



Dickens and the Moving Age

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On 9 June 1865 Charles Dickens had been returning from France on the tidal express which had left Paris at 7 a.m. He had taken the cross-channel ferry at Boulogne, and resumed the train journey at Folkestone at 2.38 p.m. on its way to Charing Cross. Work was being undertaken on the line between Staplehurst and Headcorn, on the bridge over the River Beult, and rails had been removed. The foreman in charge of the work had consulted the wrong timetable and was not expecting a train for another two hours. The train had been travelling at fifty miles per hour on a downward gradient, and the sight of the danger signal (a man waving a red flag some 500 yards from the site of the work) succeeded in slowing it to a speed of twenty to thirty mph. The train jumped the 42-foot gap, swerved off the track and broke in two. Seven carriages plunged into the river; the others remained poised over the gap. There were 110 passengers, of whom ten were killed and 14 badly injured. Dickens worked hard to tend the injured and dying, and wrote fully about his anger at the incompetence causing the accident. Dickens had been accompanied by Ellen Ternan, with whom he had been conducting a very close liaison since first meeting her in 1857 (they were frequent travellers to France together), and her mother.

Rail travel, in many ways, identifies the nineteenth century as a 'moving age' and could be, as here, a dangerous experience. We shall revisit it later. Incidentally, Charles Dickens died on the same date, 9th June, five years later, in 1870.

Dickens was born in Portsmouth in 1812, three years before the Battle of Waterloo brought to an end the Napoleonic Wars and established Great Britain as the leading nation in the world. Britain was the centre of a developing empire, extending across all continents, and the centre of a great trading system, increasingly stimulated by the process of change from a predominantly agrarian economy to a predominantly industrial one, which had been going on for the previous fifty years or so. With this process of change came social strains and stresses and changes to the way people lived their lives; the development of great towns and cities in the midlands and north, a change in the location of wealth and its creation, and the need for the political and social structure to acknowledge these things, all meant that there was a ferment of change in Dickens's lifetime: it was a 'moving age' indeed.

The title for this talk comes from chapter 12 of Dickens's novel, *Bleak House*, published between May 1852 and September 1853. It is a mid-century novel, following soon after the Great Exhibition, and one which presents both a searching analysis and a powerful indictment of Victorian society. In lots of ways, it is Dickens's 'take' on the Great Exhibition, of which event with its immensely self-congratulatory stance, he deeply disapproved. Here is the paragraph in question:

"There are also ladies and gentlemen of another fashion, not so new but very elegant, who have agreed to put a smooth glaze on the world, and to keep down all its realities. For whom everything must be languid and pretty. Who have found out the perpetual stoppage. Who are to rejoice at nothing, and be sorry for nothing. Who are not to be disturbed by ideas. On whom even the Fine Arts, attending in powder and walking backward like the Lord Chamberlain, must array themselves in the milliners' and tailors' patterns of past generations, and be particularly careful not to be in earnest, or to receive any impress from the moving age."

It is a brilliant paragraph, summarising many of the things Dickens found distasteful about social attitudes: indifference; complacency in any form, backward-looking, lack of earnestness (that great Victorian value); inability to respond; cultural philistinism...

Bleak House, widely regarded as one of Dickens's greatest achievements, is a novel of great immediacy, from its very opening in a fog-bound London. It is a picture of mid-Victorian England at the height of its power and potential, caught between forces for stagnation and for change. The faults in society are caused by an out-dated, hide-bound system like Chancery, self-serving and self-perpetuating, destroying those who become caught up in its toils. It is also a world governed by an aristocracy which is ossifying. As a result of these influences, there is great poverty and suffering, squalor and disease. Pitched against the stagnation are positive forces for change like medicine, the new police force, the new industrialists: there is energy as well as ossification, though some of the energy takes the form of misplaced philanthropic zeal and a neglect of the real and immediate problems in society. Alongside the social analysis runs a narrative about a personal search for identity.

It is true that we look to Dickens for a re-creation of the nineteenth century. Indeed, our picture of life in that complex, energetic and high-achieving century often comes from works of fiction, and especially Dickens's, because he creates such a vivid and detailed contemporary world in his novels, and his other writings. We recall Walter Bagehot's description of him in a review in 1858 as writing as if he were "a special correspondent for posterity", a writer who captures images of his age in words. Through Dickens's writings we are kept in contact with some of the crucial developments of the nineteenth century: political change, reform, the advent of railway travel, the Great Exhibition, the Crimean War, educational developments, and we touch the texture of daily life, particularly in areas like poverty, provision (or lack of it) for suffering, entertainment, the law, crime, prison, and the struggle for survival in an increasingly complex world. We are in particular, allowed to watch the capital city grow. Dickens's voyages through his own times show him responding with great awareness and sensitivity to the age, its achievements and its shortcomings. His energetic response to enormous technological change, his reactions to Britain in the context of the wider world, and his excursions into the vast range of social questions offered and demanding answers, all show him as a man very much prepared to take his own 'impress from the moving age.'

