A Literary Icon

Charles Dickens

Percorriamo le strade di Londra seguendo i passi del romanziere per eccellenza dell'Inghilterra vittoriana, l'autore che meglio ha saputo descrivere i cambiamenti sociali portati dalla Rivoluzione Industriale.

UPPER INTERMEDIATE B2

ON CD 8

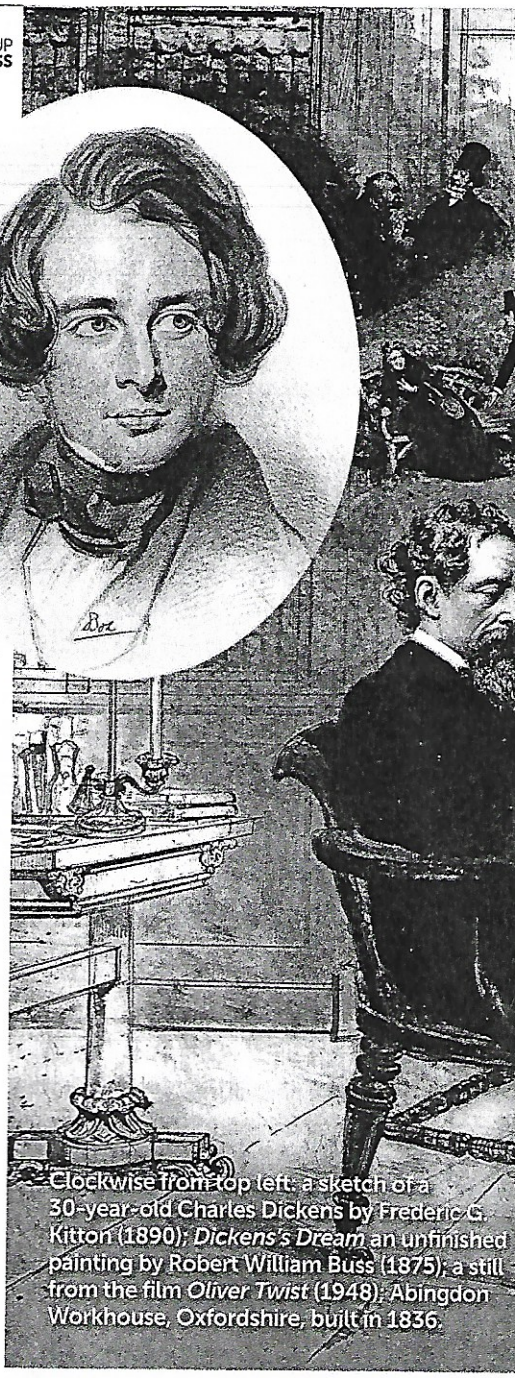
GLOSSARY

1 **to get into debt:** indebitarsi
2 **blacking:** lucido
3 **to stick:** attaccare
4 **pots:** barattoli
5 **to release:** rilasciare
6 **huge:** enorme
7 **to lead:** condurre
8 **clerk:** impiegato
9 **law firm:** studio di avvocati
10 **to fail:** fallire
11 **ordinary people:** gente comune
12 **throughout:** nel corso di
13 **to rule:** stabilire (con una legge)
14 **unless:** a meno che
15 **workhouse:** laboratorio, ospizio per i poveri
16 **to break up:** separare
17 **installments:** fascicoli
18 **orphanage:** orfanotrofio
19 **to threaten:** minacciare

Charles Dickens was born in 1812 into a relatively middle-class family and received a primary education. But then, when he was just twelve years old, everything changed. Charles' father got into debt[1] and was sent to Marshalsea Debtors' prison in London. Charles had to leave school and went to work in a factory that made blacking[2]. He spent ten hours a day there, sticking[3] labels onto the pots[4] of blacking. It was tedious work and the factory itself was dirty and infested with rats. In less than a year his father was released[5] from prison after inheriting some money and Charles was able to leave the factory. But this early experience of poverty would have a huge[6] impact on Dickens' life and work. He saw for himself how poverty could destroy people's lives and even lead[7] them into crime.

