

Charles Dickens

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อร่วมฉลอง ๒๐๐ ปีชาตกาลชาลส์ ดิกเกนส์ เป็นการมองภาพองค์รวมของชีวิตและผลงานของดิกเกนส์ รวมทั้งเสนอภาพอย่างกว้าง ๆ ของกรุงลอนดอนในต้นคริสต์ศตวรรษที่ ๑๙ ชีวิตในเยาว์วัยของดิกเกนส์ ณ เมืองเคนต์และกรุงลอนดอน และการเริ่มต้นชีวิตการทำงานของเขา สรุปความเกี่ยวกับชีวิตนักเขียนของดิกเกนส์ การไปเยือนสหรัฐอเมริกา และจบลงด้วยการใช้ชีวิตในวาระสุดท้ายของดิกเกนส์ ณ แกดส์ฮิลล์ในเมืองเคนต์

คำสำคัญ : ดิกเกนส์ กรุงลอนดอน ชีวิต ผลงาน แกดส์ฮิลล์

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Abstract

To celebrate the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Dickens, this article presents an overview of his life and works. It begins with a brief description of London in the early 19th century, and continues to describe Dickens' early years in Kent and London and the start of his working life. The article outlines Dickens' literary career, visits to America, and concludes with his final days at Gad's Hill in Kent.

Keywords : Dickens, London, Life, Works, Gad's Hill

"There is no contemporary English writer whose works are read so generally through the whole house, who can give pleasure to the servants as well as to the mistress, to the children as well as to the master." (Walter Bagehot, 1858)

This year celebrates the 200th anniversary of Charles Dickens. Who would have thought that a child labourer working in a boot-blackening factory would rise to such meteoric fame as a world-renowned and well-respected author? Not only did he write nineteen novels, but he also wrote endless stories, letters and articles on social issues; such as housing, education and prison reform.

This article aims to describe the life and times of Charles Dickens, from his humble beginnings to world-wide fame.



Dickensian London

London in the 1800s was one of the largest cities in the world. At the beginning of the century it housed around a million people, but by the end of the century that number had swollen to 4.5 million. Hoards of people left their rural cottages in the countryside to seek their fortune in the city 'paved with gold'. This rapid expansion, however, came with its drawbacks. Rich and poor were living side-by-side in the dirty, smelly, overcrowded city (Perdue, 1997). The promise of rich pickings attracted pick-pockets, prostitutes, drunks, beggars and tramps. Personal hygiene was not a big priority, and diseases like cholera were commonplace killers. There were workhouses for poor people, which were more like prisons. Human dignity was destroyed and families were separated. This is where Dickens lived, and this is where he got his inspiration.

The Early Years

On 7th February, 1812, in a modest terraced house in Portsmouth, a legend was born. Charles John Huffam Dickens was the second child, and first son, for John and Elizabeth Dickens – his sister Fanny was born two years earlier. The Dickens were a perfectly ordinary middle-class family with no financial problems. Charles' father, John, held a respectable job as a clerk in a naval office earning £ 6.50 (325 baht) a month, which would have been sufficient for the family to live a comfortable, middle class lifestyle.

When Dickens was 5 years old, the family moved to Chatham in Kent (about 60kms East of London). Dickens had his happiest childhood years here, and was disappointed when, at the age of 10, his father received a promotion and the family moved to London. Living in London was more expensive than the countryside, and Dickens' father was rather too extravagant with his mediocre salary – he consequently got into debt. In the early part of the 19th century being in debt

was considered a crime, therefore Dickens' father was arrested and sent to Marshalsea Prison (McNamara, n.d.) Because Dickens was the eldest son he was removed from school and sent to work in a shoe polish factory sticking labels on jars. Now, as a mere 12 year-old, he was supporting the whole family. It was due to an inheritance, when John Dickens' mother died, that Dickens senior was released from prison and the young Dickens could return to school. There were many arguments in the Dickens' household between his parents, as his father was in favour of Charles returning to school, but his mother wanted him to continue working. Eventually, his father won the argument and Charles could continue his education until he was 15 years old.

First Job

Dickens first 'respectable' job, at the beginning of 1827, was as a law clerk at Ellis and Blackmore. Being a young lad, his job involved delivering documents and running errands. Eighteen months later he joined another law firm, but only stayed for a few months as he found the work boring and he decided he didn't want to become a lawyer. In his next job he was a court stenographer, which involved learning to use shorthand to record events in court. Most people took about three years to learn this difficult job, but Dickens managed to accomplish it in about three months (Benson, n.d.). At the age of 19 he became shorthand reporter for a publication called *The Mirror of Parliament*, which involved writing accurate accounts of the activities in the House of Commons and the House of Lords. He was respected for his quick and accurate accounts of the events in parliament. While he was working for the publication he became more interested in the theatre, and dreamed of becoming an actor. He missed an important audition due to illness, but with a passion for drama he started writing stories for London newspapers. This was the beginning of his literary career.

Start of his literary career and marriage

Now aged 21, Dickens was contributing stories and descriptive essays to various magazines and newspapers. They soon became popular, and three years later they were reprinted entitled *Sketches by Boz* (Boz was Dickens' nickname). This was a pivotal year for Dickens, as he was asked to write a comic serial narrative to accompany drawings by a well-known artist. The first installment of *Pickwick Papers* was born in 1836. This serial became so popular that Dickens became the most-read author of that time. He was now spending so much time on his literary career (and obviously earning money), that he decided to resign from his newspaper job and edit a monthly magazine. It was at this time, in 1837, that he decided to serialize another of his stories – *Oliver Twist*.