In a more literal sense it was a moving age for him because he travelled, and not only in this country and by train. He visited America twice, once from 22 January to 7 June 1842, including crossing into Canada where he stayed for nearly a month, and once from 19 November 1867 to 22 April 1868, including a briefer visit to Canada. This visit was principally a public reading tour. There were three kinds of writing which emerged from the 1842 visit. Dickens maintained an extensive correspondence with friends at home during these visits and drew on these letters when he turned his experiences into published works, in *American Notes for General Circulation* in 1842 and in the chapters in *Martin Chuzzlewit* devoted to Martin and Mark Tapley's experiences during their visit to America. Dickens has Martin say 'I'll go to America' at the end of chapter 12.

Dickens made his first visit to France in 1837 and his last in 1868. His European travelling spans, therefore, some 31 years, and includes some long periods of residence abroad, especially in Italy, during the 1840s, and some frequent shorter visits to the northern coast of France later in his life. There were about sixty channel crossings, and it was quite a dangerous business. Staplehurst was an extreme case, but every journey was perilous, especially if, like Dickens, you were not a very good traveller. This is how he describes his first experience of crossing the channel in July 1837 in a letter home to Forster:

We arrived here in great state this morning – I very sick, and Missis very well.... We have arranged for a post coach to take us to Ghent, Brussels, Antwerp, and a hundred other places that I cannot recollect now and couldn't spell if I did. We went this afternoon in a barouche to some gardens where the people dance, and where they were footing it most heartily – especially the women who in their short petticoats and light caps look uncommonly agreeable. A gentleman in a blue surtout (coat) and silken Berlins (gloves) accompanied us from the Hotel, and acted as Curator (guide). He even waltzed with a very smart lady (just to show us, condescendingly, how it ought to be done) and waltzed elegantly too. We rang for slippers after we came back, and it turned out that this gentleman was the 'Boots'. Isn't this French?

Like all his letters, it crackles with excitement and immediacy, as the new experiences crowd in on him.

I propose today to look at the way Dickens takes his own 'impress from the moving age' by returning to perhaps the most evident way in which the nineteenth century was a 'moving age': it was the age when railways developed.

Dickens is often identified in the popular imagination as a man of the stagecoach world: those scenes on Christmas cards we call Dickensian, for example. He was, of course, born into such a world, in 1812, and he records the feeling, as a child travelling from Kent up to London, of being packed into the damp straw inside a coach, "like game". His early novels, like *Pickwick Papers* and *Nicholas Nickleby* are stagecoach

novels, with characters using that mode of transport. The mood created by these journeys at their best is captured here, from chapter 46 of *The Old Curiosity Shop*: What a soothing, luxurious, drowsy way of travelling, to lie inside that slowly-moving mountain, listening to the tinkling of the horses' bells, the occasional smacking of the carter's whip, the smooth rolling of the great broad wheels, the rattle of the harness, the cheery good-nights of passing travellers jogging past on little short-stepped horses--all made pleasantly indistinct by the thick awning, which seemed made for lazy listening under, till one fell asleep! The very going to sleep, still with an indistinct idea, as the head jogged to and fro upon the pillow, of moving onward with no trouble or fatigue, and hearing all these sounds like dreamy music, lulling to the senses--and the slow waking up, and finding one's self staring out through the breezy curtain half-opened in the front, far up into the cold bright sky with its countless stars, and downward at the driver's lantern dancing on like its namesake Jack of the swamps and marshes, and sideways at the dark grim trees, and forward at the long bare road rising up, up, up, until it stopped abruptly at a sharp high ridge as if there were no more road, and all beyond was sky...

But by the time he was eighteen, in 1830, the first piece of railway track was laid between Manchester and Liverpool, and the railway age had begun. When, in March-April of 1837, he with his wife and first child, took possession of their first family house at 48 Doughty Street in Bloomsbury, London, work was going on at nearby Euston on the first main line railway, from Birmingham, to be brought into the capital. Its first section, from Euston to Boxmoor was opened on 20th July 1837, a month after Victoria became queen, and the whole line was completed on 17th September 1838.

Dickens's letters of 1838 show us he was already travelling by train. Staying at Llangollen he wrote to Forster on 2nd November 1838 telling him to 'go straight to Liverpool by the first Birmingham train' (the Grand Junction Railway from Birmingham to Liverpool had been opened in July 1837). On 5th November he wrote from Liverpool to his wife that he would be returning to London with Forster and would arrive 'at the Euston Square Station of the Birmingham Railway.'

By the time of Dickens's death in 1870, most of the main line termini in London had been built. Liverpool Street, Blackfriars and Marylebone were the only ones still to come. Work on an Underground Railway in the capital had begun and been opened in 1863. Dickens was himself permanently established at Gad's Hill Place, near Rochester in Kent by this time, but had been commuting up to London from the conveniently nearby Higham Station for the previous ten years. He also became a frequent rail traveller in the course of his Reading Tours to all parts of this country and America in the 1850s and 60s. By 1870 the rail network in this country was well-established, and the changes it brought into being had altered people's lives for ever. Dickens spent his adult life living through those times and recording them.

Dickens was very much a man fascinated by technological progress and its potential for good. He often described the act of writing as "getting up steam" and of "blazing away" when the creative fit was on him – both industrial metaphors closely related to railways and steam. John Ruskin described Dickens as being of "the steam whistle party", a man wedded to the progressive developments of the time. In a letter to his friend, Douglas Jerrold, from Cremona in Italy in November 1844, Dickens is strongly critical of the voices raised in objection to the building of a railway in Venice: "Instead of going down upon their knees, the drivellers, and thanking Heaven that they live in a time when Iron makes Roads instead of prison bars, and engines for driving screws into the skulls of innocent men.'