THE PERSONAL MEETS THE POLITICAL

When he was fifteen, Charles got a job as a clerk[8] in a law firm[9]. There he saw how the law often failed[10] ordinary people[11]. Throughout[12] his novels he is highly critical of the law and lawyers. In 1834, when Dickens was twenty-two, a controversial law, the New Poor Law, was introduced by the British Parliament. It ruled[13] that no kind of help would be given to poor people unless[14] they agreed to enter a workhouse[15]. The workhouses provided basic food and a place to sleep in return for long hours of hard labour. Families were broken up[16] as men and women were kept separate. Charles knew from personal experience how easy it was to fall into poverty and he also knew that even the debtors' prison at Marshalsea was not as desperate as the workhouse.



Clockwise from top left: a sketch of a 30-year-old Charles Dickens by Frederic G. Kitton (1890); *Dickens's Dream* an unfinished painting by Robert William Buss (1875); a still from the film *Oliver Twist* (1948); Abingdon Workhouse, Oxfordshire, built in 1836.

SOCIAL MESSAGE

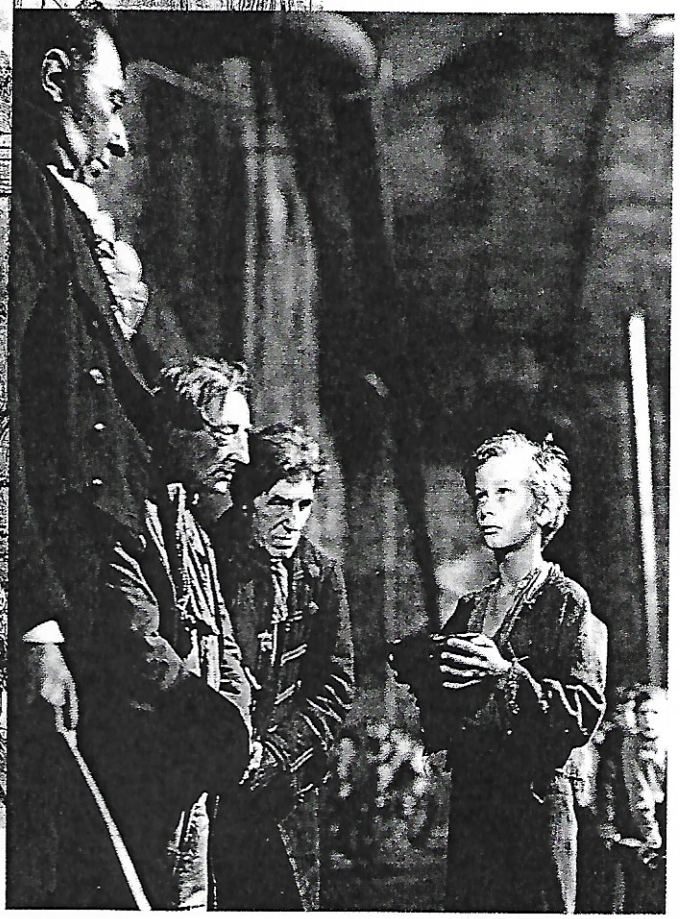
Dickens was so horrified by the injustice of the New Poor Law that he decided to protest in the way he knew best... through

EXERCISES IN

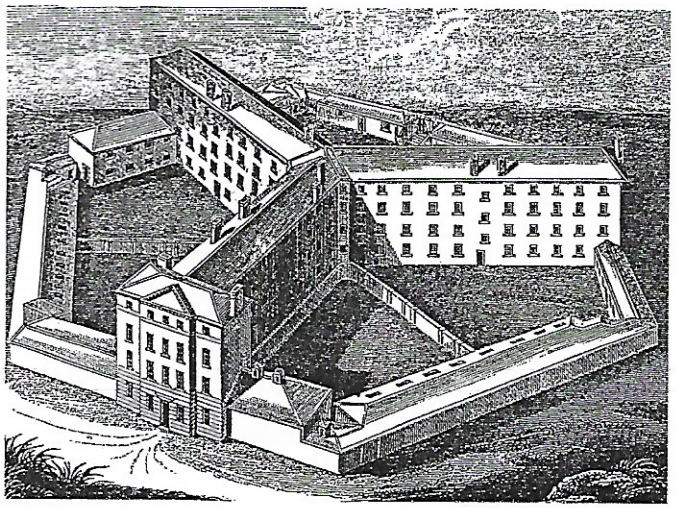
Work It Out!

