twist* (1837-9) and *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-9), all produced during the decade that saw the rise of Dickens's reputation as a highly

and further lacerated by the advent of the railways (see pages 154-177), which brought both industrial activity and poverty to the area. It is a setting to which Dickens returns in his fiction, setting the Cratchit home there in *A Christmas Carol* (1843) and describing railway development in *Dombey and Son* (1846-8) as it transformed the area, tearing through the close-packed streets,

'Houses were knocked down; streets broken through and stopped; deep pits and trenches dug in the ground; enormous heaps of earth and clay thrown up; buildings were undermined and shaking, propped by great beams of wood ... Everywhere were bridges that led nowhere; thoroughfares that were wholly impassable ... carcasses of ragged tenements, and fragments of unfinished walls and arches, and piles of scaffolding, and wildernesses of bricks, and giant forms of cranes, and tripods straddling above nothing ... In short, the yet unfinished and unopened Railroad was in progress ...'

It was just such detailed descriptions of early

popular writer of fiction. It was characteristic of him to have a number of projects in operation at the same time, beginning one work before he had completed the previous one. In 1836, for example, he was completing *The Pickwick Papers*, revising *Sketches* for another edition, writing a libretto for the London stage and all the while continuing his employment as a reporter for *The Morning Chronicle*.

This was also the time which saw his marriage, in 1836, to Catherine Hogarth, soon to be followed by the start of a family, and a move into their first family home at 48 Doughty Street in Bloomsbury in March 1837. Victoria became Queen in June of that year, and in July Euston Station opened as the terminus of the first inter-city railway line, from Birmingham to London. The combination of these three events brings together the new young Queen, the new mode of transport for the age to which she gives her name and the new young writer who was to chronicle that age and, especially, that of the development of its capital city. Walter Bagehot, the English economist and journalist, in a review of Dickens's work in 1858, wrote that Dickens's genius was

... especially suited to the delineation of city life. London is like a newspaper; everything is there, and everything is disconnected. There is every kind of person in some houses; but there is no more connection between the houses than between the neighbours in the lists of "births, marriages, and deaths". As we change from the broad leader to the squallid police-report, we pass a corner and we are in a changed world. This is advantageous to Mr Dickens's genius. His memory is full of instances of old buildings and curious people, and he does not care to piece them together. On the contrary, each scene, to his mind, is a separate alertness of observation that is observable in those who live by it. He describes London like a special correspondent for posterity.'

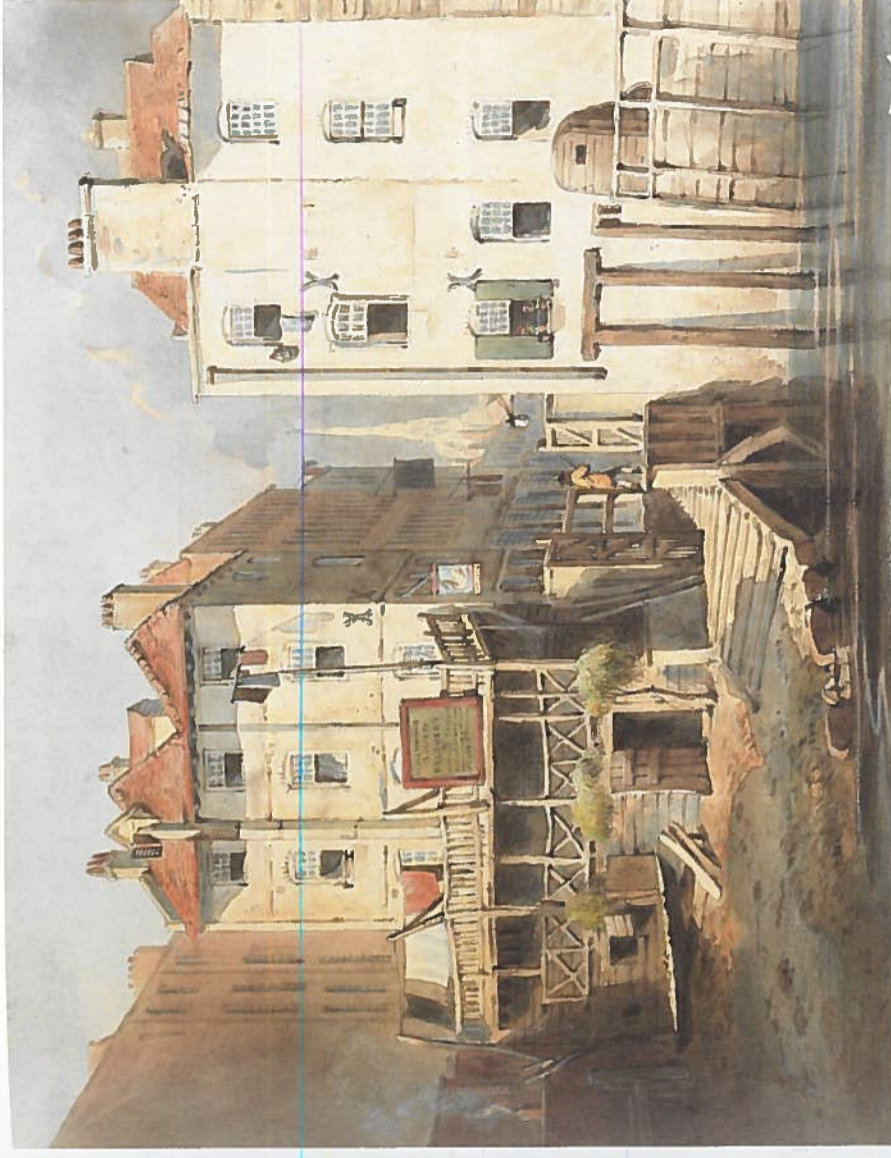
These three significant elements of nineteenth-century London were soon to be joined by a fourth: another means by which the age would be recorded for posterity. In a lecture to the Royal Society on 14 March 1839, Sir John Herschel first used the term 'photography' to describe the new process of fixing

images, often called sun-pictures, on sensitive paper. The earliest photographic processes, the daguerrotype devised by the Frenchman Louis Daguerre, and the calotype, developed by Englishman William Henry Fox Talbot, were both introduced in this year.