When R H Horne wrote his *New Spirit of the Age* in 1844 he gave pride of place to Dickens, describing him as 'manifestly the product of his age...a genuine emanation from its entire and genuine spirit'. The same could be said of railways. More than any other technological development, railways characterise the Victorian Age and remain one of its greatest achievements, harnessing natural power and energy by man-made means in the cause of improvement and progress. Tennyson, wrote in *Locksley Hall* (written 1837-8, published 1842):

Not in vain the distance beacons. Forward, forward let us range,
Let the great world spin for ever down the
ringing grooves of change.

Wrong, of course; he thought railway train wheels ran in grooves, instead of on flanges and rails.

The pace of life in the nineteenth century was changing fast. Think of walking or horse-riding as the pace of life from the middle ages up to the mid-nineteenth century. A good horse-drawn coach travelling on a well-made road in reasonable weather conditions could average a speed of 9 to 10 mph: movement as fast as people envisaged possible up to the 1830s. Between 1839 and 1880 railway travelling speed increased from 12 mph to 48 mph, averaging about 36 mph for much of the time. By the end of the great railway

boom of the 1840s, over 5000 miles of track had been laid, and by 1889 this had increased to 13,000. The railway boom stimulated the economy, the iron and steel industry especially, and made it easier for goods to be transported. It gave employment opportunities, very important at a time when there was much poverty and suffering. The very real fear of revolution with the Chartist Movement and the “Hungry Forties” (and the ever-present memory of the French Revolution high in the popular consciousness) was somewhat assuaged by the economic boost given by railway development. There was the opportunity for speculation, and fortunes could be made and just as easily lost. Gradually there came about the opportunity to live away from the area where you worked. The landscape was altered: travellers saw parts of the country they barely knew existed. Train travel demanded standardisation of time throughout the country, which happened from the 1880s.

All of this took some adjustment. Gentlemen, who had their own horse-drawn carriages, would unbridle the horses and have the carriages fixed to flat trolleys coupled to trains, and travel in them, rather than have to share carriages with other people. Guards locked carriage doors to prevent people getting out while the train was moving. Victoria’s consort, Prince Albert, is reputed to have remarked to a railway official after his first journey, “Not quite so fast next time, Mr Conductor, if you please.” Dickens has the wonderfully-garrulous Mrs Gamp describing the dangers of the shocks and excitement of railway travel for ladies in an interesting condition, in *Martin Chuzzlewit*: “I have heard of one young man, a guard upon a railway, only three year opened...as is godfather at this present time to six-and-twenty blessed little strangers, equally unexpected, and all on ‘em named after the Ingeins as was the cause.”

Dickens gives Tony Weller, father of Sam, in *Pickwick Papers*, the opportunity to voice several objections to railway travel, from the perspective of a stage coachman, in this extract from *Master Humphrey’s Clock*: ‘It wos on the rail, (Samivel)... I wos a goin’ down to Birmingham by the rail, and I wos locked up in a close carriage with a living widder. Alone we wos; the widder and me wos alone; and I believe it wos only because we WOS alone and there wos no clergyman in the conwayance, that that ‘ere widder didn’t marry me afore ve reached the half-way station. Ven I think how she began a screaming as we wos a goin’ under them tunnels in the dark, - how she kept on a faintin’ and ketchin’ hold o’ me, - and how I tried to bust open the door as was tight-locked and perwented all escape - Ah! It was a awful thing, most awful!’

... And as to the ingein, - a nasty, wheezin’, creakin’, gaspin’, puffin’, bustin’ monster, always out o’ breath, with a shiny green-and-gold back, like a unpleasant beetle in that ‘ere gas magnifier, - as to the ingein as is always a pourin’ out red-hot coals at night, and black smoke in the day, the sensiblest thing it does, in my opinion, is, ven there’s somethin’ in the vay, and it sets up that ‘ere frightful scream vich seems to say, “Now here’s two hundred and forty passengers in the wery greatest extremity o’ danger, and here’s their two hundred and forty screams in vun!”

Inevitably there were objections to the changes wrought by the railways. Dickens, always responsive to the tenor of the times, addresses the issue most fully in *Dombey and Son*. Published, as usual for Dickens, in serial instalments, it came out between October 1846 and April 1848, and it is the great novel of the Railway Age. It is a strikingly contemporary work, coming at a crucial point in Dickens’s career, and thenovel in which he gives railways a major focus. In it he records social and physical change consequent upon railways, in describing the obliteration of Staggs’s Gardens, a London area usually associated with Camden Town, which Dickens knew from having lived there when the family moved to London when he was a child and living in Bayham Street.

This euphonious locality was situated in a suburb, known by the inhabitants of Staggs’s Gardens by the name of Camberling Town; a designation which the Strangers’ Map of London, as printed (with a view to pleasant and commodious reference) on pocket handkerchiefs, condenses, with some show of reason, into Camden Town.