GLOSSARY

20 **to hold up:** alzare, sostenere in alto
21 **pickpockets:** borseggiatori
22 **to steal:** rubare
23 **to endure:** sopportare



a story. In his famous novel *Oliver Twist*, published in installments[17] between 1837 and 1839, Dickens describes young Oliver's life in an orphanage[18], where the children are so hungry that one boy threatens[19] to eat another! This leads to the famous scene where Oliver holds up[20] his empty bowl and says: "Please Sir, I want some more." Oliver eventually leaves the orphanage and joins a group of young pickpockets[21] in London, who steal[22] to stay alive. Dickens describes very graphically the terrible conditions being endured[23] by poor people, especially children, in Victorian London, and the hypocrisy of many in authority. ⊗



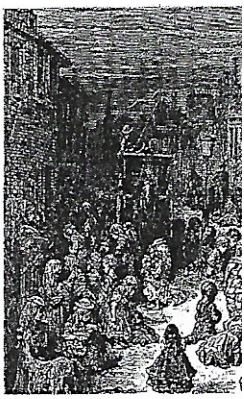
FEATURE

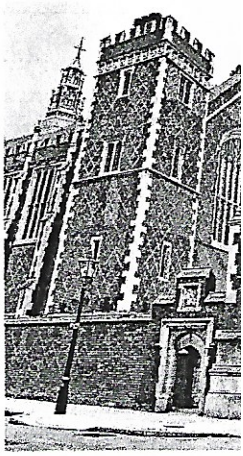
DICKENSIAN LONDON

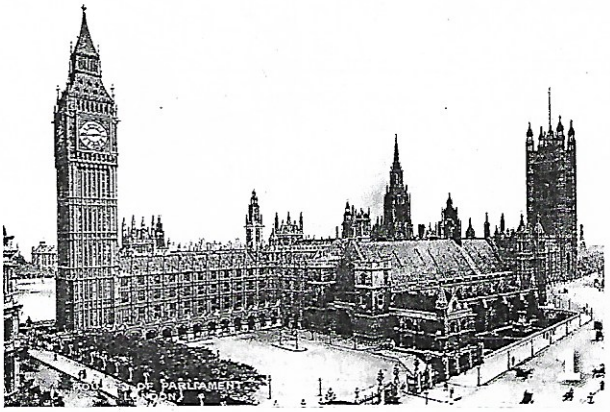
The most popular British writer of the Victorian era, Charles Dickens wrote prolifically. However, he is best-known for his twenty novels and novellas[1], which were originally published in magazines in weekly or monthly installments. These stories delighted[2] his fans but also had a shocking social message to get across[3].

VICTORIAN BEST-SELLER

Dickens' story installments became immediate best-sellers with readers from all social classes in Britain and even the USA. And it's easy to see why they were so popular. The plots contain high drama[4], romance and mystery and there is a cliffhanger at the end of almost every chapter. The characters tend to be larger than life[5] and some, like the miser[6] Ebenezer Scrooge, the tragic bride[7] Miss Havisham and the orphan Oliver Twist, became so well-known that they have almost developed a life of their own outside the original novels.







UPPER INTERMEDIATE B2

ON CD 9

GLOSSARY

1 **novellas:** racconti
2 **to delight:** deliziare
3 **to get across:** trasmettere
4 **high drama:** molto dramma
5 **larger than life:** esagerati
6 **miser:** taccagno, avaro
7 **bride:** sposa
8 **just off:** proprio a fianco
9 **surroundings:** dintorni
10 **filthy:** sudice
11 **attenuated:** malnutriti
12 **smart:** elegante
13 **inn:** taverna
14 **barristers:** avvocati
15 **Oxbridge:** contrazione delle università di Oxford e Cambridge
16 **bleak:** squallida
17 **bitter:** amaro