From the outset London was the main focus of photographic activity in England. In October that same year, M. de St Croix was the first person to mount an exhibition of the French daguerrotype process in the capital, at the Royal Adelaide Gallery of Practical Science in the Strand. His photograph of Whitehall taken from Trafalgar Square (see page 27) shows the equestrian statue of Charles I and, in the hazy distance, the Banqueting House. There are figures of boys near the statue and cabs lined up at the roadside. Dickens describes the scene in *David Copperfield* as 'King Charles on horseback, surrounded by a maze of hackney-coaches, and looking anything but regal in a drizzling rain and a dark-brown fog'. Fox Talbot's early work also included photographs of the Banqueting House in Whitehall and a view of Westminster from Hungerford Market (where Charing Cross Station now stands), dating from June 1841. The new Houses of Parliament were being built at this time but had not risen sufficiently to be visible. The view from Hungerford Market shows the River Thames with wharves and jetties which existed until the construction of the embankments in the 1860s. In this area was Warren's blacking business where Dickens had been put to work in 1824, shortly after his twelfth birthday, when debt overtook the family.

By the 1840s, several photographic portrait studios had been established in central London; a daguerrotype studio run by Mr Richard Beard in the Polytechnic Institution, Cavendish Square, was in an attic 'with an extensive skylight to secure every available ray of the sun', the *Morning Herald* reported in March 1841. Beard's studio was popular with those who could afford the new portraiture; takings were often as much as £50 per day. By the mid-century more than sixty studios had opened, with Regent Street the focus of this new art of capturing images (see pages 178–195).

The new medium brought with it a new vocabulary, which was soon being used to describe other art forms, including that of powerful



descriptive writing. Novelist George Eliot in 1856 praised Dickens's writing for using 'the delicate accuracy of a sun-picture'. Journalist H F Chorley wrote of Dickens giving one of his characters 'the immediate power of the daguerrotype' in the precision of her observation. George Brimley in *The Spectator* magazine in 1853 thought 'a daguerrotype of Fleet Street at noon-day would be the aptest symbol' for Dickens's powers of description. For William Forsyth in *Fraser's Magazine* in March 1857, Dickens 'daguerrotypes' individual characteristics and repeats them, just like reproducing an image from the same negative. R H Hutton, in *The Spectator* for June 18, 1870 acknowledged Dickens's 'power of observation so enormous that he could photograph almost everything he saw'.

Dickens's own response to photography was mixed. He generally found the process of having his likeness taken and exhibited to be unattractive, and

Hungerford Stairs, 1820, George Hanley

advised others not to succumb to invitations to be photographed. He wrote to his friend, philanthropist Angela Burdett-Coutts, the wealthiest woman in England, on 23 May 1841,

'If anybody should entreat you to go to the Polytechnic Institution and have a Photographic likeness done – don't be prevailed upon, on any terms. The Sun is a great fellow in his way, but portrait painting is not his line. I speak from experience, having suffered dreadfully.'

However he was fascinated by the techniques and processes involved and included in his journal *Household Words* for 19 March 1853 an article by Henry Morley and W H Wills called 'Photography' which gives a description of a visit to a photographer's studio to see the process in action and a history of the



Portrait of Charles Dickens, 1861, John and Charles Watkins

development of the form. It concludes 'Photography is a young art, but from its present aspect we can judge what power it will have in its maturity'. Both *Household Words* and its successor *All the Year Round* include a number of pieces on the subject.

Dickens sent copies of his own photograph to applicants, and he also accepted Angela Burdett-Coutts's offer to have his son Walter taught photography before leaving for India in 1852. In December of that year he wrote to Miss Coutts praising the work of the photographer John E Mayall, for whom he had just recently sat,

'I am happy to say that the little piece of business between the Sun and myself, came off with the greatest success . . . The Artist who operated is quite a Genius in that way, and has acquired a large stock of a very singular knowledge of all the little eccentricities of the light and the instrument. The

consequence of which, is, that his results are very different from those of other men. I am disposed to think the portrait, by far the best specimen of anything in that way, I have ever seen.'

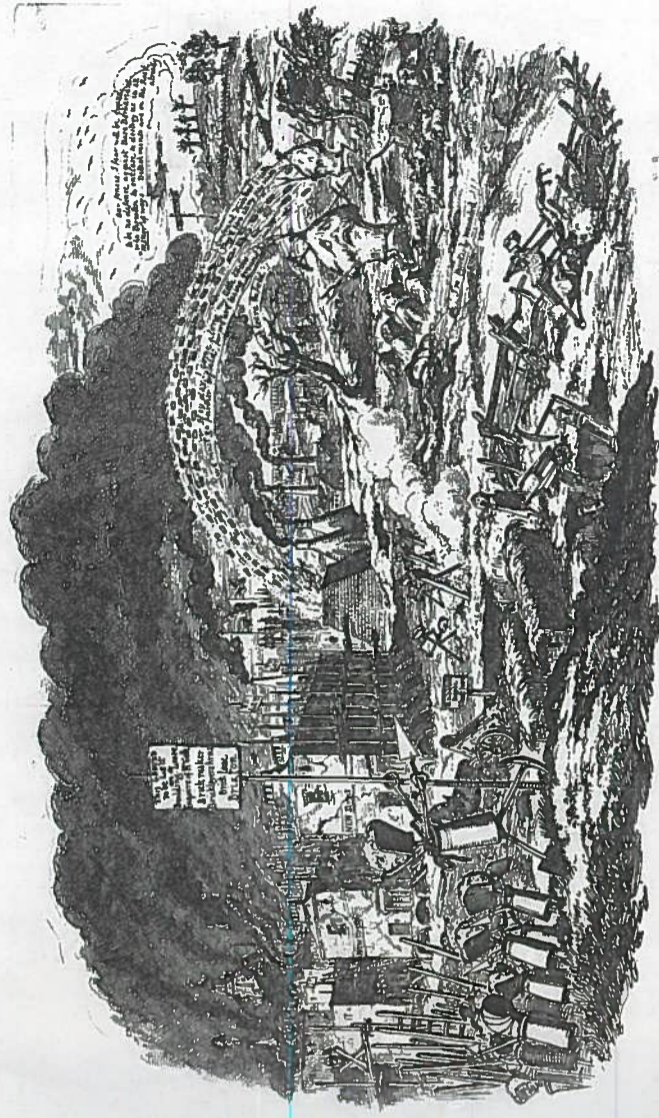
More significantly, Dickens describes his own method of work in photographic terms in a letter to W H Wills, his sub-editor on *Household Words*, of September 1858. The letter, written when he was undertaking his first provincial public reading tour, also refers positively to another photographer whose work he admired, John Watkins,