The first shock of a great earthquake had, just at that period, rent the whole neighbourhood to its centre. Traces of its course were visible on every side. Houses were knocked down; streets broken through and stopped; deep pits and trenches dug in the ground; enormous heaps of earth and clay thrown up; buildings that were undermined and shaking, propped by great beams of wood. Here, a chaos of carts, overthrown and jumbled together, lay topsy-turvy at the bottom of a steep unnatural hill; there, confused treasures of iron soaked and rusted in something that had accidentally become a pond. Everywhere were bridges that led nowhere; thoroughfares that were wholly impassable; Babel towers of chimneys, wanting half their height; temporary wooden houses and enclosures, in the most unlikely situations; carcasses of ragged tenements, and fragments of unfinished walls and arches, and piles of scaffolding, and wildernesses of bricks, and giant forms of cranes, and tripods straddling above nothing. There were a hundred thousand

shapes and substances of incompleteness, wildly mingled out of their places, upside down, burrowing in the earth, aspiring in the air, mouldering in the water, and unintelligible as any dream. Hot springs and fiery eruptions, the usual attendants upon earthquakes, lent their contributions of confusion to the scene. Boiling water hissed and heaved within dilapidated walls; whence, also, the glare and roar of flames came issuing forth; and mounds of ashes blocked up rights of way, and wholly changed the law and custom of the neighbourhood. In short, the yet unfinished and unopened Railroad was in progress; and, from the very core of all this dire disorder, trailed smoothly away, upon its mighty course of civilisation and improvement. But as yet, the neighbourhood was shy to own the Railroad. One or two bold speculators had projected streets; and one had built a little, but had stopped among the mud and ashes to consider farther of it. A bran-new Tavern, redolent of fresh mortar and size, and fronting nothing at all, had taken for its sign The Railway Arms; but that might be rash enterprise - and then it hoped to sell drink to the workmen. So, the Excavators' House of Call had sprung up from a beer-shop; and the old-established Ham and Beef Shop had become the Railway Eating House, with a roast leg of pork daily, through interested motives of a similar immediate and popular description. Lodging-house keepers were favourable in like manner; and for the like reasons were not to be trusted. The general belief was very slow. There were frowzy fields, and cow-houses, and dunghills, and dustheaps, and ditches, and gardens, and summer-houses, and carpet-beating grounds, at the very door of the Railway. Little tumuli of oyster shells in the oyster season, and of lobster shells in the lobster season, and of broken crockery and faded cabbage leaves in all seasons, encroached upon its high places. Posts, and rails, and old cautions to trespassers, and backs of mean houses, and patches of wretched vegetation, stared it out of countenance. Nothing was the better for it, or thought of being so. If the miserable waste ground lying near it could have laughed, it would have laughed it to scorn, like many of the miserable neighbours. Staggs's Gardens was uncommonly incredulous. It was a little row of houses, with little squalid patches of ground before them, fenced off with old doors, barrel staves, scraps of tarpaulin, and dead bushes; with bottomless tin kettles and exhausted iron fenders, thrust into the gaps. Here, the Staggs's Gardeners trained scarlet beans, kept fowls and rabbits, erected rotten summer-houses (one was an old boat), dried clothes, and smoked pipes. Some were of opinion that Staggs's Gardens derived its name from a deceased capitalist, one Mr Staggs, who had built it for his delectation. Others, who had a natural taste for the country, held that it dated from those rural times when the antlered herd, under the familiar denomination of Staggses, had resorted to its shady precincts. Be this as it may, Staggs's Gardens was regarded by its population as a sacred grove not to be withered by Railroads; and so confident were they generally of its long outliving any such ridiculous inventions, that the master chimney-sweeper at the corner, who was understood to take the lead in the local politics of the Gardens, had publicly declared that on the occasion of the Railroad opening, if ever it did open, two of his boys should ascend the flues of his dwelling, with instructions to hail the failure with derisive cheers from the chimney-pots.

The increasing pace and speed of life was another colossal change. Mr Dombey, in chapter 20, undertakes a train journey from Euston to Birmingham. In 1841 this would have taken five hours, reducing to three hours by 1848, the year of the novel's publication; today it takes just over two hours – or should. The other major adjustment to be made was the unsettling effect of landscape change and the destruction of whole communities in order to make room for the railway to pass through. What is so special here, and so new in fiction, is the way Dickens captures the rhythms of the train as it sweeps through the countryside. The language bristles and crackles; the disorientation is exposed; the whirl and vision presented to us in the finest piece of early railway poetry I know. This is published in part seven of the novel, in April 1847, not yet ten years since this particular line opened.

Away, with a shriek, and a roar, and a rattle, from the town, burrowing among the dwellings of men and making the streets hum, flashing out into the meadows for a moment, mining in through the damp earth, booming on in darkness and heavy air, bursting out again into the sunny day so bright and wide; away, with a shriek, and a roar, and a rattle, through the fields, through the woods, through the corn, through the hay, through the chalk, through the mould, through the clay, through the rock, among objects close at hand and almost in the grasp, ever flying from the traveller, and a deceitful distance ever moving slowly within him: like as in the track of the remorseless monster, Death!

Through the hollow, on the height, by the heath, by the orchard, by the park, by the garden, over the canal, across the river, where the sheep are feeding, where the mill is going, where the barge is floating, where the dead are lying, where the factory is smoking, where the stream is running, where the village clusters, where the great cathedral rises, where the bleak moor lies, and the wild breeze smoothes or ruffles it at its inconstant will; away, with a shriek, and a roar, and a rattle, and no trace to leave behind but dust and

vapour: like as in the track of the remorseless monster, Death!