Whilst Dickens was working for the Morning Chronicle magazine he met Catherine, the daughter of one of his colleagues. They got engaged in 1835 and married a year later. Having an extraordinary amount of energy, he was able to juggle writing two serial installments a month, as well as start a family with his new bride Catherine. Their first child was born in 1837 when Dickens was 25 years old. In the following four years three more children were born.

Dickens continued writing serials at an amazing rate, producing *Nicholas Nickleby* followed by *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Barnaby Rudge* between 1839 and 1841. He was now earning £150 (7,500 baht) per monthly installment, which made him an extremely wealthy man, but he was in danger of burning himself out.

The trip to America

In 1842 Dickens decided to take a year off from writing and visit America. Whipple (2012) commented that Dickens was curious to see this 'New World', which he understood to be an oasis for the oppressed, but he also wanted to tackle the problem of international copyright. His work was being copied and sold in huge

quantities but he received hardly any money. Just before his 30th birthday he sailed from Liverpool on a steamship with his wife Catherine and her maid.

When he arrived in Boston he was treated like a celebrity because of his huge fame. He was mobbed by his fans and followed everywhere. He didn't get this level of adoration in England, and felt uncomfortable with this constant intrusion on his life. Dickens complained in one letter to a friend *"I can do nothing that I want to do, go nowhere where I want to go, and see nothing that I want to see. If I turn into the street, I am followed by a multitude"*.

Dickens toured America extensively and was curious to find out how this country, which appeared to be doing everything right, treated working class and disadvantaged people. He visited prisons, factories, reform schools and hospitals for the insane. He also wanted to visit the South to find out how the black slaves were treated. Dickens was horrified by the condition of the slaves and by the white people's attitude towards them.

Dickens returned from America disillusioned. The government didn't listen to his copyright argument, and the country was not the paradise that he had imagined. He wrote a rather disparaging account of his trip entitled *American Notes* venting his disappointment, and it would be another 25 years before he returned there.

Back to work

Refreshed, albeit exhausted, from his 'year off' Dickens resumed his prolific writing and in the next 10 years or so wrote some of his most memorable works, including *A Christmas Carol* (1843), *David Copperfield* (1850), *Bleak House* (1853), and *'Hard Times* (1854). It was also during this time that Dickens' family grew at an incredible rate with a child being born almost every year. By 1852 Dickens (now 40 years old) was a father to nine children – most of them named after famous writers.



In 1856, when Dickens was 44 years old, he was so wealthy that he was able to buy the house of his dreams – Gad’s Hill Place, in Kent. However, his personal life was not so dreamlike, and, after falling in love with an actress (Ellen Turnan), he separated from his wife Catherine in 1858. His relationship with Ellen was relatively unknown to his adoring fans, and, possibly due to the breakup of his marriage, Dickens spent the next several years travelling around the country on reading tours. It was during this period that Dickens wrote *Little Dorrit* (1857), *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) and *Great Expectations* (1861).

Second visit to America

In the late 1850’s Dickens was planning another trip to America, however, the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861 resulted in him postponing his plans. His last completed novel *Our Mutual Friend* (1865) was written while he waited for the right time to travel. It wasn’t until 1867, when Dickens was in his mid-fifties, that his trip could take place. Whipple (2012) noted that by this time Dickens’ health was deteriorating, but he was determined to go ahead with the trip. With the lure of a £10,000 (500,000 baht) fee he ignored his friends’ advice to remain in England. The average salary of a Civil Servant clerk at that time was around £140 per year.

He was, again, adored by the American public, and gave 76 performances over a five-month period. This trip was, despite his bad health, more enjoyable than his first trip 25 years earlier, and he returned to England with a much more favourable opinion of the country.

Final days at Gad's Hill

Dickens' final two years, after his return from America, were to be spent at Gad's Hill. He enjoyed entertaining in the evenings at his beloved house, and spent hours writing in a chalet in the garden. Despite failing health Dickens continued touring the UK during 1868 and 1869. In May 1870 he made his last public appearance at a banquet at the Royal Academy in front of the Prince of Wales (later to become King Edward VII).

On Wednesday 8th June, 1870, Dickens worked all day in his chalet writing *Edwin Drood*. Just before dinner that evening he collapsed into a coma. Hardwick (1976) wrote that Dickens was placed on a sofa in the living room and died the next evening at the age of 58.

Dickens had previously told his daughters that he would like to be buried at Rochester Cathedral, because he wanted his name to be more associated with the house and the district. However, the Dean of Westminster Abbey wanted a 'spectacular new burial' for Poets' Corner, because there hadn't been a literary burial there since the end of the 18th century, so that was where Dickens was laid to rest.

His obituary in the New York Times began, "*The death of Mr. Charles Dickens creates a greater gap in English literature than the loss of any other one man could have occasioned. He was incomparably the greatest novelist of his time ...*". His contemporaries regarded him not only as a great writer, but as a man of principle who worked tirelessly throughout his whole life for greater social justice, and a better, kinder world.

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