'I walked from Durham to Sunderland, and made a little fanciful photograph in my mind of Pit-Country, which will come well into H. W. one day. I couldn't help looking upon my mind as I was doing it, as a sort of capitally prepared and highly sensitive plate. And I said, without the least conceit (as Watkins might have said of a plate of his) "it really is a pleasure to work with you, you receive the impression so nicely".'

It is this combination, of capturing the realism of the moment as in a photograph and bringing to it qualities of imagination in depiction, which identify the essential qualities of Dickens's art. One of his other journalistic contributors, John Hollingshead, writing in his own memoir *My Lifetime* in 1895 looked back on Dickens in this way,

'His walks were always walks of observation, through parts of London that he wanted to study. His brain must have been like a photographic lens, and fully studded with "snap-shots". The streets and the people, the houses and the roads, the cabs, the buses and the traffic, the characters in the shops and on the footways, the whole kaleidoscope of Metropolitan existence . . .'

This capacity for imaginative observation provides the keynote for his depiction of London, as for all else in his output. In 'Meditations in Monmouth Street', from 1836, Dickens describes an area well-known as a street of second-hand clothes shops (see page 71), near Seven Dials, a very poor, criminalised area at the time. (Monmouth Street later became part of Shaftesbury Avenue.) The shops in Monmouth Street would at that



LONDON going out of Town, or - - - The March of Bricks & Mortar, 1829

time have had old clothes hanging up outside them. Dickens begins by observing some of the garments on offer and then allows his imagination to develop the life stories of previous owners of the clothing,

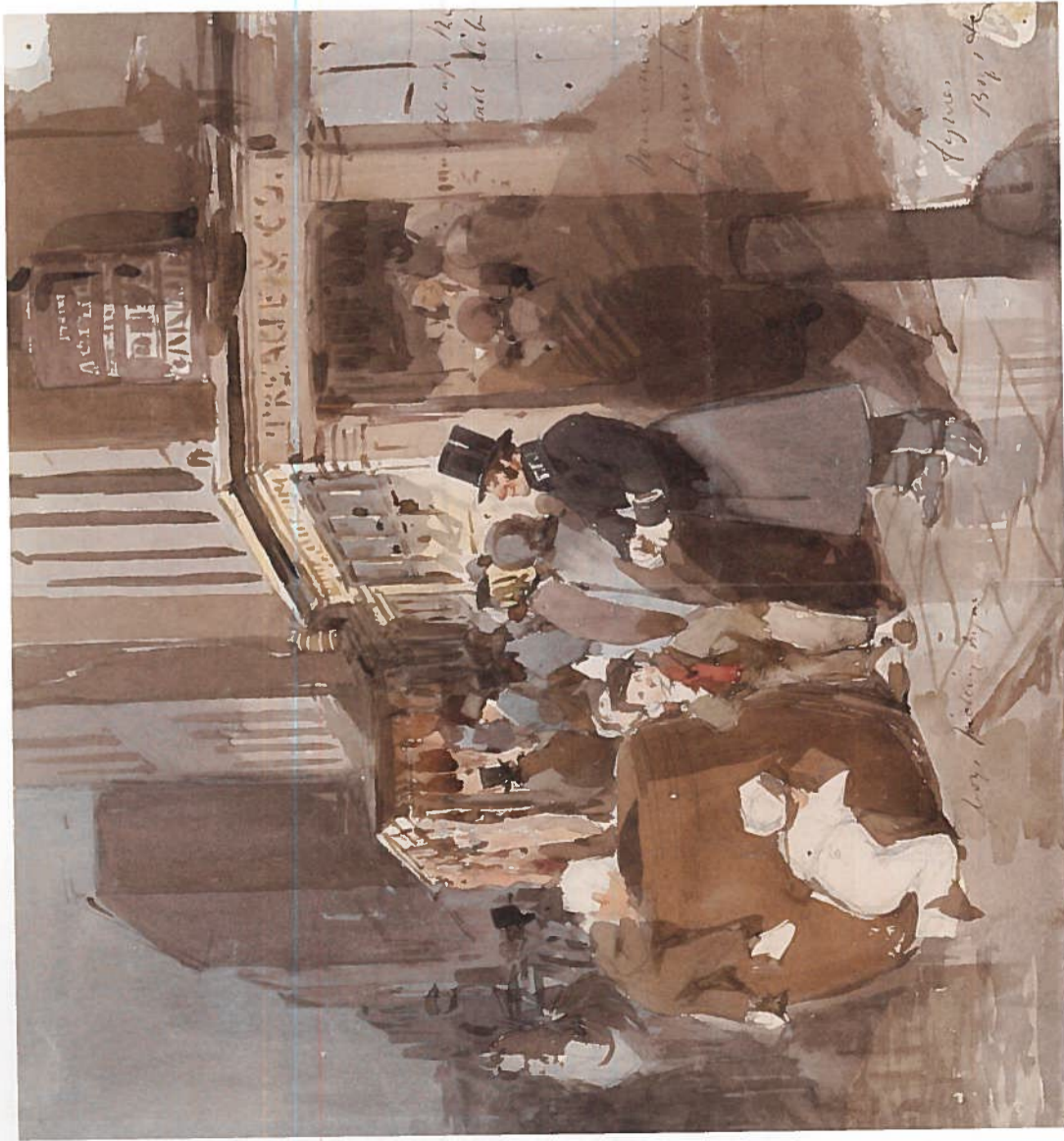
'The first was a patched and much-soiled skeleton suit . . . It had belonged to a town boy, we could see; there was a shortness about the legs and arms of the suit; and a bagging at the knees, peculiar to the rising youth of London streets. A small day-school he had been at, evidently. If it had been a regular boys' school they wouldn't have let him play on the floor so much, and rub his knees so white. He had an indulgent mother too, and plenty of halfpence, as the numerous smears of some sticky substance about the pockets, and just below the chin, which even the salesman's skill could not succeed in disguising, sufficiently betokened . . .'