Breasting the wind and light, the shower and sunshine, away, and still away, it rolls and roars, fierce and rapid, smooth and certain, and great works and massive bridges crossing up above, fall like a beam of shadow an inch broad, upon the eye, and then are lost. Away, and still away, onward and onward ever: glimpses of cottage-homes, of houses, mansions, rich estates, of husbandry and handicraft, of people, of old roads and paths that look deserted, small, and insignificant as they are left behind: and so they do, and what else is there but such glimpses, in the track of the indomitable monster, Death!

Away, with a shriek, and a roar, and a rattle, plunging down into the earth again, and working on in such a storm of energy and perseverance, that amidst the darkness and whirlwind the motion seems reversed, and to tend furiously backward, until a ray of light upon the wet wall shows its surface flying past like a fierce stream, Away once more into the day, and through the day, with a shrill yell of exultation, roaring, rattling, tearing on, spurning everything with its dark breath, sometimes pausing for a minute where a crowd of faces are, that in a minute more are not; sometimes lapping water greedily, and before the spout at which it drinks has ceased to drip upon the ground, shrieking, roaring, rattling through the purple distance!

Louder and louder yet, it shrieks and cries as it comes tearing on resistless to the goal: and now its way, still like the way of Death, is strewn with ashes thickly. Everything around is blackened. There are dark pools of water, muddy lanes, and miserable habitations far below. There are jagged walls and falling houses close at hand, and through the battered roofs and broken windows, wretched rooms are seen, where want and fever hide themselves in many wretched shapes, while smoke and crowded gables, and distorted chimneys, and deformity of brick and mortar penning up deformity of mind and body, choke the murky distance.

As Mr Dombey looks out of his carriage window, it is never in his thoughts that the monster who has brought him there has let the light of day in on these things: not made or caused them.

It is also important to note the last part of the piece, as the train enters the midlands city. Here is a Birmingham industrial landscape Dombey, the capitalist from London whose wealth helped to create the enabling context for the railway boom, would not otherwise know, an industrial world of darkness and misery, a world into which the train has “let the light of day.” This is again a typical feature of the age: the sources of wealth not known or acknowledged by those who exploit them.

Dickens clearly sees the power of progress to make changes for good in people’s lives, as well as the inevitable resistance to change and fear of Staggs’s Gardens, and the depiction of the train as destroyer here. There is one more important use of the railway in chapter 50, but I will return to that later. Increasingly, as time goes by, the railway is assumed as part of the setting of the novels, so we get occasional references to train travel, but no major exploration of its impact such as that we are given in *Dombey and Son*. We do, though, get a possible railway reference in *Little Dorrit*. The great financier who comes to a crash, Merdle, is generally accepted to be based on the career of John Sadleir, but an article in *The Dickensian* for Autumn 1971 by Grahame and Angela Smith called ‘Dickens as a Popular Artist’ (pp. 131-144) argues for the career of George Hudson, the ‘Railway King’ as a source for the creation of the character. Incidentally, that issue of the Dickens Fellowship’s journal contains other interesting railway material, such as a piece by Michael Steig on the railway panic of 1845, and a short item on the Staplehurst railway accident of 1865, quoting from the *Illustrated Police News* of 17 June that year and giving an account of Dickens’s involvement.

It is to Dickens’s Journalism we must turn to see his fascination further developed. Dickens’s writing career began in journalism and he soon established himself a reputation as ‘the best reporter in London’. He taught himself shorthand in record time, and moved frantically from story to story, all round the country, to get his copy in first. As well as speed, he was accurate and a sharp observer – and he was, and was to remain, wickedly funny. He was to become, as well as the writer of fifteen novels, five Christmas Books, eighteen Christmas Stories, two travel books, writings for children and the scripts for several plays, and undertaking reading tours of his own works, the editor – or conductor – of his own two journals *Household Words* (1851-59) and *All The Year Round* (1859-70).

Once he had ownership and editorial control, and always with a close eye to public demand, which he created in order to be able to satisfy it, he was able to explore topics close to his heart. Thus, if one simply looks for pieces with “Railway” in their titles, one finds eight such items in *Household Words*, and a staggering fifty-seven in *All The Year Round*. There are, of course, many more with other titles, and only a

few are by Dickens himself.

Of these, Mrs Lirriper's Legacy which was the Christmas story for 1864, is a wonderful tale of Mrs Lirriper's adopted grandson Jemmy and one of her lodgers, Major Jackman, playing trains, but is used by Dickens to explore the whole range of issues involved in establishing the railway. He covers attitudes to the public, safety issues, investment, punctuality, all through the fanciful guise of the garrulous London landlady recounting her grandson's games to her friend:

