

# Charles Dickens

(1812 – 1870)

Charles Dickens is one of the most important English writers. He wrote a lot of novels, but he also wrote short stories, essays, newspaper articles and travel books. A lot of people say he was the greatest writer of the Victorian Age.

## Early Life

Charles John Huffam Dickens was born in Landport, on the south coast of England, on February 7th 1812. He was the second of eight children. His father, John Dickens, was a secretary. Charles' mother's name was Elizabeth. John Dickens wasn't very good with money and Charles' family weren't very rich. But they weren't poor either.

When Charles was four years old, the family moved to Chatham in Kent. Charles was very happy there. His father paid for him to go to a private school. He liked school very much. In 1822, his father had some problems with money, so the family moved to London. They lived in Camden Town, a poor area of London, and Charles stopped going to school.

## Money Problems

In Victorian times, people often went to prison if they had money problems. Sometimes everyone in the family went to prison too. The prisons were called *debtors' prisons*, because a *debtor* is someone who can't pay their bills. In 1824, John Dickens and his family went to

prison for debt. Charles didn't go to prison with them. He started work in a factory to try and help his family. His life was very hard. When the family came out of prison, Charles went back to school. He studied until he was fifteen years old, then he started work.

## Work and Family

Charles' first job was in a lawyer's office. Then he worked for a newspaper and as a reporter for parliament. He started writing short stories at the same time. In 1833, a magazine called the *Monthly Magazine* published Charles' first short story, *A Dinner at Poplar Walk*. In 1836, he published his first book *Sketches by Boz*. He used the name Boz as a nickname for many years. In the same year, he married Catherine Hogarth. She was the daughter of a newspaper editor. Together, they had ten children.

## What did Dickens Write about?

Charles never forgot his early days. Especially the time when he was poor. He spent a lot of his later years fighting for rights for the poor. He wrote a lot of articles for newspapers about the problems poor people had. In his books, he also wrote a lot about the problems of poor people. His book, *Oliver Twist*, was quite shocking for the Victorian people. One of his Christmas stories, *A Christmas Carol*, also looks at the problems of the poor. Many of the characters in Charles' stories are like people that he met in his life. *David Copperfield* is almost an autobiography, that is, the story of Charles' own life. *Great Expectations* was one of Charles Dickens' later books. He published it in 1861. It was very popular indeed.

## Final Days

In June 1870, Charles became very ill. He died on June 9th that year. He is buried in Poets' Corner - a part of Westminster Abbey, London. This is a great honour for a writer.



Charles Dickens with his two daughters.

### Task

Complete the form with the information about the author.

- Full Name:
- Date of birth:
- Place of birth:
- Parents' Names:
- Wife's Name:
- Children:
- Four Important Works:
- Date of death:

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# Rich and Poor



In Dickens' writing, we see a lot of differences between the rich and the poor. Dickens himself was poor for a time, when he was young.

*Blind Man's Buff* by James Burfield

## Education

In *Great Expectations*, Pip learns to read at a private evening school. This was usual for poorer people at the time. Most education was private until late in the century, when elementary education became free for everyone. Before that, Sunday Schools were very important. Boys and girls could learn on Sundays because they didn't have to work. There weren't schools everywhere in Victorian times, it depended where you lived – there were some charity schools for poor people in some towns, but not in others. Rich people had more choice, but their education wasn't always very good.

## Travel

Travelling was difficult when Dickens was writing. People still mainly travelled by 'coach'. Like in *Great Expectations*, this meant travelling by road in a private car pulled by horses. There was a good system of coach travel, but it was quite expensive. Poor people didn't usually travel at all, they just walked to work. Very rich people had their own coaches. In later Victorian times, the train took the place of the coach. By the 1850s it was quite normal to travel from one town to another by train. It also got less expensive later in the century and both the rich and the poor used the train. It was still quite difficult to travel to other countries. Ships were slow, and dangerous, until later in the century.



*A Family Gathering* by Joseph Clark

## Child Labour

It was completely normal for children from poor families to work. People even thought that work was good for children. During the industrial revolution, there were many new factories and industries. They needed workers. Child workers were very cheap and there were lots of them: families often had a lot of children. Children often started work when they were four or five years old. They worked for many hours a week. Dickens talks about children who work in factories and on farms. Some politicians tried to change this. They tried to make a law about the number of hours that children could work, but factory managers were against it. Later in the century, things began to change.