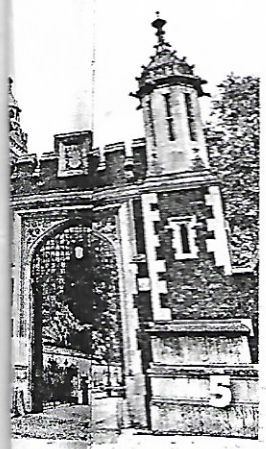
1

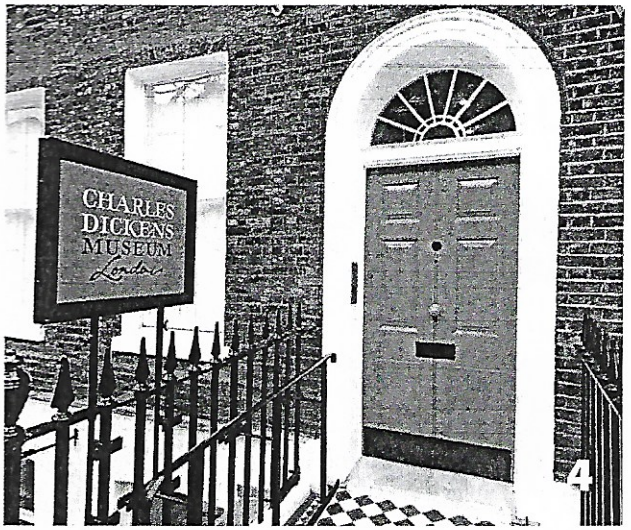
The Palace of Westminster

Dickens started his writing caree
Parliamentary reporter and he men
Parliament in many of his novels. I
vid Copperfield, a semi-autobiogr
cal novel, David gets work taking
at Parliamentary debates. The Pala
Westminster has been rebuilt since
Copperfield was published but is s
the same site.

SPEAK UP Explains

There is a cliffhanger at the end of almost every chapter. Quasi ogni capitolo ha un finale in sospeso. *Cliffhanger* è una parola composta da *cliff* ('dirupo') e *to hang* ('appendere'). È difficile pensar a un finale per un capitolo con un 'suspense' maggiore di uno in cui il protagonista è 'sospeso' da terra e sta per cadere da un precipizio. Dickens è considerato uno dei maestri di questa tecnica narrativa che usò in molti dei suoi romanzi pubblicati a puntate.





Clockwise from far left: the Houses of Parliament; Lincoln's Inn; a sketch of Seven Dials slum by Gustave Dore (1872); the Charles Dickens Museum located in the author's former home (above); a 19th century illustration of the Strand.