...what with engineering since he took a taste for it and him and the Major making Locomotives out of parasols broken iron pots and cotton-reels and them absolutely a getting off the line and falling over the table and injuring the passengers almost equal to the originals it really is quite wonderful. And when I says to the Major, "Major can't you by ANY means give us a communication with the guard?" the Major says quite huffy, "No madam it's not to be done," and when I says "Why not?" the Major says, "That is between us who are in the Railway Interest madam and our friend the Right Honourable Vice-President of the Board of Trade" and if you'll believe me my dear the Major wrote to Jemmy at school to consult him on the answer I should have before I could get even that amount of unsatisfactoriness out of the man, the reason being that when we first began with the little model and the working signals beautiful and perfect (being in general as wrong as the real) and when I says laughing "What appointment am I to hold in this undertaking gentlemen?" Jemmy hugs me round the neck and tells me dancing, "You shall be the Public Gran" and consequently they put upon me just as much as ever they like and I sit a growling in my easy-chair. My dear whether it is that a grown man as clever as the Major cannot give half his heart and mind to anything--even a plaything--but must get into right down earnest with it, whether it is so or whether it is not so I do not undertake to say, but Jemmy is far out-done by the serious and believing ways of the Major in the management of the United Grand Junction Lirriper and Jackman Great Norfolk Parlour Line, "For" says my Jemmy with the sparkling eyes when it was christened, "we must have a whole mouthful of name Gran or our dear old Public" and there the young rogue kissed me, "won't stump up." So the Public took the shares--ten at ninepence, and immediately when that was spent twelve Preference at one and sixpence--and they were all signed by Jemmy and countersigned by the Major, and between ourselves much better worth the money than some shares I have paid for in my time. In the same holidays the line was made and worked and opened and ran excursions and had collisions and burst its boilers and all sorts of accidents and offences all most regular correct and pretty. The sense of responsibility entertained by the Major as a military style of station-master my dear starting the down train behind time and ringing one of those little bells that you buy with the little coal-scuttles off the tray round the man's neck in the street did him honour.

Mugby Junction is the Christmas story for 1866. Mugby is Rugby, the great midland junction station. He includes an hilarious description of a railway refreshment room, and gives a spine-chilling ghost story called The Signalman, setting the scene in this masterly and nightmarish way:

A place replete with shadowy shapes, this Mugby Junction in the black hours of the twenty-four. Mysterious goods trains, covered with palls and gliding on like vast weird funerals, conveying themselves guiltily away from the presence of the few lighted lamps, as if their freight had come to a secret and unlawful end. Half-miles of coal pursuing in a Detective manner, following when they lead, stopping when they stop, backing when they back. Red-hot embers showering out upon the ground, down this dark avenue and down the other, as if torturing fires were being raked clear; concurrently, shrieks and groans and grinds invading the ear as if the tortured were at the height of their suffering. Iron-barred cages full of cattle jangling by midway, their drooping heads with horns entangled, eyes frozen with terror, and mouths too: at least they have long icicles (or what seem so) hanging from their lips. Unknown languages in the air, conspiring in red, green and white characters. An earthquake, accompanied with thunder and lightning, going up express to London. Now, all quiet and rusty, wind and rain in possession, lamps extinguished, Mugby Junction dead and indistinct, with its robe drawn over its head, like Caesar.

The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices appeared in Household Words in October 1857 and contains vivid impressionistic descriptions of railway travel, on the lines of the piece in Dombey and Son.

Other shorter pieces on this theme include Railway Dreaming (10 May 1856), which captures the abandonment of conscious control of one's life which rail travel can induce: I am never sure of time or place upon a Railroad. I can't read, I can't think, I can't sleep – I can only dream. Rattling along in the railway carriage in a state of luxurious confusion, I take it for granted I am coming from somewhere, and going somewhere else. I seek to know no more.

Railway Strikes (11 January 1851) argues for a reconsideration by the train operatives on the North-Western Railway of their decision to go on strike. It pursues Dickens's frequent argument that employers and employed are all engaged in the same activity and have the same interests and should, therefore, work together. Fire and Snow (21 January 1854) gives a description of a journey between Birmingham and Wolverhampton under snowy conditions. A Narrative of Extraordinary Suffering (12 July 1851) tackles the complexities of Bradshaw's Railway Guide and the miseries it causes for one Mr John Lost, in attempting to plan a journey to Worcester. A Flight (30 August 1851) gives wonderful description of impressions during a high-speed journey, again identifying the unsettling quality of travel, such a new experience for the time. An Unsettled Neighbourhood (11 November 1854) returns to the theme of dislocation and change necessary for progress, and like Staggs's Gardens, returns to Camden Town in London.

Accidents seem to have been associated with railways since the very beginning. When the Manchester to Liverpool Railway was opened in 1830, the MP William Huskisson was fatally injured during the first journey. Dickens uses the railway as a kind of fatal force, a nemesis, in *Dombey and Son*, when the express train destroys Mr Carker and licked up his "stream of life with its fiery heat, and cast his mutilated fragments in the air." Between April 1850 and December 1855, he informed the readers of *Household Words* of the number of people killed or injured in train accidents in monthly issues of a factual digest called the *Household Narrative of Current Events*. This publication, principally compiled by Dickens's father-in-law George Hogarth is a wonderful compilation of facts and figures. For example, we learn that, in the half-year ended 31 December 1851, the number of individual journeys taken on the railway was 47,509,392. Of these 113 were killed and 264 injured. The length of the railways open on the 30th June 1851 was 6698 miles; by 31 December this had risen to 6890, an increase of 192 miles.

By 1866, of course, he had undergone personal experience of the danger of railway travel and I began with the Staplehurst accident on 9 June 1865. There is much correspondence from Dickens to his friends about the incident, but the fullest is this, to Thomas Mitton, on 13th June, the Tuesday after the accident. It is a very powerful account of the experience, in extremely vivid terms, and we can do no better than let him speak for himself.