Dickens always acknowledged how important London was to his creative processes, mentioning his need for the imagery that the city laid out for him on his numerous walks. On 30 August 1846, he wrote to his friend and later biographer, John Forster, about the

London Going Out of Town or the March of Bricks and Mortar, 1829, George Cruikshank

difficulties he was experiencing with his writing of *Dombey and Son*, in 'the absence of streets . . . A day in London sets me up again and starts me. But the toil and labour of writing, day after day, without that magic lantern, is IMMENSE!!' Again, it is notable that he uses a visual reference – the magic lantern, used to project images for entertainment – to define his relation with his great inspiration. His friend, the actor William Charles Macready, described Dickens as having 'a clutching eye' – referring to the writer's uncanny ability to see and record his vision in a photographic-like way.

The London which Dickens described, and which the photographs in this book capture, expanded quickly during the nineteenth century. It was a city of just under a million at the beginning of the century, increasing to 1.5 million by the 1820s when Dickens moved there as boy. By the mid-century, the year of the Great Exhibition of 1851, London's population had increased to 2.5 million and by the early 1870s was heading for 3.5 million.



Three boys and a policeman, c.1850, Hablot Knight Browne ('Phiz')

Despite all of the horrors of the high rates of infant mortality and the epidemic outbreaks of deadly cholera in the nineteenth century, the general demographic trend during the period was for an increase in births greater than that of deaths. But a very large part of the population increase was due to migration, not only from other parts of the British mainland, but also from Ireland, especially during the Hungry Forties when harvest failures brought famine to the island, and from Europe. The Dickens family themselves were one such group of migrants, and it is

interesting to note how often Dickens returns in his novels to the idea of his characters entering London for the first time, as we have seen in *David Copperfield*. It is also true for Pip in *Great Expectations*, whose hopes of London are disappointed by the reality. On arrival there from Kent, he finds the city 'rather ugly, crooked, narrow and dirty', and himself 'scared by the immensity of London'.

The scale of the city's growth led Dickens to ponder the social problems of mass migration – the loss of identity, of community in the ever-expanding and increasingly impersonal metropolis. In an essay called 'Thoughts About People', published in April 1835, he writes,

'It is strange with how little notice, good, bad, or indifferent, a man may live and die in London. He awakens no sympathy in the breast of any single person; his existence is a matter of interest to no one save himself; he cannot be said to be forgotten when he dies, for no one remembered him when he was alive. There is a numerous class of people in this great metropolis who seem not to possess a single friend, and whom nobody appears to care for. Urged by imperative necessity in the first instance, they have resorted to London in search of employment, and the means of subsistence... (and) have become lost... in the crowd and turmoil...'

Innocent people come to the city because it seems to offer them a means of survival; the city then destroys them. 'London,' Dickens wrote to politician and fellow author Edward Bulwer-Lytton in February 1851, 'is a vile place'. Dickens often described the city as hungry, a ravaging beast which was capable of devouring all who entered. In *Dombey and Son* he has a character observe,

'the stragglers who came wandering into London, by the great highway hard by, and who, footsore and weary, and gazing fearfully at the huge town before them, as if foreboding that their misery there would be but as a drop of water in the sea, or as a grain of sea-sand on the shore, went shrinking on... Day after day, such travellers crept past, but always... in one direction – always towards the town. Food for the hospitals, the churchyards, the prisons, the river, fever, madness, vice, and death – they passed on to the monster, roaring in the distance, and were lost.'

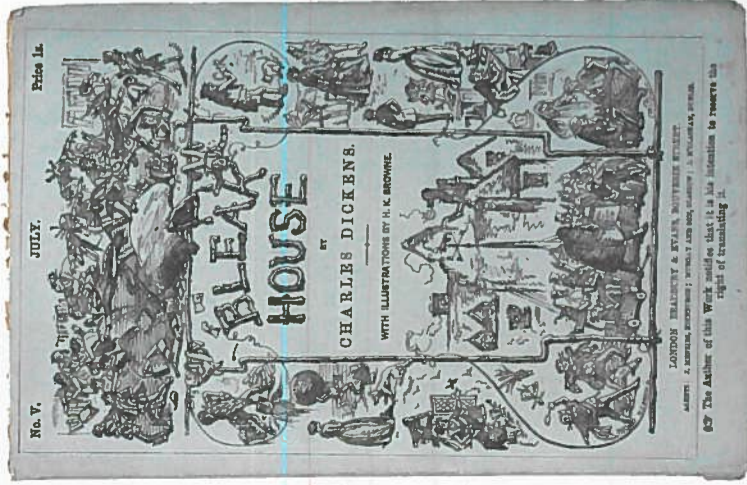
Again, it was this ability to depict the reality of London life which allowed Dickens's huge audiences to identify themselves, their families or their friends or neighbours in his writings, particularly in his detailed descriptions of the lives of the poor. There were few photographic images of London poor (see page 58) during the early days of the new medium: those original 'sun portraits' were the prerogative of the wealthy. Dickens's word pictures were the place of record for humbler lives, and struck a chord with