4 48 Doughty Street

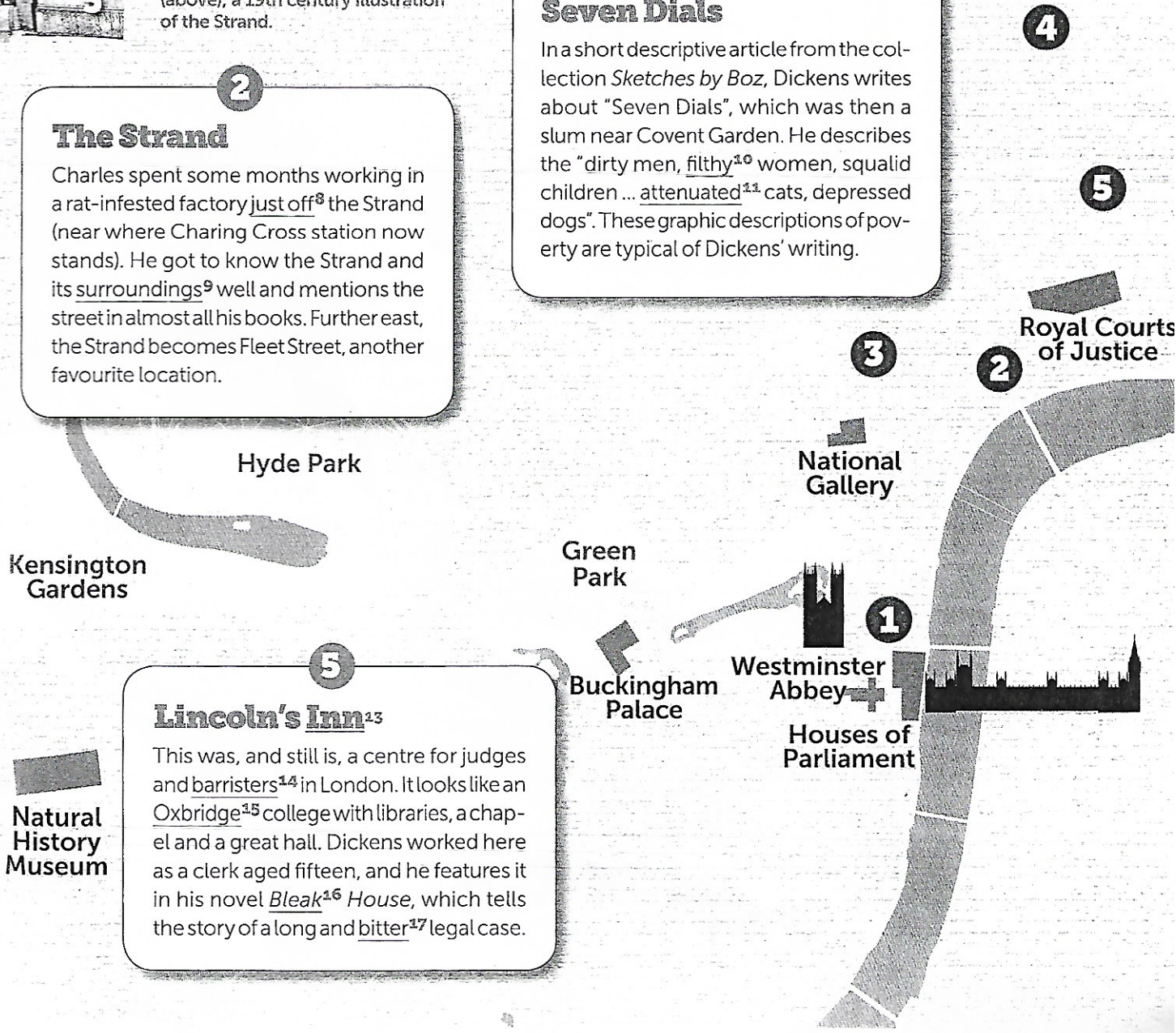
Dickens was able to move into this smart[12] Georgian house aged twenty-five with his wife and two-year-old son thanks to money earned from sales of *The Pickwick Papers*. He wrote *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby* here too. Today it houses the Dickens Museum.

3 Seven Dials

In a short descriptive article from the collection *Sketches by Boz*, Dickens writes about "Seven Dials", which was then a slum near Covent Garden. He describes the "dirty men, filthy[10] women, squalid children ... attenuated[11] cats, depressed dogs". These graphic descriptions of poverty are typical of Dickens' writing.

2 The Strand

Charles spent some months working in a rat-infested factory just off[8] the Strand (near where Charing Cross station now stands). He got to know the Strand and its surroundings[9] well and mentions the street in almost all his books. Further east, the Strand becomes Fleet Street, another favourite location.



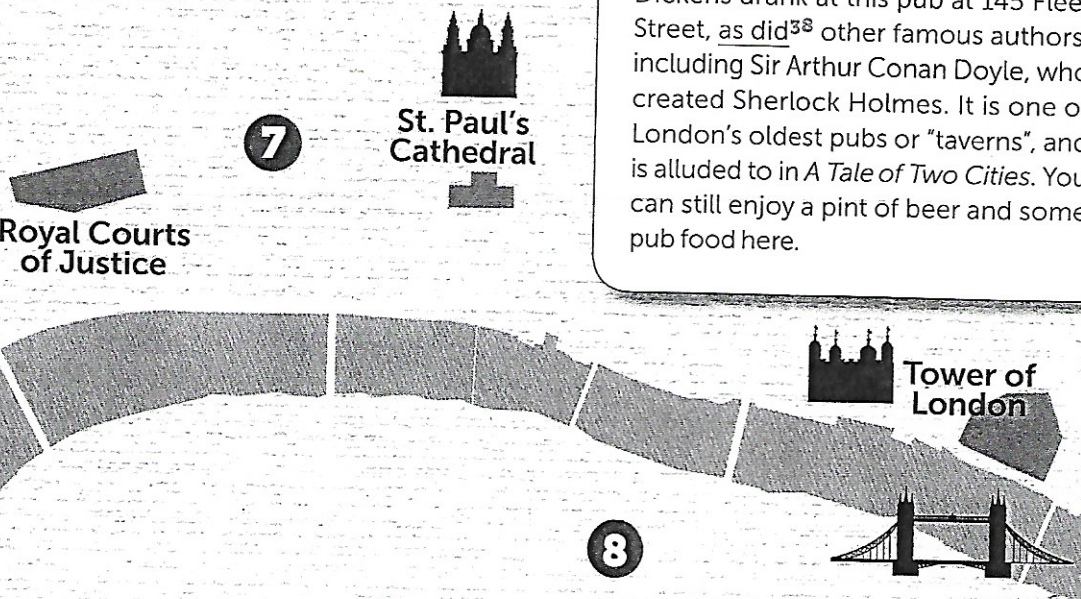
5 Lincoln's Inn[13]