To Thomas Mitton GAD'S HILL PLACE, | HIGHAM BY ROCHESTER, KENT. Tuesday, Thirteenth June 1865

My Dear Mitton. I should have written to you yesterday or the day before, if I had been quite up to writing. I am a little shaken, not by the beating and dragging of the carriage in which I was, but by the hard work afterwards in getting out the dying and dead, which was most horrible. I was in the only carriage that did not go over into the stream. It was caught upon the turn by some of the ruin of the bridge, and hung suspended and balanced in an apparently impossible manner. Two ladies were my fellow passengers; an old one, and a young one. This is exactly what passed:-- you may judge from it the precise length of the suspense. Suddenly we were off the rail and beating the ground as the car of a half emptied balloon might. The old lady cried out "My God!" and the young one screamed. I caught hold of them both (the old lady sat opposite, and the young one on my left), and said: "We can't help ourselves, but we can be quiet and composed. Pray don't cry out." The old lady immediately answered, "Thank you. Rely upon me. Upon my soul, I will be quiet." The young lady said in a frantic way, "Let us join hands and die friends." We were then all tilted down together in a corner of the carriage, and stopped. I said to them thereupon: "You may be sure nothing worse can happen. Our danger must be over. Will you remain here without stirring, while I get out of the window?" They both answered quite collectedly, "Yes," and I got out without the least notion what had happened. Fortunately I got out with great caution and stood upon the step. Looking down, I saw the bridge gone and nothing below me but the line of rail. Some people in the two other compartments were madly trying to plunge out at window, and had no idea that there was an open swampy field 15 feet down below them and nothing else! The two guards (one with his face cut) were running up and down on the down side of the bridge (which was not torn up) quite wildly. I called out to them "Look at me. Do stop an instant and look at me, and tell me whether you don't know me." One of them answered "We know you very well, Mr. Dickens." "Then," I said, "my good fellow for God's sake give me your key, and send one of those labourers here, and I'll empty this carriage." -- We did it quite safely, by means of a plank or two and when it was done I saw all the rest of the train except the two baggage cars down in the stream. I got into the carriage again for my brandy flask, took off my travelling hat for a basin, climbed down the brickwork, and filled my hat with water. Suddenly I came upon a staggering man covered with blood (I think he must have been flung clean out of his carriage) with such a frightful cut across the skull that I couldn't bear to look at him. I poured some water over his face, and gave him some to drink, and gave him some brandy, and laid him down on the grass, and he said "I am gone" and died afterwards. Then I stumbled over a lady

lying on her back against a little pollard tree, with the blood streaming over her face (which was lead color) in a number of distinct little streams from the head. I asked her if she could swallow a little brandy, and she just nodded, and I gave her some and left her for somebody else. The next time I passed her, she was dead. Then a man examined at the Inquest yesterday (who evidently had not the least remembrance of what really passed) came running up to me and implored me to help him find his wife, who was afterwards found dead. No imagination can conceive the ruin of the carriages, or the extraordinary weights under which the people were lying, or the complications into which they were twisted up among iron and wood, and mud and water. I don't want to be examined at the Inquest, and I don't want to write about it. It could do no good either way, and I could only seem to speak about myself, which, of course I would rather not do. I am keeping very quiet here. I have a -- I don't know what to call it -- constitutional (I suppose) presence of mind, and was not in the least fluttered at the time. I instantly remembered that I had the MS. of a No. with me, and clambered back into the carriage for it. But in writing these scanty words of recollection I feel the shake and am obliged to stop. Ever faithfully, C.D.

Later that year, on 30th November, Dickens writes as follows, in a letter to W W F de Cerjat:

Lastly, a muddle of railways in all directions possible and impossible, with no general public scheme, no general public supervision, enormous waste of money, no fixable responsibility, no accountability but under Lord Campbell's Act (1846 Act only permitting compensation for fatal accidents). I think of that accident in which I was preserved. Before the most furious and notable train in the twenty-four hours, the head of a gang of workmen takes up the rails. That train changes its time every day as the tide changes, and that head workman is not provided by the railway company with any clock or watch! Lord Shaftesbury wrote to me to ask me what I thought of an obligation on railway companies to put strong walls to all bridges and viaducts. I told him, of course, that the force of such a shock would carry away anything that any company could set up, and I added: "Ask the minister what he thinks about the votes of the railway interest in the House of Commons, and about his being afraid to lay a finger on it with an eye to his majority."

One wonders if anyone has read that recently and in high places. Dickens was badly shocked by the incident. He continued to make much use of railway travel, particularly in enabling him to travel for Public Reading performances, but suffered much nervous strain as a result, and it must have contributed to his death in 1870.

Dickens also turns his attention to another set of problems for travellers: refreshments on a journey. This essay, called Refreshments for Travellers was published in All The Year Round on 24th March 1860, and is one of The Uncommercial Traveller series. Refreshments for the travelling public was a new idea in Britain, though not abroad, and had been stimulated by a parliamentary measure introduced by Gladstone earlier in 1860, so the piece is highly topical.