## Health

There were many health problems at the time Dickens was writing. Two of the biggest problems were typhoid and cholera. They were both caused by drinking dirty water or eating dirty food. Typhoid and cholera were common in the new industrial cities, where most people were poor. It's a mistake to think that rich people didn't have any problems: Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's husband, died of typhoid. Doctors began to understand that it was important to be clean. Many houses didn't have bathrooms, so Victorians built a lot of 'public baths'. These were swimming pools with areas where people could wash. Rich Victorians went to private spas or baths, the poor went to public baths.

## Food and Drink

There were big differences between the rich and the poor with food and drink. Rich Victorians loved food. Large dinner parties were very normal and large houses had chefs, cooks and kitchen servants. At the beginning of this time, food was very complicated, with many courses. Victorians loved exotic food from different places in the British Empire. Poor people had a very bad diet. In the cities, there was very little fruit and very few vegetables. People with better pay could sometimes buy meat, usually sausages and bacon. Many people ate mainly potatoes, as bread was very expensive. This was a problem in the 1840s in Ireland: a million people died because there was no food, not even potatoes.

### Task

#### Internet research – Victorian Inventions

What did the Victorians invent? Do the research and then write a paragraph about their most important inventions.



# Victorian Justice

The Victorian age was the time when Queen Victoria was the Queen of England: from 1837 – 1901. Dickens was writing for much of this time. The justice system was very hard. Young children went to prison, the death penalty still existed and people went to a type of prison because they were poor.

## Transportation

One normal penalty in early Victorian times was transportation to a different country. In the 1830s, it was common to send people to Australia and Tasmania. Before then, convicts were often sent to America. This changed after the American Declaration of Independence. More than 160,000 people were transported to Australia in about eighty years. They were men, women and children, but the majority were men. Of course, the journey to Australia was very long and very hard. Prison ships were always old and in bad condition. Sometimes people stayed on the ships for more than a year. In the 1850s, transportation to Australia finally stopped.



Children at a run-down workhouse, 1895.

## The Death Penalty

In the early Victorian period, many people were executed (killed by the state). Sometimes, they were executed for theft or other less serious crimes. Until 1868, executions were public. People sometimes went to watch, as a type of entertainment. The usual method of execution was hanging – with a rope around the neck. In late Victorian times, there were changes in the system. People were executed for murder, not for crimes like theft. The death penalty continued in England until very late – 1964.

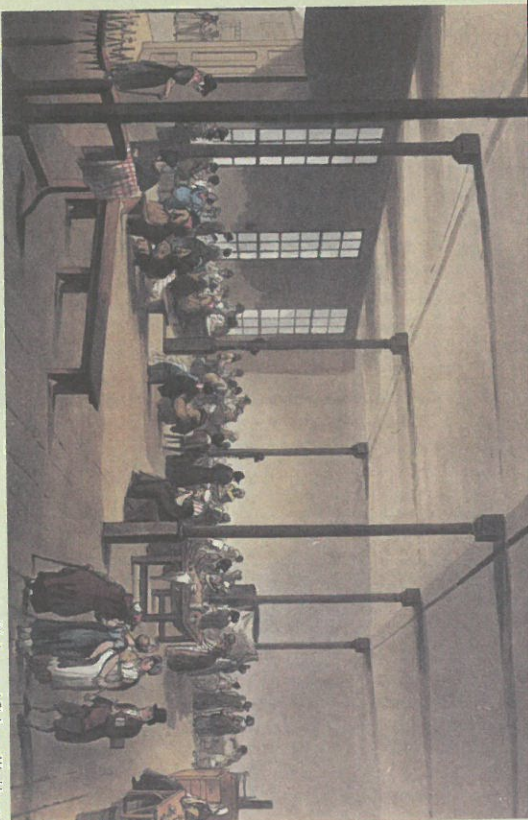
## Prisons

In Victorian times, prisons were terrible. Charles Dickens often wrote about the conditions at Newgate Prison. This was the largest prison in London. There, people had to cook, wash, live and sleep in a very small area. There were different sections in the prison: a section for men, a section for debtors (people who didn't have enough money to pay their bills) and a section for women and children. Later in the century, the government built many new prisons. Most of them are still used as prisons today.