all who could afford to follow his stories serialised in the weekly journals; the same 'lower classes' who would, years later, file past his open grave in Westminster Abbey, leaving hand-tied offerings of humble wild flowers.

After population growth, the next significant change in the fabric of London between 1822 and 1870 was that caused by the coming of the railways. All of London's main railway termini were built between 1836 and 1874, with the exception of Blackfriars (1886) and Marylebone (1899). With them came an increase in crossing-points on the Thames. London's urban sprawl began to reach ever outwards, enveloping green fields and dairy pastures, covering over meandering streams and brooks and realigning the natural lie of the land. More rapid communication and transport came hand in hand with a quickening of the pace of life, spurred on by the regulation of time itself as clocks were universally regimented to record accurate departures and arrivals on the railways.

In his great mid-century novel *Bleak House*, Dickens satirises those members of society and of government who are determined not 'to receive any impress from the moving age', in other words, not to respond to social and other forces of change. That could never be said of him. In *Dombey and Son*, written in the middle of the railway boom, he responds powerfully to the changes going on in London's landscape as whole communities are displaced for the railway (see pages 154–177). But for long after the arrival of railways in London, the transport of an earlier time was still in evidence in the large number of coaching inns across the city (see page 74). When David Copperfield arrives in London from Suffolk, he arrives at one such inn 'in the Whitechapel district... called the Blue Bull, or the Blue Boar'. Photographs have recorded these evocations of a past age for us; Dickens records them through memorable characters such as stagecoach driver Tony Weller, father of Sam, the 'boots' at the White Hart in Borough High Street in *The Pickwick Papers* (the fifteenth-century inn now remembered only in the name White Hart Yard). Weller senior had strong views about the new means of transport,

'... And as to the ingein, – a nasty, wheezin', creakin', gaspin', puffin', bustin' monster, always



Cover of *Bleak House* part work, 1852

out o' breath, with a shiny green-and-gold back, like a unpleasant beetle in that 'ere gas magnifier, – as to the ingein as is always a pourin' out red-hot coals at night, and black smoke in the day, the sensiblest thing it does, in my opinion, is, ven there's somethin' in the way, and it sets up that 'ere frightful scream vich seems to say, "Now here's two hundred and forty passengers in the very greatest extremity o' danger, and here's their two hundred and forty screams in vum!"'

Of course, there was another side to the massive changes which London was undergoing: improved means of communication stimulated the economy. London was a great commercial city. Everywhere one looked there was advertising (see page 105). Indeed, Dickens's own novels were commercial commodities, published as monthly parts, each one containing two or three chapters, a couple of illustrations, and some wonderful advertising. He even employed his own image in advertising.

The economic boom brought improvements to many inner urban areas, with much of central London being rebuilt as the disruption of the rail incursions prompted long-needed reconstruction of the city's decrepit and outdated infrastructure. The London captured in early Victorian photographs (see pages 57–73) records an environment of narrow alleyways, courts and slum dwellings which were soon to disappear, a city of twists and turns providing an ideal bolt-hole for the criminal, which were bewildering to the visitor, as Dickens describes in *Martin Chuzzlewit*,

'You couldn't walk about Todgers's neighbourhood, as you could in any other neighbourhood. You groped your way for an hour through lanes and byways, and court-yards, and passages; and you never once emerged upon anything that might be reasonably called a street. A kind of resigned distraction came over the stranger as he trod those devious mazes, and, giving himself up for lost, went in and out and round about and quietly turned back again when he came to a dead wall or was stopped by an iron railing . . . Instances were known of people who, being asked to dine at Todgers's, had travelled round and round for a weary time, with its very chimney-pots in view; and finding it, at last, impossible of attainment, had gone home again with a gentle melancholy on their spirits, tranquil and uncomplaining. . . . Todgers's was in a labyrinth, whereof the mystery was known but to a chosen few.'

New roads were driven through, like New Oxford Street in 1847, linking Oxford Street and High Holborn, and removing one of the worst rookeries of vice and poverty around St Giles's High Street. However, as Dickens pointed out, many such reconstruction projects resulted simply in moving the inhabitants on to other, ultimately worse, pockets of degradation, as he noted in *Household Words* of June 14, 1851, in an article called 'On Duty with Inspector Field',

'Thus we make our New Oxford Streets and our other new streets, never heeding, never asking, where the wretches whom we clear out, crowd.

Saint Giles's church clock, striking eleven, hums



Charles Dickens, 1839, after William Finden's engraving

The Pickwickians handkerchief, c.1840

through our hand from the dilapidated door of a dark outhouse as we open it, and are stricken back by the pestilent breath that issues from within . . . let us look!

Ten, twenty, thirty – who can count them! Men, women, children, for the most part naked, heaped upon the floor like maggots in a cheese! Ho! In that dark corner yonder! Does anybody lie there? Me sir, Irish me, a widder, with six children. And yonder? Me sir, Irish me, with me wife and eight poor babes . . .'

