

# CHARLES DICKENS AND THE MAGIC LANTERN IN HIS WORKS

## and the combination in the Dutch Dickens Theatre, Laren. Part 2

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This article is based on the presentation given by Adrian and Else at the MLS Birmingham meeting on 30 April 2022 (see TML 31).

In the first part of this article (TML 31, p. 4) we looked at Charles Dickens' early introduction to the magic lantern, the performance of his stories during his lifetime and examples of the magic lantern in his works. Now we come to our last pressing research question: Did Charles Dickens give a magic lantern show himself?

### WAS CHARLES DICKENS A MAGIC LANTERNIST?

Through *The Letters of Charles Dickens*<sup>1</sup> we were able to confirm that Dickens had indeed had a magic lantern in his house, as the following letter to his American friend Cornelius Felton proves. On 6 January 1843 – Twelfth Night (the Feast of Epiphany) – his eldest son Charley's sixth birthday was the reason for a big party at the Dickens house.

31st December, 1842

"My dear Felton,

Many and many happy New Years to you and yours!

The actuary of the national debt couldn't calculate the number of children who are coming here on Twelfth Night, in honour of Charley's birthday, for which occasion I have provided a magic lantern and divers other tremendous engines of that nature."

Dickens was very much looking forward to the magic lantern show at his home because he also wrote about it on 3 January 1843, to Leigh Hunt, the founder of *The Examiner* journal.

"My Dear Hunt,

Next Friday Twelfth Night is the Anniversary of my son and heir's birthday; on which occasion, a magic lantern and divers other engines are going to be let off on these premises. I have asked some children of a larger growth (all of whom you know) to come and make merry on their own account. If you be well enough to join us, and will do so by half past seven, you will give my wife and myself great pleasure."

In both letters Dickens mentions 'other engines'. We know that Dickens was interested in many technical developments – but what else did he have in the house? He owned, for example, a large Townshend stereoscope<sup>2</sup> but there is not space to describe his other optical instruments.

Twelfth Night apparently called for a magic lantern party for children at the time – his friend Thackeray searched in vain for a magic lantern during his stay in Rome in 1854. For Thackeray, this was a reason to write about it in the Prelude of his book *The Rose and the Ring*: "You could not even get a magic lantern or buy Twelfth-Night characters for a children's entertainment."<sup>3</sup>

But what do the researchers say about the role of Dickens himself when it comes to operating the magic lantern?

In his book *A Christmas Carol and its Adaptations*<sup>4</sup> Fred Guida makes a critical examination of this Dickens story and its productions in different media including magic lantern, film and television. He states: "We don't know for sure, but with his skills as an actor, as a public reader, as an entertainer, he was certainly capable of being an excellent magic lanternist."

Joss Marsh believes that Dickens did have hands-on experience because he describes scenes where magic lantern techniques are clearly used, as in *A Christmas Carol* and *Gabriel Grub*. She regrets that Guida did not notice these obvious magic lantern techniques but, unfortunately, she could not prove that Dickens himself was behind the magic lantern to give a show.<sup>5</sup>

What about close friends or relatives of Dickens? Neither his biographer John Forster nor manager George Dolby mention anything but his daughter Mamie gives the final answer in her book *Charles Dickens by his eldest Daughter*: "Never such magic lanterns as those shown by him!"<sup>6</sup>

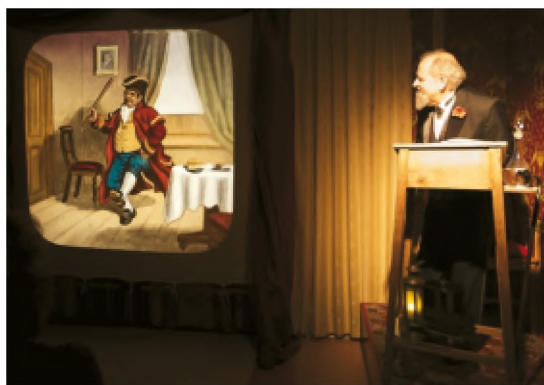
Based on this conclusion, we are confident that presenting his stories in our Dickens Theatre alongside magic lantern slides (Fig. 1) is in keeping with Dickens' own activities. Through global purchasing over the last ten years we have been able to expand our repertoire until now the Dickens Theatre owns almost all the magic lantern slide sets of Charles Dickens stories. This allows us to premiere a new story every year, such as *The Cricket on the Hearth* in November 2021.

This is an overview of the Dickens Theatre's current repertoire (Fig. 2) – but, as Miss Kenwigg says, in the novel *Nicholas Nickleby*: "We ain't proud, because ma says it's sinful."

### DICKENS' PUBLIC READINGS AND THE COMBINATION IN THE DUTCH DICKENS THEATRE

The public readings are probably a lesser-known aspect of Dickens' work but from 1853 they were very successful for many years. For example, in 1858 he performed in more than 30 cities in Great Britain and Ireland over the course of 16 weeks.

