

Charles Dickens' Childhood

Michael Allen



CHARLES DICKENS' CHILDHOOD

Charles Dickens' Childhood

Michael Allen

M
MACMILLAN
PRESS

© Michael John Allen 1988

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 1988 978-0-333-43834-3

All rights reserved. No reproduction, copy or transmission of this publication may be made without written permission.

No paragraph of this publication may be reproduced, copied or transmitted save with written permission or in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright Act 1956 (as amended), or under the terms of any licence permitting limited copying issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency, 7 Ridgmount Street, London WC1E 7AE.

Any person who does any unauthorised act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

First published 1988

Published by
THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 2XS
and London
Companies and representatives
throughout the world

Typeset by Wessex Typesetters
(Division of The Eastern Press Ltd)
Frome, Somerset

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Allen, Michael

Charles Dickens' Childhood.

1. Dickens, Charles, 1812-1870—Biography

2. Authors, English—19th century—

Biography

I. Title

823'.8 PR4581

ISBN 978-1-349-19092-8

ISBN 978-1-349-19090-4 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-1-349-19090-4

This book is for Barbara Allen

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	viii
<i>List of Plates</i>	ix
<i>Chronological List: Dickens' childhood homes</i>	x
Introduction	1
1 Portsmouth	11
2 London 1815–16	29
3 Sheerness and Chatham	36
4 London, from Camden Town to the Marshalsea	71
5 Release from Prison, Release from Warren's and Back to School	96
<i>Appendix: Street Plans</i>	113
<i>Notes</i>	125
<i>Bibliography</i>	134
<i>Index</i>	142

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Victor Neuburg for his early encouragement to carry out research work; to David Parker, Curator of Dickens House, for his constant assistance; and to my wife Barbara for her patience. Acknowledgements are also due to the following organisations for permission to reproduce material held in their collections: The British Library Reference Division, The British Library Newspaper Library, Hampshire County Library Portsmouth, Portsmouth City Records Office, City of Westminster Libraries Archives Department, The Public Record Office, London Borough of Southwark Public Libraries, Greater London Record Office (Maps and Prints), Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England, London Borough of Camden Libraries and Arts Department, Portsmouth City Museums, Barbara Allen, The Dickens House Museum.

List of Plates

1. Crewe Hall, Cheshire
- 2a. Mile End Terrace, Portsmouth
- 2b. Mile End Terrace: newspaper advertisement
3. William Pearce's rent book
- 4a. Hawke Street, Portsmouth
- 4b. Wish Street, Southsea: rate book entry
5. Front view of Portsmouth dockyard
- 6a. Ordnance Terrace, Chatham: newspaper advertisement
- 6b. Ordnance Terrace, Chatham
- 7a. St Mary's Place, The Brook, Chatham
- 7b. Giles' School, Best Street, Chatham
- 8a. No. 16 Bayham Street, Camden Town: rate book entry
- 8b. Wellington House Academy
9. Map of Portsmouth, 1823
10. Map of Blue Town, Sheerness, 1800
11. Map of Chatham, 1832
12. Map of early nineteenth-century London
13. Hungerford Stairs, London
14. Dickens at the blacking warehouse, by Fred Barnard
15. John Dickens, by Samuel Hayden
16. No. 1 Lant Street, Borough
- 17a. No. 29 Johnson Street, Somers Town
- 17b. No. 29 Johnson Street: rate book entry
18. Chandos Street, Covent Garden, by T. C. Dibdin, 1851
19. Elizabeth Dickens, by John W. Gilbert
20. Portrait said to be of Charles Dickens as a boy