From the lowest slum to the seat of power, London was rebuilt through the nineteenth century. At Whitehall, Parliament Square was redeveloped and the slow reconstruction of the Parliament buildings was underway. The new Palace of Westminster was designed by Charles Barry and Augustus Welby Pugin in Gothic Revival style to marry the new structure with the surviving medieval buildings from the 1834 fire that burnt down the old palace where Dickens had worked as a Parliamentary reporter. Other old haunts of his were also redeveloped, some to his evident pleasure.

Dickens was a keen supporter of the plan to create embankments along the Thames (see pages 278–282), thus reclaiming land and creating protection for property close to the previously open and shelving riverside, particularly at Hungerford Stairs, where he had worked in the rat-infested blacking factory and where the new Charing Cross Station was constructed. He told his friend, and biographer, John Forster,

'Until Old Hungerford Market was pulled down, until Old Hungerford Stairs were destroyed, and the very nature of the ground changed, I never had the courage to go back to the place where my servitude began. I never saw it. I could not endure to go near it.'

Dickens may not have frequented the area, but many of his characters did. Mr Micawber set off with his family for their new life in Australia from Hungerford Stairs which led up from the river to the Strand, and Dickens describes how the last days of the emigrants were spent 'in a little, dirty, tumbledown public-house, which in those days was close to the stairs, and whose protruding wooden rooms hung over the river'.



The Pool, 1859, James McNeill Whistler

The Thames itself occupies a dominant position in Dickens's imagination (see pages 112–137). It was a thoroughfare, a trade route, a dark and brooding presence and, for much of the century, also a source of disease, in reality little more than an open sewer, until the building of the embankments under the aegis of Joseph Bazalgette, chief engineer of the Metropolitan Board of Works. The embankments encased a new sewerage system, which removed the effluent from the river and took it downstream, away from the offended nostrils of MPs whose outrage at the Great Stink of the summer of 1858, when the stench from untreated human waste swilling about in the polluted river was so strong that Parliamentary business had to be suspended, had hastened sanitary reform. Though he did not live to see the construction of the embankments completed, Dickens wrote in a letter in January 1869 that he regarded it as 'the finest public work yet done'.

Dickens's last completed work, *Our Mutual Friend*, focuses on the lives of those who make a

living from what can be found in the river, including human remains, and in the novel Dickens graphically describes the riverside area,

'The wheels rolled on . . . down by the Monument and by the Tower, and by the Docks; down by Ratcliffe, and by Rotherhithe; down by where accumulated scum of humanity seemed to be washed from higher grounds, like so much moral sewage, and to be pausing until its own weight forced it over the bank and sunk it in the river. In and out among the vessels that seemed to have got ashore, and houses that seemed to have got afloat – among bow-splits staring into windows, and windows staring into ships – the wheels rolled on, until they stopped at a dark corner, river-washed and otherwise not washed at all, where the boy alighted and opened the door.'

Elsewhere in the same tale it is a 'dirty indecorous drab of a river' or it has 'an awful look... as if the spectres of suicides were holding (the reflected lights) to show where they went down'. Dickens also uses the riverside powerfully in *Oliver Twist*, where



he sets the concluding movement of the novel in Jacob's Island, Bermondsey, the scene of Fagin's arrest and Bill Sikes's death,

'In such a neighbourhood, beyond Dockhead in the Borough of Southwark, stands Jacob's Island, surrounded by a muddy ditch, six or eight feet deep and fifteen or twenty wide when the tide is in, once called Mill Pond, but known in the days of this story as Folly Ditch. It is a creek or inlet from the Thames, and can always be filled at high water by opening the sluices at the Lead Mills from which it took its old name. At such times, a stranger, looking from one of the wooden bridges thrown across it at Mill Lane, will see the inhabitants of the houses on either side lowering from their back doors and windows, buckets, pails, domestic utensils of all kinds, in which to haul the water up; and when his eye is turned from these operations to the houses themselves, his utmost astonishment will be excited by the scene before him. Crazy

A Bird's Eye View of Smithfield Market taken from the Bear and Ragged Staff, 1811, Thomas Rowlandson and Auguste Charles Pugin

wooden galleries common to the backs of half-a-dozen houses, with holes from which to look upon the slime beneath; windows, broken and patched, with poles thrust out, on which to dry the linen that is never there; rooms so small, so filthy, so confined, that the air would seem too tainted even for the dirt and squalor which they shelter; wooden chambers thrusting themselves out above the mud, and threatening to fall into it – as some have done; dirt-besmeared walls and decaying foundations; every repulsive lineament of poverty, every loathsome indication of filth, rot, and garbage; all these ornament the banks of Folly Ditch.'

Dickens was anxious to see reform in the conditions of life in London; he was particularly keen to lend his considerable influence to the question of Smithfield Market, which in the early part of the nineteenth

century was an open-air beast market. There were growing protests about the condition of the market, the animals and the surrounding streets, from the 1820s. Dickens describes it vividly in *Oliver Twist*,

'The ground was covered, nearly ankle-deep, with filth and mire; a thick steam, perpetually rising from the reeking bodies of the cattle, and mingling with the fog . . . hung heavily above. Countrymen, butchers, drovers, hawkers, boys, thieves, idlers, and vagabonds of every low grade, were mingled together in a mass; the whistling of drovers, the barking dogs, the bellowing and plunging of the oxen, the bleating of sheep, the grunting and squeaking of pigs, the cries of hawkers, the shouts, oaths, and quarrelling on all sides; the ringing of bells and roar of voices, that issued from every public-house; the crowding, pushing, driving, beating, whooping and yelling; the hideous and discordant din that resounded from every corner of the market; and the unwashed, unshaven, squalid, and dirty figures constantly running to and fro, and bursting in and out of the throng; rendered it a stunning and bewildering scene, which quite confounded the senses.'

