

Dickens' Secret Life In Slough
by Michael Percy (1460 Words)

The bicentenary of the birth of Charles Dickens falls on 7 February 2012.

At the height of his fame, Dickens rented a cottage in Slough for nearly two years which was used by his lover actress Nelly Ternan. Michael Percy examines the evidence for the dramatic events that occurred in Elizabeth cottage which would haunt Dickens for the rest of his life.

Can you keep a secret? If you were privy to the knowledge that a famous, rich and popular author was renting a cottage in your village under an assumed name and regularly visiting his lover there, a woman half his age, could you keep it to yourself? In 1866 the people of the village of Slough did exactly that.

Victorian England is renowned for its strict moral codes – and double standards. Top Victorian men could have secret lovers as long as they followed the rules. This was the code that allowed the most famous of Victorian authors to keep his lover openly 'hidden' within sight of Windsor Castle. And was this the birthplace of his illegitimate heir?

Charles Dickens was regarded as the moral conscience of Victorian England; *Oliver Twist*, one of his first successes, was published in 1837 - the same year Victoria came to the throne - and was a brutal exposé of poverty and the exploitation of the poor.

Dickens' visits to Slough were cloaked in secrecy. There were no fanfares or guards of honour although the village people would probably have gladly provided one for such a star performer.

The Slough rating records of 1866 show that a mysterious Mr John Tringham rented Elizabeth Cottage in Slough High Street; the village of Slough was then in Buckinghamshire. Charles Dickens was at the height of his popularity at this time travelling the country giving readings to packed theatres. But stealth must have been a high priority on his visits to Slough. His distinctive features were well-known through theatre posters and the newspapers of the day.

So how did he get away with it especially considering that in 1867 he gave one of his famous readings in a hall in Slough High Street; possibly even attended by his secret lover.

The object of Dickens' affections was actress Ellen (Nelly) Ternan. With her two sisters and mother she had been active on the stage since childhood. Nelly first met Dickens when they appeared on stage together. As Claire Tomalin explains in her book *The Invisible Woman*, Dickens was a passionate actor who ran his own amateur company and wrote many plays for the stage.

Nelly and Dickens met in 1857 performing in a lavish amateur production called *The Frozen Deep* actually written by Dickens' friend Wilkie Collins. The cast included Dickens himself with his friends and family spiced up with one or

two professionals. This was where the Ternans came in. Dickens was 45 and Nelly was aged eighteen.

Dickens maintained a large country house in Kent for his nine children. Despite having separated from his wife Catherine in 1858, he contrived to live the life of an upright Victorian citizen, renowned writer and editor of a London based weekly literary magazine entitled *All The Year Round*. The attractions of Slough, which was easily accessible by train from either Waterloo or Paddington, are obvious.

So that is how Mr Tringham came to rent that small cottage in Slough for Nelly and her mother and later a second cottage in the village for the sake of appearances. This was probably in Church Street, a ten minute walk from Elizabeth cottage.

His identity had to be concealed and no doubt his love of acting took a part in making this deception possible – even enjoyable. But not watertight. According to Felix Aylmer in *Dickens Incognito*, years later when a fire destroyed Elizabeth Cottage the Slough Express carried a report that Dickens had once lodged in the cottage.

Despite disguises and false names it would seem Dickens relied heavily on the discretion of his neighbours in Slough. Imagine the scene: Dickens arrives at Slough Station wearing a heavy disguise, offers his ticket for inspection and as he walks away the station attendant calls out, “goodnight Mr Dickens.”

Today there is no record of Dickens in Slough, no blue plaque on the wall of an ancient cottage in the High Street, no Dickens trail for tourists, no memorial theatre re-creating the dramatic readings that the great man put so much energy into.

The rating records for the period can be seen showing entries in the name of Tringham and the rating map of 1851 shows the site of Elizabeth Cottage near the junction of Alpha Street and High Street. But that is all.

So what evidence is there for this lovers’ tryst in Victorian Slough?

Dickens led a very busy life which necessitated keeping detailed notebooks and diaries of his appointments and appearances. Aware that these would be a goldmine of information about his personal life for any journalist of the time, or in the future, he was in the habit of destroying these books each year. But one notebook relating to 1867 survived.

It was stolen during a visit to America and remained lost until 1922 when it surfaced in an auction of literary memorabilia in New York. Dickens’ passion for secrecy proved well-founded because if it had been written in plain English rather than code, his secret life would have been immediately revealed.

The notebook offers a fascinating challenge of detective work deciphering Dickens’ cryptic notes to himself. It regularly includes such references as ‘At SL’ and ‘To SL’ and combined with other evidence it all points to Slough being a regular haunt for the novelist.

More dramatic is the entry dated 13th April 1867: ‘*To SL: at 10.25. at SL: at 2 ½ Arrival.*’ A week later on Saturday April 20th Dickens notes: ‘*To off: from SL: at 11.40. (Loss.) To G.H.*’ The words ‘*Arrival*’ and ‘*Loss*’ have been interpreted by historians as the birth and premature death of a child to Nelly Ternan. It would be

tempting to read the couple's eighteen month stay in Slough as a planned attempt to have a child. Nelly would be out of the London spotlight but close enough to be regularly visited by Dickens.

Dickens' private letters reveal that Nelly often rode the train back to London with him and they dined in top London restaurants. But life in a village backwater must have been difficult for Nelly. She was used to travelling abroad with Dickens and spending long periods with him as he toured giving readings from his novels.

It was while returning from one of these trips to Paris that they came close to public discovery. In 1865, Dickens, Nelly and her mother were involved in a rail crash at Staplehurst. Their first-class carriage was the only one not to plunge over a bridge. Dickens was active in comforting the survivors but managed to avoid appearing at the inquest into the incident. Had he been forced to testify the nature of his relationship with Nelly Ternan could have been made public.

On Dickens' death in 1870 Nelly could not be openly acknowledged in his will; she received the sum of £1000, a reflection of her public standing as a family friend. To give her nothing would have raised as much suspicion as an overly generous bequest.

But Nelly, aged thirty-one, was able to live a comfortable life after Dickens' death possibly due to settlements made by the author in life. In 1876, Nelly, having removed ten years from her age thus expunging her time with Dickens, married the Reverend George Wharton Robinson and assumed a respectable life in Margate. She had a son, Geoffrey and a daughter Gladys.

It was Geoffrey who discovered Nelly's secret after her death in 1914. He had served as an army officer and then set up as a book dealer with a shop in, ironically, Slough. Among Nelly's papers and letters, he discovered discrepancies between his mother's account of her life and the facts. Driven on by an inescapable Victorian moral code he approached Dickens' descendants and learned the truth.

In an attempt to protect his mother's memory and his family honour he destroyed all Nelly's papers and with it an important historical perspective on one of the world's great literary figures.

Nelly had devoted most of her early adult life to the love affair with Dickens and perhaps, at nearly thirty, she felt her child bearing years slipping away. But the birth in Slough of an illegitimate child fathered by Charles Dickens is a matter of debate amongst Dickens scholars.

Dickens and Nelly left Slough in 1867 and maybe the locals were relieved that the pressure was off: no more need for discretion. The love affair had lasted thirteen years and only came to an end upon the death of Dickens. It would be nice to think the ordinary people of Slough recognised the depth of feeling the lovers shared which resulted in a voluntary code of silence defending the couple from the censure of Victorian society and the excesses of the Victorian gutter press.

(END)

Resource Sidebar

The Invisible Woman by Claire Tomalin published by Viking Penguin.

Dickens Incognito by Felix Aylmer. Published by Hart-Davis

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