Chronological List

DICKENS' CHILDHOOD HOMES

- | | | |
|-----|---------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. | Mile End Terrace, Portsmouth | 7 Feb 1812–24 Jun 1812 |
| 2. | 16 Hawke Street, Portsmouth | 25 Jun 1812–25 Dec 1813 |
| 3. | 39 Wish Street, Southsea | 26 Dec 1813–25 Dec 1814 |
| 4. | 10 Norfolk Street, St Marylebone | 26 Dec 1814–25 Dec 1816 |
| 5. | High Street, Blue Town, Sheerness | 26 Dec 1816–4 Apr 1817 |
| 6. | Ordnance Terrace, Chatham | 5 April 1817–4 Apr 1821 |
| 7. | St Mary's Place, The Brook, Chatham | 5 Apr 1821–24 Jun 1822 |
| 8. | Giles' School, Best Street, Chatham | 25 Jun 1822–Sept 1822 |
| 9. | 16 Bayham Street, Camden Town | Sept 1822–25 Dec 1823 |
| 10. | 4 Gower Street North, St Pancras | 26 Dec 1823–4 Apr 1824 |
| 11. | 37 Little College Street, Camden Town | 5 Apr 1824–1 May 1824 |
| 12. | 1 Lant Street, Borough | 2 May 1824–27 May 1824 |
| 13. | 37 Little College Street, Camden Town | 28 May 1824–29 Sep 1824 |
| 14. | Hampstead | 30 Sep 1824–25 Dec 1824 |
| 15. | 29 Johnson Street, Somers Town | 26 Dec 1824–1827 |

Introduction

The aim of this book has been to approach the childhood of Charles Dickens with a fresh eye: certainly to examine the work of past biographers, but also to question their facts and opinions; to test their accuracy by going back to original sources; and to seek out new sources and new information.

There is a long history of enquiry into Dickens' early life, that history having had a ragged beginning, as documented by Engel.¹ The details of his childhood did not come quickly to the attention of the public, and when they did come they were not always accurate. Dickens himself provided the very earliest résumé, in a letter written in 1838, when he gave some brief information for publication in Germany:

I was born at Portsmouth, an English Seaport town principally remarkable for mud, Jews, and Sailors, on the 7th. of February 1812. My father holding in those days a situation under Government in the Navy Pay Office, which called him in the discharge of his duty to different places, I came to London, a child of two years old, left it again at six, and then left it again for another Sea Port town – Chatham – where I remained some six or seven years, and then came back to London with my parents and half a dozen brothers and sisters, whereof I was second in seniority.

I had begun an irregular rambling education under a clergyman at Chatham, and I finished it at a good school in London – tolerably early, for my father was not a rich man, and I had to begin the world.²

He ended the letter 'I have said more about myself in this one note than I should venture to say elsewhere in twenty years'. Nor did he say more: further details of his childhood were kept conspiratorially quiet until after Dickens' death, so that even his children were unaware of the hardships he had suffered during part of his early life. The silence was broken in 1872, with the publication of Forster's biography of Dickens; but invaluable though that book was – and is – it still did not provide either a full or an accurate account of Dickens' early life. Attempts have been

made ever since to fill the gaps. Forster's account depended very heavily on information from Dickens himself, to which he added some reminiscences from his subject's schoolfriends, and these personal accounts were subsequently expanded by other authors through articles and letters published in various periodicals.

Throughout the thirty years following Dickens' death many items of a topographical nature were also published, concentrating primarily on descriptions of the locations in which Dickens' novels were set, with occasional added brief descriptions of some of the houses in which he lived. One account – that of Robert Langton – stands out above the others. By seeking out those people still living who remembered the Dickens family, and consulting various official records, he was able to add considerably to Forster's account of Dickens' childhood: he was the first person, for example, to mention Dickens' home at Ordnance Terrace, Chatham. Also worthy of note during this period is the work of F. G. Kitton, who similarly sought out contemporaries of Dickens and tried to fix more accurately the dates of the family's movements.

During the first half of the twentieth century little information was added to what was already known of the early life of Dickens, though Gladys Storey did throw forward some debatable points: debatable since her information came from Dickens' elderly daughter Kate, and Dickens is reported to have told his children very little of his childhood. The most outstanding publication since 1950 has been Edgar Johnson's biography, which presents a formidable challenge to any author seeking to replace it. However, its value as the best authority on Dickens' early life is doubtful: it weaves previously available information into an attractive narrative, but presents little new information.

The prize for post-war research work on Dickens' early life must go to W. J. Carlton, who presented a number of impressive articles through the pages of *The Dickensian*. That periodical also published two extremely well-researched articles by Angus Easson, both throwing much-needed light on the affairs of John Dickens. It is a great pity that the work of Carlton and Easson was not taken into account by Johnson when he prepared a new edition of his work. Gaps and mistakes appearing in the first edition (1953) are repeated in the new edition (1977). Neither does a new biography by N. and J. Mackenzie (1979) take advantage of the material available, or produce fresh information of its own.