He returns to the market when Pip arrives in London in *Great Expectations*, 'So, I came into Smithfield; and the shameful place, being all asmeared with fat and blood and foam, seemed to stick to me'. Animals were driven by drovers through the narrow streets surrounding Smithfield until they reached the market. In 1839 total sales for the year included some 180,000 cattle, over 250,000 pigs and almost 1,400,000 sheep. Conditions and cruelty were appalling. There were more animals than could be accommodated, so they were kept in off-droves, penned into nearby streets. By 1850 there was a proposal that the market should be closed and moved out of the City. The City Corporation's main policy-making body, the Court of Common Council, opposed this suggestion. Dickens wrote an article for *Household Words* in March 1851, called 'A Monument of French Folly', in which he drew unfavourable contrasts between the sanitary and efficient way the meat markets of Paris operated and the chaotic horror of Smithfield, with its entrenched self-interest on the part of the Corporation.

The reformers prevailed and in 1852 the Smithfield Market Removal Act was passed, providing for the beast market to be held in Copenhagen Fields in Islington. Named the Caledonian Meat Market, this opened in 1855. The present market building in Smithfield, London Central Markets, was built between 1866 and 1868 to Sir Horace Jones's design (see pages 96–97), so Dickens would have seen its construction.

Another significant change in London during Dickens's time was the establishment of the Metropolitan Police Force in 1829, seven years after his arrival in the capital. Later, in 1842, the Detective Police was established and Dickens's interest in the way the force operated, and especially his friendship with, and admiration of, Inspector Charles Frederick Field, led to his making nocturnal explorations of the city's dens of vice and crime, in company with Field and his officers. These visits appear as a series of articles called 'On Duty with Inspector Field', but Field is also thought to be the inspiration for Inspector Bucket in *Bleak House*.

It is well documented that many of Dickens's characters – like the writer himself – are fascinated, even haunted, by images of prison and execution. It is one aspect of the 'attraction of repulsion' which Dickens's biographer Forster identifies as a key element in his art. The Old Bailey, Dickens writes, was 'a kind of deadly inn-yard from which pale travellers set out continually, in carts and coaches, on a violent passage into the other world'. Dickens knew well, too, the Compter debtor's prison on the corner of Giltspur Street in Smithfield, and the Fleet prison, on the eastern bank of the Fleet River on what is now Farringdon Street, where Mr Pickwick is sent when he refuses to pay the damages after the trial for breach of promise. The Middlesex House of Correction, on the site of the present Mount Pleasant Post Office complex, is just a few minutes' walk away from Dickens's home in Doughty Street, and he visited it several times to observe the operation of the reforms introduced by its governor George Laval Chesterton. Dickens's closest links, however, were with the Marshalsea, the debtors' prison which moved into a new building on Borough High Street, Southwark in 1811, and which was where his father was sent for some months when young Charles was twelve years old.

Dickens visited his family in Marshalsea on Sundays, when not working at the blacking factory, and he later faithfully recorded the prison scenes in *Little Dorrit*,

'Thirty years ago there stood, a few doors short of the church of Saint George, in the borough of Southwark, on the left-hand side of the way going southward, the Marshalsea Prison. It had stood there many years before, and it remained there some years afterwards; but it is gone now, and the world is none the worse without it.'

In the preface he wrote for the novel in 1857 he further emphasised the location,

'But, whosoever goes into Marshalsea Place, turning out of Angel Court, leading to Bermondsey, will find his feet on the very paving-stones of the extinct Marshalsea jail; will see its narrow yard to the right and to the left, very little altered if at all, except that the walls were lowered when the place got free; will look upon rooms in which the debtors lived; and will stand among the crowding ghosts of many miserable years.'

It is, however, Newgate (see pages 175 and 176) which exerts exceptional power over Dickens's imagination. Executions took place in public until 1868 (Dickens was vocal in campaigning for their taking place inside prison) were carried out in Newgate Street, where animals bought at Smithfield would come for slaughter, usually at eight in the morning, a fact observed by Nancy to Bill Sikes as they hear the bells of the church of St Sepulchre, at the top of the Old Bailey. It was past this church that condemned felons would be taken by cart to Tyburn before executions moved here. In *Barnaby Rudge*, Dickens describes the burning of the old Newgate Gaol during the Gordon Riots of 1780, creating a glow so great that 'the church clock of St Sepulchre's, so often pointing to the hour of death, was legible as in broad day'. The rebuilt prison lasted from 1783 to demolition in 1902.

The other great City of London landmark which Dickens uses is that of St Paul's Cathedral (see pages 28 and 29). In *Great Expectations* Pip observes 'the Criminal broadsheet recounting the trial and execution of Courvoisier, 1840



EXECUTION

Who was Executed on Monday July the 6th, 1840, for the Wilful Murder of Lord William Russell, on Wednesday, May 6th, at his Residence, 14, Norfolk-Street, Park-lane, London.

Since the period of his condemnation the convict Courvoisier, maintained the same apparent indissipation to the dreadful death he was about to undergo as he had previous to his trial, and appeared to have had an amusement in inventing various and false versions of his confessions; the one day declaring that Lord Russell caught him in the act of plundering, the next that his Lordship never left his bed, and the third that he had buried some money in the cell, at Bow-street, so that at length nothing could be relied upon in any of his statements, except the fact of his having committed the murder; his confessions being so various, and proved to contain so many falsehoods. This hardship continued until the visit of his Uncle, with whom he had two interviews, in the presence of the Chaplain of Newgate.

His Uncle is a person of great respectability, and has been for eighteen years in the service of Sir George Beaumont; these interviews there is every reason to believe, were productive of the most beneficial results, as the convict appeared awakened to his awful situation and explained many of the inconsistencies in his confession.