I travel by railroad. I start from home at seven or eight in the morning, after breakfasting hurriedly. What with skimming over the open landscape, what with mining in the damp bowels of the earth, what with banging, booming and shrieking the scores of miles away, I am hungry when I arrive at the 'Refreshment' station where I am expected. Please to observe, expected. I have said I am hungry; perhaps I might say, with greater point and force, that I am to some extent exhausted, and that I need – in the expressive French sense of the word – to be restored. What is provided for my restoration? The apartment that is to restore me, is a wind-trap, cunningly set to inveigle all the draughts in that country-side, and to communicate a special intensity and velocity to them as they rotate in two hurricanes: one, about my wretched head; one about my wretched legs. The training of the young ladies behind the counter who are to restore me, has been from their infancy directed to the assumption of a defiant dramatic show that I am NOT expected. It is in vain for me to represent to them by my humble and conciliatory manners, that I wish to be liberal. It is in vain for me to represent to myself, for the encouragement of my sinking soul, that the young ladies have a pecuniary interest in my arrival. Neither my reason nor my feelings can make head against the cold glazed glare of eye with which I am assured that I am not expected, and not wanted. The solitary man among the bottles would sometimes take pity on me, if he dared, but he is powerless against the rights and mights of Woman. (Of the page I make no account, for, he is a boy, and therefore the natural enemy of Creation.) Chilling fast, in the deadly tornadoes to which my upper and lower extremities are exposed, and subdued by the moral disadvantage at which I stand, I turn my disconsolate eyes on the refreshments that are to restore me. I find that I must either scald my throat by insanely ladling into it, against time and for no wager, brown hot water stiffened with flour; or I must make myself flaky and sick with Banbury cake; or, I must stuff into my delicate organisation, a currant pincushion which I know will swell into immeasurable dimensions when it has got there; or, I must extort from an iron-bound quarry, with a fork, as if I were farming an inhospitable soil, some glutinous lumps of gristle and grease, called

pork-pie.

If we read what Dickens has to say about railways as they develop in his lifetime we can discover the contemporary fears they created, the social and topographical changes they caused, the new responses and ways of behaving they inspired. We bring together two gigantic representations of the age, two massive impressions of 'the moving age' of the nineteenth century.

My final extract takes us back to Staggs's Gardens in *Dombey and Son* chapter 15 for Dickens's assessment of the power and possibility inherent in the new age:

There was no such place as Staggs's Gardens. It had vanished from the earth. Where the old rotten summer-houses once had stood, palaces now reared their heads, and granite columns of gigantic girth opened a vista to the railway world beyond. The miserable waste ground, where the refuse-matter had been heaped of yore, was swallowed up and gone; and in its frowsy stead were tiers of warehouses, crammed with rich goods and costly merchandise. The old by-streets now swarmed with passengers and vehicles of every kind: the new streets that had stopped disheartened in the mud and waggon-ruts, formed towns within themselves, originating wholesome comforts and conveniences belonging to themselves, and never tried nor thought of until they sprung into existence. Bridges that had led to nothing, led to villas, gardens, churches, healthy public walks. The carcasses of houses, and beginnings of new thoroughfares, had started off upon the line at steam's own speed, and shot away into the country in a monster train.' As to the neighbourhood which had hesitated to acknowledge the railroad in its straggling days, that had grown wise and penitent, as any Christian might in such a case, and now boasted of its powerful and prosperous relation. There were railway patterns in its drapers' shops, and railway journals in the windows of its newsmen. There were railway hotels, office-houses, lodging-houses, boarding-houses; railway plans, maps, views, wrappers, bottles, sandwich-boxes, and time-tables; railway hackney-coach and stands; railway omnibuses, railway streets and buildings, railway hangers-on and parasites, and flatterers out of all calculation. There was even railway time observed in clocks, as if the sun itself had given in. Among the vanquished was the master chimney-sweeper, whilom incredulous at Staggs's Gardens, who now lived in a stuccoed house three stories high, and gave himself out, with golden flourishes upon a varnished board, as contractor for the cleansing of railway chimneys by machinery. To and from the heart of this great change, all day and night, throbbing currents rushed and returned incessantly like its life's blood. Crowds of people and mountains of goods, departing and arriving scores upon scores of times in every four-and-twenty hours, produced a fermentation in the place that was always in action. The very houses seemed disposed to pack up and take trips. Wonderful Members of Parliament, who, little more than twenty years before, had made themselves merry with the wild railroad theories of engineers, and given them the liveliest rubs in cross-examination, went down into the north with their watches in their hands, and sent on messages before by the electric telegraph, to say that they were coming. Night and day the conquering engines rumbled at their distant work, or, advancing smoothly to their journey's end, and gliding like tame dragons into the allotted corners grooved out to the inch for their reception, stood bubbling and trembling there, making the walls quake, as if they were dilating with the secret knowledge of great powers yet unsuspected in them, and strong purposes not yet achieved.

The London of Charles Dickens A small but very useful volume called *The London of Charles Dickens*, originally published in 1970 jointly by London Transport and the Dickens Fellowship, and republished in 1979 by Midas Books has, sadly, been out of print for some years. It drew on the vast knowledge and expertise of The Dickens Fellowship's long-serving Secretary John Greaves. The good news is that a revised edition is planned for publication later in November 2006, with additional material and illustrations. It is to be published by Proof Books (www.proofbookonline.com) at £6.99 a copy.

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