This was, and still is, a centre for judges and barristers[14] in London. It looks like an Oxbridge[15] college with libraries, a chapel and a great hall. Dickens worked here as a clerk aged fifteen, and he features it in his novel *Bleak[16] House*, which tells the story of a long and bitter[17] legal case.

6

The Angel, Islington

In Dickens' time this inn was right on the edge[36] of London. In *Oliver Twist*, the Artful Dodger[37] finds Oliver nearby, alone and hungry, and takes him to join a gang of young pickpockets. The Angel still exists but is no longer an inn, and Islington is no longer on the edge of London!



7

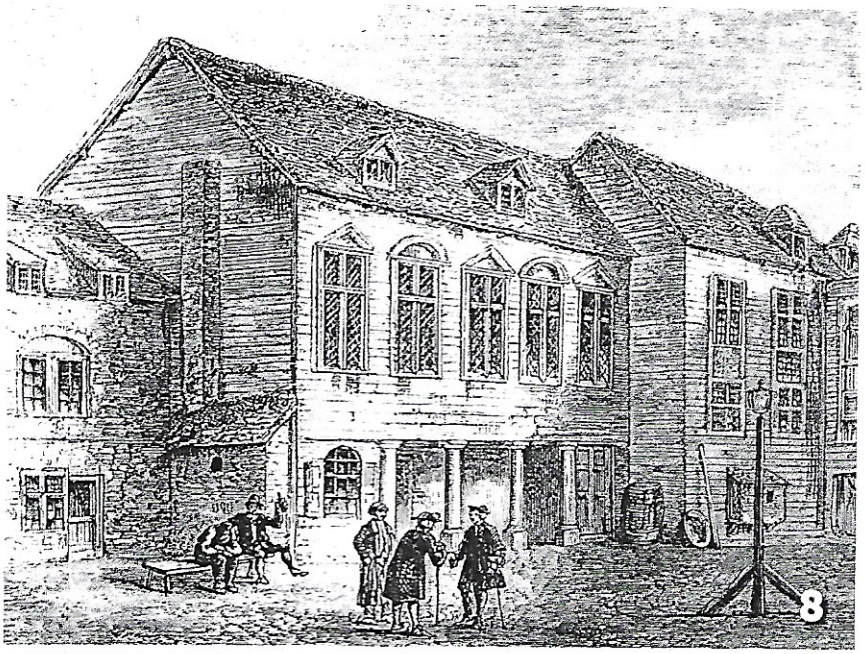
Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese

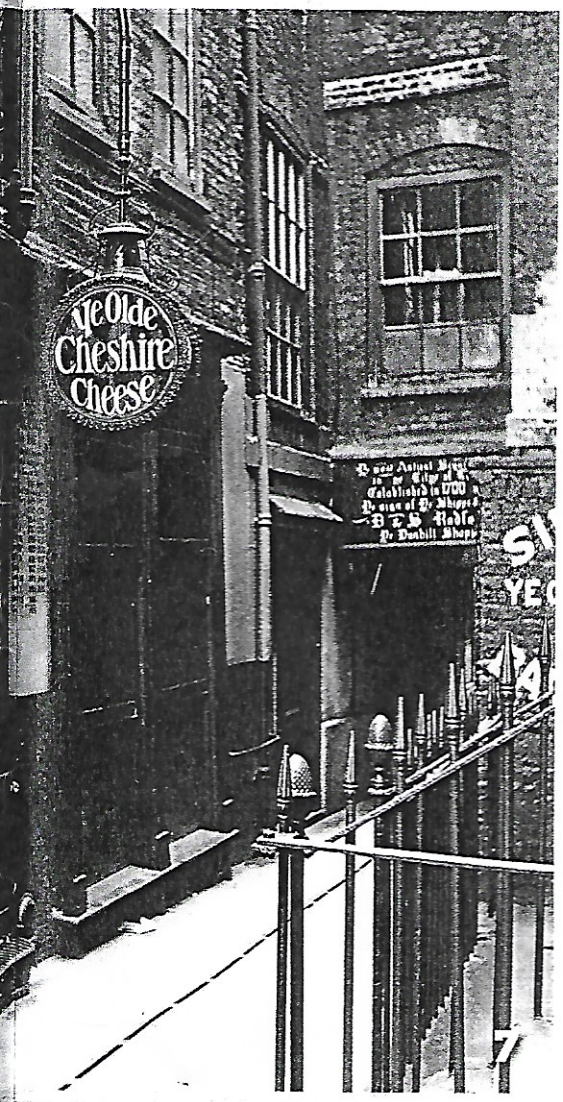
Dickens drank at this pub at 145 Fleet Street, as did[38] other famous authors, including Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who created Sherlock Holmes. It is one of London's oldest pubs or "taverns", and is alluded to in *A Tale of Two Cities*. You can still enjoy a pint of beer and some pub food here.

8

Marshalsea Prison

Dickens' father was sent to the notorious[39] Marshalsea Debtors' Prison when Charles was twelve and the experience affected Charles deeply. In the novel *Little Dorrit*, Amy is born and raised[40] in the prison. Only one wall of it now remains, close to Borough Market, which Dickens would also have known.





Clockwise from top left: the 1903 Angel Hotel in Angel, Islington; Marshalsea Prison in an 18th century etching; Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese' pub on Fleet Street; etchings (also right) by George Cruikshank from the first (1838) edition of *Oliver Twist*.

GLOSSARY

18 **to unfold:** svilupparsi
19 **to find out:** scoprire
20 **to call out:** convocare, chiamare
21 **sailors:** marinai
22 **alive:** viva
23 **appeal:** attrattiva
24 **out of print:** fuori stampa
25 **stage plays:** opere di teatro
26 **to hold a mirror up:** essere un riflesso fedele (*lett.* mettere uno specchio davanti)
27 **to challenge:** sfidare
28 **slums:** bassifondi, quartieri poveri
29 **to shock:** sorprendere, stupire
30 **sudden:** improvviso
31 **overcrowding:** sovrappopolazione
32 **lack:** mancanza
33 **sanitation:** igiene
34 **related:** relativo
35 **cheap:** economico
36 **edge:** confine
37 **Artful Dodger:** *lett.* astuto truffatore (personaggio chiamato "il Furbacchione")
38 **as did:** come fecero anche
39 **notorious:** infame
40 **born and raised:** nato e cresciuto

VICTORIANS GOT HOOKED ON SERIES TOO!

Dickens' serialized stories were the TV series of the time, with fans counting the days until the next episode was published so they could see how the often complex plot would unfold[18]. When the final installment of the *The Old Curiosity Shop* was published in Britain but had not yet arrived in the United States, American readers in New York couldn't wait to find out[19] the ending. Fans went down to the port and called out[20] to sailors[21] on a ship arriving from Britain: "Is little Nell alive[22]?". And the stories' appeal[23] has lasted into the 21st century. Dickens' books have never been out of print[24] and are still being turned into films and TV dramas, stage plays[25] and musicals.

But Charles Dickens did much more than entertain. Through his highly-detailed descriptions of people and places, especially in London, he held a mirror up[26] to society, challenging[27] politicians and ordinary people to open their eyes to the destructive power of poverty in a Britain radically changed by the Industrial Revolution.

SO DICKENSIAN!

It was Dickens' descriptions of London's slums[28] that really shocked[29] people. The population of London more than doubled between 1801 and 1850 and this sudden[30] increase led to terrible overcrowding[31] and a lack[32] of sanitation[33] in the poorest areas. The term "Dickensian" can be used to describe anything related[34] to Dickens' novels but in general is used to suggest poor social conditions. For example: "The apartment's cheap[35] and a bit Dickensian." ⊗

HOW DO YOU SAY...
Che diavolo sta succedendo?
What the dickens is going on in here?