

**1849: Charles Dickens in Bonchurch**

Shanklin, Isle of Wight, Monday Night, June 16th, 1849: My Dear Kate, I have but a moment. Just got back and post going out. I have taken a most delightful and beautiful house, belonging to White, at Bonchurch; cool, airy, private bathing, everything delicious. I think it is the prettiest place I ever saw in my life, at home or abroad . . . The man with the post-bag is swearing in the passage. Ever affectionately [signed]. P.S.—A waterfall on the grounds, which I have arranged with a carpenter to convert into a perpetual shower-bath.

The letter was from Charles Dickens to his wife Catherine, and the house was Winterbourne, which they rented from mid-July to early October in 1849, when he was writing *David Copperfield*. The grounds included the waterfall mentioned by Dickens in his letter to Catherine, and he did indeed have a shower-bath built under the waterfall; apparently on one occasion a maid was sent down there to enquire about meal arrangements, and cartoonist John Leech, who was also in Bonchurch that summer, produced this cartoon in *Punch* in September 1849 (note particularly the intriguing shower-cap Dickens is sporting!).

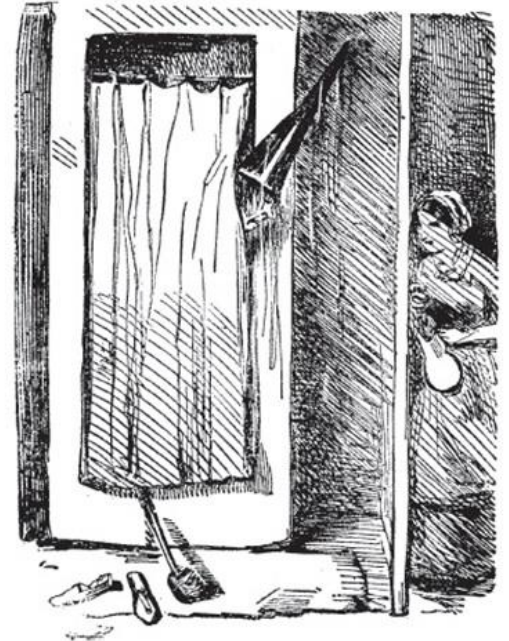
The family arrived on the Island on 23 July: Dickens, his wife Catherine, and her sister Georgina who helped with their eight children, ranging in age from Charlie (aged 12), to baby Henry (6 months). William Thackeray recalled feeling a touch of envy when he described witnessing their arrival in Ryde as he was heading for the ferry: *I met on the pier as I was running for dear life, the great Dickens with his wife his children . . . all looking abominably coarse, vulgar and happy.*

Winterbourne belonged to James and Rosa White - the two families were good friends and they spent much time together. Dickens enjoyed White's company and also his hospitality, in particular the specially prepared gin-punch (a favourite drink), which he described to a friend: *White very jovial . . . He had made some [gin-punch] for our arrival. Ha! Ha! not bad for a beginner . . . I have been, and am, trying to work this morning; but I can't make anything of it, and am going out to think.* Although he had vowed to work every morning on writing, he also took regular walks on the Downs, which he enjoyed, describing the views as similar to those in Genoa. And there were also social engagements, including formal tea parties with Lady Swinburne at East Dene and on another occasion, clearly more to Dickens' taste, *we had a grand, and, what is better, a very good dinner at 'parson' Fielden's (the new curate), with some choice port.*

Towards the end of the Bonchurch visit John Leech was knocked down and injured by a wave on Bonchurch shore, which upset Dickens, who was very interested in the use of hypnosis and tried it on Leech, with, he felt, good effect. But he was distressed by his friend's illness, and was not sleeping well, and when the family finally returned home he complained that the Bonchurch climate did not suit him, causing what he called *great prostration of strength* although author Richard Hutchings suggests that this possibly had something to do with the hospitality and the gin-punch.

But it had also been a genuine family holiday, with games, swimming on the beach, parties and picnics. Dickens threw himself into these events, performing conjuring tricks for assembled family and friends with great panache - he introduced one trick as *the product of nine years' seclusion in the mines of Russia*, and claimed that another was *bought for 5,000 guineas from a Chinese Mandarin who died of grief immediately after parting with the secret*. He was always a showman - a great entertainer. When writing *Oliver Twist*, Dickens had described reducing his wife to what he called an *unspeakable "state"* when he read her his account of the murder of Nancy by Bill Sikes; his biographer, Claire Tomalin, described this as the germ of the readings he gave in 1869 and 1870, when he performed readings of his work to huge audiences, and, in her words, reduced whole audiences to unspeakable "states" and himself to near collapse.

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Gentleman (in Shower Bath):—"Hollo! Hollo! Who's there? What the douce do you want?"
Maid—"If you please, sir, here's the butcher, and missus says, what will you have for dinner to-day?"