## Workhouses

The Victorians thought it was important for people to work. If people had no work and no money, they had to live (and work) in 'workhouses'. Workhouses were very similar to prisons. Inside these buildings, families were

separated. Men and boys lived in one area and women and girls lived in another. They all wore uniforms. They worked for ten hours a day, but there was no work on Sundays. Small children went to school inside the workhouse.



Workroom at St James' Workhouse.

## Prison Reformers

The fight to change prisons (prison reform) began before Victorian times, with John Howard. He visited prisons in Britain and Europe and wrote about his experiences. He went to Parliament to talk about prison conditions. The writings of Charles Dickens made people think about prison conditions. People began to ask if there were better systems. Elizabeth Fry was one of Britain's most famous prison reformers. When she saw the conditions in the women and children's section of Newgate Prison, she began to invite important people to visit the prison. A lot of the people were very shocked. Elizabeth Fry also wrote a book about prison conditions.



Elizabeth Fry

### Task

Do some Internet research about the life of Elizabeth Fry or John Howard. Write a paragraph about your subject.



# Dickens Today

Charles Dickens was an important writer when he was alive, but he's still important today. His books are still very popular and there are many film and television adaptations of his work.

## The Dickens Effect

Charles Dickens was a very popular writer when he was alive. He wasn't only popular in Britain. People read his books all over the world. Dickens went to America twice, to give readings. People all over the world began to talk about some of the problems Dickens wrote about. For example, Dickens wrote about terrible prison conditions in *The Pickwick Papers*. After that, more people began to be interested in prison reform. *A Christmas Carol* was one of the best-selling Victorian novels. Some people think that this story made Christmas a more important holiday than it was before. When Dickens wrote about child criminals in *Oliver Twist*, many people were shocked. As a result, a lot of work was done in one of London's poorest areas. Many other writers read his work and liked it. Two of his fans were Thomas Hardy and Leo Tolstoy.



## Great Expectations

Charles Dickens' classic story  
from Orford, Charles Kemping, James Woodall  
An orphan is unexpectedly granted a life of gentility... with great expectations.  
MASSIEPOT THEATRE  
A Screen on Public Television

## Adaptations

There are almost 200 film and television adaptations of Dickens' work. *A Christmas Carol* has the most adaptations, including one version with Bugs Bunny and another with the Muppets. There are also many film versions of *Great Expectations*. A popular musical, *Oliver!*, comes from the novel *Oliver Twist*. The Royal Shakespeare Company produced a stage version of *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*.

## The English Language

In London, there are four avenues, two roads, one street and a square named after Charles Dickens. Charles Dickens had an effect on the English language too. Ebenezer Scrooge is the main character in *A Christmas Carol* and he doesn't like spending money. We use the word 'scrooge' today to mean the same thing – a person that doesn't like spending money. Some people say that Dickens made the expression 'Merry Christmas' popular, because of the same book. We use the word 'Dickensian' in two ways, one positive and one negative. A Dickensian Christmas is a happy, traditional one. But, Dickensian factory conditions, for example, mean very bad factory conditions.



## Museums and Festivals

There are Dickens museums in Portsmouth, London and Broadstairs. They are in houses with a connection to Dickens. They all have collections of his books and letters. Some towns have a Dickensian Christmas celebration, when people dress up in early nineteenth century clothes and eat traditional food. Some places also have Dickensian Christmas Fairs, there are some famous ones in the UK, the USA and many other countries. A lot of places in the world have Dickensian literary festivals, too. There are readings from Dickens' works and discussions about them. If you prefer a more modern style of Dickens celebration, you could always visit Dickens' World in Chatham. It's a theme park with rides, a cinema and restaurants.



Dickens' library.

### Task

Are there any special festivals in your country? Write a paragraph about one. Answer these questions in your paragraph.

- When is it?
- Why do people celebrate it?
- What do people do?
- Do you eat any special food at this time?

