A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CHARLES DICKENS

To Begin With

Charles John Huffam Dickens was born at 13 Mile End Terrace, Portsmouth (now the Dickens Birthplace Museum) on Friday, 7th February, 1812. His father, John, was a clerk in the naval pay office, and Charles’s early years were spent moving whenever and wherever his father’s postings dictated. In January 1815, John was transferred to London, and the young Dickens first encountered the city with which his later life and fiction would become so indelibly linked.

Two years later, the family moved to Chatham in Kent where Charles enjoyed the happiest years of his childhood. His mother taught him the rudiments of reading, and he received an education courtesy of a schoolmaster named William Giles. Charles also enjoyed long walks through the Kent countryside with his father.

Life in London

Dickens’s childhood idyll ended abruptly in 1822 when John Dickens was transferred back to London and his income reduced severely. John, a man who was never able to live within his means, plunged heavily into debt. His wife, Elizabeth, attempted to alleviate the family’s financial predicament by opening a school for young ladies, but that failed and, in 1824, John Dickens was arrested for debt, and incarcerated in the Marshalsea Prison. Elizabeth and the younger children went with him. However, the sensitive Charles was sent to begin work at Warren’s Blacking Factory.

The young boy, who had truly believed he was destined to be a gentleman, now found himself sticking labels onto pots of boot blacking. His misery was exacerbated by the fact that his beloved elder sister, Fanny, had been enrolled at the Royal College of Music. Charles longed to resume his education, but left to his own devices, he roamed the streets of the capital, where he mixed with the low life of early 19th-century London, taking in everything he saw.

John Dickens was released from prison after 14 weeks, as his mother-in-law had died and left him a little money. But he was still not out of debt. However, in 1825, he took Charles away from the blacking factory, and despite vociferous objections from Elizabeth, who wanted their son to continue bringing in a useful weekly wage, John sent him to school at Wellington House Academy. Charles never forgave his mother.
Dickens stayed at the Academy for about two years, before his father's debts forced him back into employment, this time for Ellis and Blackmore, a firm of solicitors in London's Gray's Inn. Whilst there, he learned shorthand, and after 18 months felt confident enough to establish himself as a shorthand writer at Doctors’ Commons, near St Paul’s Cathedral in the City. By 1830 he had met and fallen madly in love with a banker’s daughter named Maria Beadnell. A year later he began work as a reporter for his uncle’s newspaper The Mirror of Parliament. In 1832, he applied for, and was granted, an audition at the Covent Garden Theatre, but on the day in question illness prevented him from attending. Dickens's love of the theatre and desire to perform remained with him for the rest of his life and resulted in his amateur theatricals and later his public reading tours.

Dickens’s career as writer takes off
By May 1833, Maria’s ardour had cooled considerably and their relationship ended. In an attempt to overcome his broken heart Dickens flung himself into his writing, and at the end of the year his first story A Dinner at Poplar Walk was published. By 1834 he was working for the Morning Chronicle newspaper and became friends with its music critic, George Hogarth. In 1835 Hogarth became editor of the Evening Chronicle, and he invited Dickens to contribute sketches to the paper. These would eventually appear in print as Sketches by ’Boz’. Dickens had also fallen in love with Hogarth’s daughter, Catherine, and on 2nd April, 1836 the two were married at St Luke’s Church, Chelsea. Following a honeymoon in Kent, they settled into chambers in Furnival’s Inn, Holborn. By this time the first instalment of Pickwick Papers had appeared, despite the suicide of its originator and illustrator Robert Seymour. Hablot Browne, who for the next 20 years remained Dickens’s chief illustrator, replaced Seymour, and when Dickens introduced the character of Sam Weller, Pickwick Papers became a publishing phenomenon. In December 1836, Dickens met John Forster, who at the time was the literary and drama editor of The Examiner. The two became firm friends, and Forster effectively became Dickens’s agent for the rest of his life and, following the author’s death, his primary biographer.

The Death That Devastated Dickens
In January 1837, Charles and Catherine’s first child, also named Charles, was born, and by April the family had moved to a house in Doughty Street more suited to both Dickens’s growing family and reputation. Catherine’s younger sister, Mary, moved in with them, and Dickens developed an intense platonic relationship with her. Then, on 6th May, 1837, Mary died suddenly at their house, leaving Dickens utterly devastated by the loss.

His Success Increases
Over the next few years while living at Doughty Street, Dickens cemented his reputation with Oliver Twist (1837–38), Nicholas Nickleby (1838–39), and began work on Barnaby Rudge (1841). His family also increased with two daughters, Mary and Kate, born in 1838 and 1839. By 1839 Dickens’s growing fame enabled them to move to a grander house at 1 Devonshire Terrace, Marylebone. Their fourth child, Walter, was born in 1841, and in January 1842, Charles and Catherine set off on a six-month tour of America. Such was his fame now that Dickens found himself mobbed on several occasions. Back in London he wrote Martin Chuzzlewit (1843–44) and, a year later, what is perhaps one of his best known works, A Christmas Carol (1843).
A Mid-Life Crisis
By 1855, with his family swollen to ten children, one of which, Dora, had died in infancy, Dickens was becoming restless. In February, he received a letter from Maria Beadnell, now Mrs Winter. He replied enthusiastically, pouring scorn on her assertion that she was now toothless, fat and middle aged. ‘You are always the same in my remembrance’ he wrote. They planned to meet at his house when his wife was ‘not at home’, but Dickens was shattered to find that Maria was exactly as she had described herself. His passion cooled and he, rather cruelly, portrayed her in Little Dorrit (1855–57) as Flora Finching, once pretty and enchanting, but now fat, diffuse and silly.

Dickens Buys The House Of His Dreams
In 1856, he purchased Gad’s Hill Place in Kent, a house he had first seen whilst walking with his father in the idyllic years of his childhood. In January 1857, he directed and acted in Wilkie Collins’s play The Frozen Deep and as he researched professional actresses to play the female parts, he met the young actress Ellen Lawless Ternan who became his intimate friend and probably his lover. The following year Dickens formally separated from his wife, and viciously attacked her in an article published in several newspapers. His daughter Kate later recalled, ‘My father was like a madman… He did not care a damn what happened to any of us. Nothing could surpass the misery and unhappiness of our house.’ His younger sister-in-law, Georgina Hogarth, became his housekeeper, and rumours began to circulate that it was his affair with her that had caused his marital breakdown.

In August 1858, Dickens began the first of a series of reading tours that would, over the next 12 years, prove extremely profitable. By 1860 Gad’s Hill became his permanent residence. Over the next ten years, as he and Ellen Ternan became more involved with each other, his personal life became more and more enigmatic. It is possible that he took a house in France for Ellen and her mother, where he visited them frequently. However, Dickens’s secret life came close to exposure in 1865 when he, Ellen and her mother, were travelling back from France and their train was involved in a serious accident at Staplehurst in Kent. Although Dickens tended to the injured and dying, he refused to attend the subsequent inquest probably for fear it would make public the fact he was travelling with Ellen Ternan.

The Death of Dickens
Over the next few years, Dickens undertook several private reading tours in England and America. But his health was failing and by 1870 he looked considerably older than his 58 years. Then on the 8th June, 1870, having spent the day working on what was to be his last unfinished novel The Mystery of Edwin Drood, he collapsed at the dinner table and died the next evening.
Images taken at the Guildhall Museum, Rochester