



Dickens in 1842

About the Author cont.

After a full day's work on his serial story *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (which was never completed), on June 8, 1870, Dickens suffered a stroke at his home. He died the next day. He was laid to rest in the Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey. An epitaph printed for his funeral read: "He was a sympathizer with the poor, the suffering, and the oppressed; and by his death, one of England's greatest writers is lost to the world."

Discussion Questions:

- Do you think kids under the age of 15 should be allowed to work for money? What if their families depend on the income they bring in?
- In Victorian England, people that received charity—such as those who lived in workhouses—were seen as inferior people. It was believed that God was punishing them for being sinful people. We see echoes of this attitude in the negative associations that "charity" retains today—particularly in the use of the phrase "charity case" as a derogative description of a person in need. During this season, we quote the old saying, "It is better to give than to receive." Does our concept of charity differ from that of the Victorians, and does it fit with the message of *A Christmas Carol*?

For Further Study

Dickens, Charles; Douglas-Fairhurst, Robert (ed.) (2006), *A Christmas Carol and other Christmas Books*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Standiford, Les (2004), *The Man Who Invented Christmas: How Charles Dickens's A Christmas Carol Rescued His Career and Revived Our Holiday Spirits*, New York: Crown

Websites:

Charles Dickens Page
<http://charlesdickenspage.com/carol.html>

Victorian England
<http://www.victorianweb.org/>

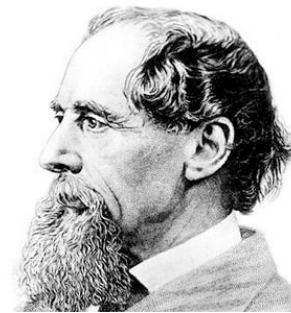
Child Labor in the Industrial Revolution
<http://www.victorianweb.org/history/hist8.html>



CHARLES DICKENS' **A CHRISTMAS CAROL**



About the Author



Charles Dickens

Born February 7, 1812 in Portsmouth, England, Charles Dickens was the most popular English novelist of the Victorian era, and one of the most popular of all time. He created some of literature's most iconic characters, with the theme of social reform running throughout his work. Due to the continuing popularity of his novels and short stories, they have never gone out of print.

Dickens' early years seem to have been an idyllic time. Coming from a moderately wealthy family, Dickens spent time outdoors, read voraciously, and attended a prestigious private school in Chatham. His socialite father spent beyond his means in entertaining and maintaining a fashionable lifestyle, however, and was imprisoned at Marshalsea debtor's prison bringing the family's prosperity to an abrupt end. The Dickens family moved to Camden Town, where the cramped urban homes inspired Dickens' later works, including *A Christmas Carol*.

Twelve-year-old Dickens had begun working ten-hour days at a shoe polish factory just before his father's arrest. He pasted labels on the jars of shoe polish and earned six shillings a week (equivalent to about 30 US dollars today). This money helped support his family and paid for his lodgings at the house of a family friend. The cruel work conditions of the factory employees (especially children) made a deep impression on Dickens. His experiences influenced later fiction and essays and were the foundation of his interest in the reform of socio-economic and labor conditions.

In May 1827, Dickens began work as a junior clerk in a law office. He remained there until November 1828, when he left to become a freelance reporter. In 1833, Dickens was able to get his first short story, *A Dinner at Poplar Walk*, published in the London periodical, *Monthly Magazine*. He became a political journalist the following year, traveling across Britain by stagecoach to cover election campaigns. His journalism, in the form of sketches which appeared as periodicals, led to the serialization of his first novel, *The Pickwick Papers*, in March 1836.

Much of his work first appeared in periodicals and magazines in serialized form, a popular way of publishing fiction at the time. Dickens often wrote his novels in parts, in the order they were meant to appear. The process of ending each installment with a "cliffhanger" gave his stories a particular rhythm and kept the public eager for the next installment. Some other serialized works include *The Adventures of Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield*, and *A Tale of Two Cities*.

Continued on back...

Dickens & Christmas

Charles Dickens has had a great influence on the way that we observe Christmas today.

During the beginning of the Victorian Period the celebration of Christmas was becoming weak. The medieval Christmas traditions, which combined the commemoration of the birth of Christ with the early Roman festival of Saturnalia (a pagan festival for the Roman god of cultivation), and the Germanic winter celebration of Yule, had come under extreme scrutiny by the Puritans under Oliver Cromwell. The Industrial Revolution also allowed factory workers little time to celebrate Christmas with their families.