In 1842 Dickens, with his wife Catherine, made a 19-week trip to the United States and Canada. He visited the USA for a second time in 1867-68, after the end of the Civil War, for an immensely successful five-month public reading tour organised by his tour manager George Dolby. Many thousands of spectators came to the box office and made the tour very profitable. Dolby considered that the north east was the best area for Dickens' readings with Boston and New York the



1. The Dickens Theatre, Laren (left)

2. Current repertoire of the Dickens Theatre (right)



**MR. CHARLES DICKENS'S FINAL READINGS.**  
 MR. CHARLES DICKENS'S FINAL FAREWELL READINGS will take place at St. James's Hall, as follows: Tuesday, February 8, "The Story of Little Dombey" (last time), and "Mr. Bob Sawyer's Party" (from Pickwick). Tuesday, February 15, "Boots at the Holly Tree Inn," "Sikes and Nancy" (from Oliver Twist), and "Mrs. Gamp" (last time). Tuesday, February 22, "Nicholas Nickleby at Mr. Squeers's School" (last time), and "Mr. Choppe the Dwarf" (last time). Tuesday, March 1, "David Copperfield" (last time), and the "Trial from Pickwick." Tuesday, March 8, "Boots at the Holly Tree Inn" (last time), "Sikes and Nancy" (from Oliver Twist, last time), and "Mr. Bob Sawyer's Party" (from Pickwick, last time). Tuesday, March 15 (FINAL FAREWELL READING), "The Christmas Carol" (last time), and the "Trial from Pickwick" (last time).  
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3. Tremont Temple in Boston (left); 4. Announcement of dates for final readings (middle); 5. Annet Duller (right)



6. The premiere at the Christiaan Huygens Theatre



8. The Dickens Fellowship at the Dickens Theatre, Laren

backbone. From Portland to Washington he performed in approximately 20 cities. Dickens gave 15 readings in Steinway Hall, New York, and 17 readings at Tremont Temple in Boston (Fig. 3) to name but two – and sold out each time.

Once back in England Charles Dickens began his series of Farewell Readings. The many readings had totally exhausted him and in 1869 he announced the dates for his final readings (Fig. 4). On 15 March 1870 Charles Dickens performed the last one and some months later he died suddenly at his beloved Gad's Hill Place in Kent. He was 58 years old.

We try to keep Charles Dickens alive in our village, Laren, in the Netherlands, especially through the Dickens Theatre with a combination of the public readings and the magic lantern.

### OUR DICKENS THEATRE AND DICKENS IN THE LIGHT OF THE MAGIC LANTERN

People often ask: "What got you started on Dickens?" The lanternist and MLS member Annet Duller (Fig. 5) had been our friend since the 1970s and she had a collection of authentic slides of Charles Dickens stories. Knowing that Adrian had addressed large audiences in more than 50 countries, she asked him to read with the Dickens slides. After researching Charles Dickens and his public readings, Adrian decided to become a Dickens actor and to perform in the way Dickens had done. The existing Dutch translations of Dickens' works proved to be too old-fashioned and were certainly not fit



7. Behind our Laren home

for the stage. Else used her experience as a writer and dramatist to translate the original readings for the Dickens stories in line with the lantern slides. Where there were additional slides, not in the readings, she had to translate some of the original texts from the books as well, to fill the gaps.

As far as possible the stage adaptations and performance in The Dickens Theatre are close to the way Charles Dickens himself performed. How do we know? Through extensive research. The book *Sikes and Nancy and other Public Readings*, collected by Philip Collins,<sup>7</sup> was very helpful. Dickens' gestures, facial expressions and vocalisation during his performances are described by critics of the time, such as Kate Field and Charles Kent.<sup>8</sup> With Else's background working at Dutch television on drama and educational programmes, she also wanted to



9. Else introducing the original Mr Dickens



10. Else now a trained lanternist

include some educational aspects in the shows. So, in his introductions, 'Mr Dickens' explains how, when and why he wrote a particular book or story to create the overall picture.

After rehearsals and many trial runs in 2012, the premiere was on 20 January 2013 in the beautiful Christiaan Huygens Theatre of Willem Albert and Margreet Wagenaar (Fig. 6). After this, we began to give regular and private shows in a small



11. Presenting the show together

building behind our Laren home – our own Dickens Theatre in Victorian style (Figs 7-9). Meanwhile Annet continued to open up the world of the magic lantern and in 2013 sold a substantial proportion of her Dickens slide collection to us. With Else now a trained lanternist (Fig. 10), from this point onwards we could do all the shows together (Fig. 11).