On Sunday the Rev Mr. Carver, the Ordinary of Newgate, preached the condemned Sermon, in the Chapel of Newgate, to the prisoner, and a very crowded auditory; taking his text from Job, chap. xxiv. ver. 21, 22. The Rev. Gentleman entered in the most full manner into the enormity of the prisoner's crime, and motives of malice and plunder had shed the blood, not only of an aged and unoffending nobleman but that nobleman's kind and indulgent master, who entered his life in his hands, yet, whom he murdered while in the calm repose of sleep. After warning the other prisoners from the commission of so heinous a crime and detailing by the prisoner's example the certainty of guilt, however cunningly devised and specially punished by law, he endeavoured to awaken in the culprit that although here death was certain, yet, how ever enormous his guilt, by throwing himself by due repentance upon the mercies of the Redeemer, he might still inherit everlasting life in the world to come. The prisoner appeared to feel deeply throughout, and there was scarcely a dry eye among the crowded congregation. During the last night for the unhappy malefactor he slept for about three hours, and on awaking, anxiously enquired what time it was.

THE OLD BAILEY

From an early hour this morning the workmen were busily engaged in making the necessary preparations for the awful ceremony which was about to take place; horses were placed at the end of Newgate Street, and in all the other thoroughfares to prevent accidents from the denseness of the crowd, and at 11 o'clock the engines were started and proceeded to the great place and street in order to disperse the multitude, who were to assemble and the whole of the area was speedily filled by the dense multitude; every avenue, window and house-stop, which could command a view of the place of execution, being crowded with spectators.

THE GAOL

At ten minutes past 7 o'clock, the Sheriff and other authorities arrived at the Gaol and having proceeded to the prison room, the culprit was summoned from his cell and conveyed to the Chapel, where he received the Sacrament, having declared his deep penitence for his crime; he was then conducted to the prison-room, where the awful preparations for death, by pinning his arms, placing the fatal cap on his head, &c., commenced.

The prisoner appeared overcome by his situation and wept bitterly. The Prison Bell now began to toll, and the preparations being complete, the last procession moved towards the drop, the Chaplain reading the Funeral Service. Upon the prisoner's arriving on the drop an auditory audience ran throughout the crowd. The unhappy man was launched into eternity, and in a few minutes ceased to exist.

John Bonner, Printer, 31, Back Street, Bristol.

great black dome of St Paul's bulging at me from behind a grim stone building which a bystander said was Newgate prison'. Jo, the crossing-sweeper in *Bleak House* who 'don't know nothink', and dies succumbing to pneumonia, the disease so rife in nineteenth-century London, observes St Paul's from his position on Blackfriars Bridge. Dickens describes Jo

'munching and gnawing, looking up at the great cross on the summit of St Paul's Cathedral, glittering above a red and violet tinted cloud of smoke. From the boy's face one might suppose that sacred emblem to be, in his eyes, the crowning confusion of the great confused city, so golden, so high up, so far out of his reach.'

The symbolism to which Dickens puts St Paul's is clear: unattainable peace and comfort, a place surrounded by suffering and cruelty.

The link between Dickens and London continued to his death on 9 June 1870. His own wishes were that he might be buried quietly in 'the small graveyard under Rochester Castle wall'. Rochester, in the Kentish countryside, where he had spent happy years in his boyhood, and to which he had returned, a highly successful man, and which he described as being 'the birthplace of (his) fancy', or his imagination: that imagination which grew and matured in London. The outpouring of national and international grief at his death was enormous, and spanned the entire social spectrum. *The Times* newspaper took the lead in campaigning for national public recognition of his life and achievements. There clearly had to be some degree of reconciliation between his wishes and the very understandable need to offer the opportunity for public homage and grieving.

On Tuesday 14 June, with the knowledge only of those who were to take part, a small group of family and friends arrived at the Dean's Yard entrance to Westminster Abbey in three mourning coaches, and Dickens's burial took place in the otherwise empty abbey church. The grave was left open for the rest of the day. Mourners came to visit later that day, then all of the following day, the Wednesday, and the grave was still kept open on Thursday, the numbers were so great. When it was closed the mourners still came. The stone bears simply his name and the dates of his

down in 1806, rebuilt and burnt down again in 1856, to be rebuilt two years later. Dickens visited the ruins of the recently-destroyed theatre four days after the fire, when he returned from Paris. It was at Covent Garden Theatre that Dickens arranged to be auditioned for a stage career in 1832 but was prevented by a heavy cold from attending. The area had connections, too, that would have remained with Dickens long into his later life because, whilst working at Warren's blacking factory in 1824, the business transferred to premises in Chandos Street, Covent Garden, and passers-by would stop to observe, through the ground-floor windows, the skilful workmanship of the boys labelling, wrapping and tying up the pots of shoe-blacking.

Two of the Covent Garden porters in John Thomson's photograph are looking directly towards the camera, directly at us, the observers. The Victorians are the first of our ancestors with whom we can make that degree of contact through images that capture a moment in time, much as Charles Dickens captures their world in words. The canvas of the metropolis reinforces the most powerful

personal and social concerns of this great writer, who both celebrates the city and helps create our vision of the modern metropolis. For Dickens did reflect the actuality of the city. He saw, and wrote about it, as a place of astonishing, overwhelming contrasts, extreme wealth alongside degrading, bitter poverty. He shows us the enticing city which becomes a trap and labyrinth: a very modern concept, brought sharply into focus through the fog-bound world of *Bleak House*. In his last complete novel, *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens paints a word-picture of a modern, almost surreal, cityscape of mounds of rubbish with a dark, destructive river snaking its way through it.

Photographers began to capture images of the city from 1839. By the time that Dickens died in 1870, it was perhaps less imperative for writers to capture the city in prose as Dickens had; his 'photographic' recollections of city life were there in black and white for all to view. The city remained much as he would recognise it to the end of the Victorian age in 1901, the era which is illustrated by the photographs included in this volume. They show Victorian London, indissolubly linked with its greatest writer.



Charles Dickens's grave in Poet's Corner, Westminster Abbey, c.1870