The romantic revival of Christmas customs that occurred during Victorian times had other contributors: Prince Albert brought the German custom of decorating the Christmas tree to England, the singing of Christmas carols (which had nearly vanished at the turn of the century) began to flourish once more, and the first Christmas card appeared in the 1840s. However, it was the Christmas stories of Dickens, especially *A Christmas Carol*, which rekindled the happiness of Christmas in Britain and America. Today, after more than 160 years, *A Christmas Carol* continues to be significant, sending a message that cuts through the commercial trappings of the season and gets to the heart and soul of the holidays.



Synopsis of *A Christmas Carol*

The tale begins on Christmas Eve seven years after the death of Ebenezer Scrooge's business partner Jacob Marley. That night, the ghost of Jacob Marley appears before Scrooge and predicts that he will be visited by three spirits who will warn him that he must change his greedy ways. Three Christmas ghosts visit Scrooge during the course of the night, fulfilling Marley's prophecy. The first, the Ghost of Christmas Past, takes Scrooge to the scenes of his boyhood and youth, which stir the old skinflint's gentle and tender side. The second spirit, the Ghost of Christmas Present, takes him to the Christmas party at his nephew Fred's home and to the Christmas dinner at the humble dwelling of his clerk Bob Cratchit. The third spirit, the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, harrows Scrooge with dire visions of the future if he does not learn and act upon what he has witnessed. From his experience, Scrooge learns generosity, kindness, and compassion and truly embodies the spirit of Christmas.

Tiny Tim's Illness

In the December 1992 issue of the *American Journal of Diseases of Children* Dr. Donald Lewis, an assistant professor of pediatrics and neurology at the Medical College of Hampton Roads in Norfolk, Virginia, theorized that Tiny Tim suffered from a kidney disease that made his blood too acidic.

The disease, distal renal tubular acidosis, was not recognized until the early 20th century but therapies to treat its symptoms were available in Dickens' time. Dr. Lewis explained that Tim's case, left untreated due to the poverty of the Cratchit household, would produce the symptoms alluded to in the story.



The Industrial Revolution and Child Labor

The Industrial Revolution took place during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. There was a considerable social upheaval as technological advances and increasing mechanization transformed a largely agrarian society. The increased output per worker made possible by the new technologies moved much of the agricultural workforce from the countryside into large urban centers of production. The consequent overcrowding into areas with little supporting infrastructure led to many problems.

While the Industrial Revolution led to a population increase, the chance of surviving childhood did not improve. There was still limited opportunity for education, and children were expected to work. Since the industrial system was completely new, there were no experienced adult laborers. Employers could pay a child less than an adult even though their productivity was comparable, and there was no need for strength to operate an industrial machine. This made child labor preferable for manufacturing in the early phases of the Industrial Revolution. Many children were forced to work in relatively bad conditions for much lower pay than their elders.

Reports were written detailing some of the abuses, particularly in the coalmines and textile factories, and these helped to popularize the children's plight. The young workers' welfare was helped by the public outcry between the upper and middle classes.

In early 1843, Dickens toured the Cornish tin mines where he saw children working in the most appalling conditions. A visit to a school for illiterate street children in London reinforced the suffering he witnessed there. Dickens read the *Second Report of the Children's Employment Commission* dated February 1843, a parliamentary report that exposed the horrifying effects the Industrial Revolution inflicted upon the lives of poor children. In a speech at the Manchester Athenaeum, he urged workers and employers to join together to combat ignorance with education. In May 1843, he planned to publish an inexpensive political pamphlet appealing to the people of England on behalf of poor children, but changed his mind. The pamphlet later became *A Christmas Carol*.

The Factory Acts, the first general laws against child labor, were passed in England in 1833 and 1844. Children younger than nine were not allowed to work, children were not permitted to work at night, and the workday of youth under the age of 18 could not exceed twelve hours. Factory inspectors supervised the execution of the law. About ten years later, the employment of children in mining was forbidden. These laws decreased the number of child laborers; however, child labor remained in Europe and the United States up to the twentieth century.



Poor children in 1840s England.

What Is a Shilling Worth?

The basic unit in English money is the pound (£).
There are 20 shillings (s.) in a pound.
There are 12 pence (p.) in a shilling.

Today, an English pound equals about \$1.65. With inflation, a pound in the 1840s would be worth over \$70 today.