At the MLS Spring Meeting in 2018 we introduced Cindy Sughrue, the director of the Charles Dickens Museum in London (see *TML* 15, p. 9). The reason – we have made arrangements for the future donation of our collection to the Museum and hope members of the Magic Lantern Society will give performances there in the future using our slides. Jeremy and Carolyn Brooker have already performed their own Halloween show in the Charles Dickens Museum (October 2018). Who next?

The Dutch Dickens Theatre opened new doors and areas of interest for us. At the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, for example, we were able to see the original George Cruickshank illustrations (Fig. 12). In a reading room we were delighted to find six boxes full of drawings. We even discovered a sketch of Dickens' short story *The Bloomsbury Christening* – that by coincidence we were premiering that year – a quick doodle of Mr Pickwick in a corner of a piece of scrap paper and a rare portrait of Dickens himself (Fig. 13).<sup>9</sup>

We also spent some golden moments in the grounds of Gad's Hill Place in Kent (Fig. 14). The janitor of Gad's Hill School (the occupants since 1924) gave us a tour through Dickens' garden and the Principal of the school welcomed us into the house. He opened the door of what is now his office – and so we stood in Dickens' study (Fig. 15)!

## SHOWS AT THE DICKENS THEATRE

As you will have ascertained, magic lantern slides were the basis for the start of The Dickens Theatre. Normally we perform our shows in the Dutch language but we also present a show in English for English speakers living in the Netherlands.

The theatre has become well known throughout the country (Fig. 16). Sadly, because of *A Christmas Carol*, many people associate Dickens just with Christmas – we do have a wide repertoire during the rest of the year. This is an example of a programme for one of the shows.

- Welcome and opening remarks on Charles Dickens in 1869, by Else Fliim
- Introducing Charles Dickens with lantern slides
- Charles Dickens expresses a wish<sup>10</sup>
- Introduction to *David Copperfield*, by Mr Charles Dickens
- Reading: 'The Friendly Waiter and I' (from *David Copperfield*)
- Intermezzo: London views in magic lantern slides
- Mr Dickens shares his thoughts on the magic lantern and his works

*Tea and coffee break*



12. The Cruickshank illustrations



13. Cruickshank sketch of Dickens (courtesy of V&A)

- Introduction to the making of *The Pickwick Papers*, by Mr Charles Dickens
- Reading: 'Mr Bob Sawyer's Party' (from *The Pickwick Papers*)
- Intermezzo: A tour through America illustrated with magic lantern slides
- Reading: *The Boots at the Holly-Tree Inn* (short story)
- Mr Dickens bids farewell to the audience

Before the break Mr Dickens reads one story and there is always a relevant 'intermezzo' of magic lantern slides. After the break there are one or two stories, depending on length – for instance *A Christmas Carol* and *Doctor Marigold's Prescriptions* are around one hour so we would include only one. A show runs for about two hours in total.

We are convinced that we are duly honouring Charles Dickens by combining his stories in our Dickens Theatre with the presentation of his public readings and showing the magic lantern slides.

## REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. *The Letters of Charles Dickens, Edited by His Sister in Law and His Eldest Daughter*, Chapman and Hall, London, 1880
2. *The Letters of Charles Dickens, Edited by His Sister in Law and His Eldest Daughter*, letter to Mamie 13 June 1859
3. William Makepeace Thackeray, *The Rose and the Ring*, G.P. Putnam & Co., New York, Christmas 1854
4. Fred Guida, *A Christmas Carol and Its Adaptations: A critical examination of Dickens's story and its production on screen and television*, McFarland & Co. Inc., Jefferson USA, 1999
5. Joss Marsh, 'Dickensian "Dissolving Views": The magic lantern, visual storytelling, and the Victorian technological imagination', *Comparative Critical Studies*, vol.6, issue 3, pp.333-346, 2009
6. Mamie Dickens, *Charles Dickens, by his eldest Daughter*, Cassell & Co. (The World's Workers), London, 1885
7. Philip Collins (ed.), *Charles Dickens: Sikes and Nancy and Other Public Readings*, World's Classics, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1975
8. Charles Kent (1823-1902) was a friend of Dickens and contributed to *Household Words* and *All the Year Round* as well as editing the *Sun* (1845-70) and *Weekly Register* (1874-81). American journalist Kate Field (1838-96) edited and published *Kate Field's Washington* as well as contributing to many publications.
9. See the Victoria & Albert Museum website [collections.vam.ac.uk](http://collections.vam.ac.uk) (O678737)
10. During his performances in the USA Dickens opened the show with a wish: "My wish is that if you feel disposed as we go along to give expression to any emotion, whether grave or gay, you will do so with perfect freedom from restraint, and without the least apprehension of disturbing me. Nothing can be so delightful to me on such occasions as the assurance that my hearers accompany me by showing their interest, their friendship and their joy."



14. Dickens' house – Gad's Hill Place in Kent



15. Dickens' study, Gad's Hill Place



16. Show at the Dickens Theatre, Laren