Charles Dickens
The Lost Portrait

Exhibition
22 November 2018 — 25 January 2019
Fig. 1
John Charles (or James Carr) Armytage (1802–1897), after Margaret Gillies (1803–1887), Portrait of Charles Dickens (1812–1870)
Engraving
Contents

Page 3
Introduction
Philip Mould

Page 5
Foreword
Dr. Cindy Sughrue

Page 8
The Lost Portrait:
Charles Dickens by Margaret Gillies
Emma Rutherford

Page 20
The Lost Portrait: A Note on Provenance
Lawrence Hendra

Page 30
Dickens in the 1840s
Lucinda Dickens Hawksley

Page 40
Charles Dickens: A Life in Objects
Louisa Price

Page 49
List of illustrations

Page 50
Index
Introduction

Philip Mould

Every now and then something comes through our doors that alone justifies a career devoted to the research and representation of historical art. When the small package finally arrived at our gallery on a Monday morning in spring, it represented just such a moment. Although covered with a particularly virulent species of South African mould, following its unwrapping Dickens’ indomitable expression was still as affecting as it had been to the Victorian audience of the Royal Academy when it was last seen in public one hundred and seventy-four years ago. It was an electrifying moment for us all.

Since then much has happened. I would like to acknowledge the expert conservation carried out by Alan Derbyshire at the Victoria and Albert Museum. It has also been a privilege to work with Dr Cindy Sughrue OBE FRSA and the staff of the Charles Dickens Museum on placing this rediscovered image into Dickens’ life and iconography. Their insights have been transformative. As our miniature consultant Emma Rutherford has demonstrated in her essay and Lawrence Hendra in his provenance research, in artistic, historical and literary terms this is a portrait that has kept on giving.

There are many captivating strands to this story: the emotive circumstances of its commission as an image for a ‘New Age’; its departure to South Africa and connections to the family of the writer George Eliot; the fascinating revelations about its proto-suffragist artist, Margaret Gillies; its critical timing with A Christmas Carol and the radically fresh characterisation that its re-emergence has now lent to our perception of the young author.

I would like to make special mention of our online manager Laurie Lewis for coordinating the activities and podcast in connection to this project, and the fruitful and dedicated collaboration of our gallery team.

Our earnest hope is that the activities we have put in train around its emergence will culminate in this exceptionally important portrait being preserved for the nation within the Charles Dickens Museum’s outstanding collection of the author’s objects and possessions.

Philip Mould OBE, D.Lit Hon.
November 2018
Foreword
Dr. Cindy Sughrue

When Philip Mould contacted the Charles Dickens Museum with news of the discovery of a possible portrait miniature of Charles Dickens as a young man, our interest was naturally piqued. I recall saying to our curator, ‘let’s not get too excited just yet’, knowing that the trade in Dickens relics had occasionally brought forth some questionable material over the years. However, when we saw an image of the piece and were able to identify it as the source for a number of popular engravings from the 1840s, it was a thrilling moment.

Letters in our archive revealed details about Dickens sitting for the artist Margaret Gillies during the autumn of 1843, the period when Dickens was writing *A Christmas Carol*. The artist found Dickens to be ‘a most agreeable and pleasant talker.’ As you will see in the essays that follow, it seems it was a meeting of minds.

This discovery would have been remarkable in any event, but it is even more so because the portrait itself – a large miniature – is exquisite. The skill of the artist is evident in the fineness of every brushstroke, in each strand of hair and the sparkling eyes that look right into yours. And in those eyes you see the complexity of the man – the confidence of success, the urgency, warmth and compassion, but also a hint of vulnerability.

I wish to thank Philip Mould and his team for giving the Charles Dickens Museum the opportunity to bring this extraordinary portrait of Dickens into our permanent collection, securing it for the nation and giving us a chance to share it with the world.

Dr. Cindy Sughrue OBE
Director of the Charles Dickens Museum
November 2018
Fig. 2
Margaret Gillies RWS (1803–1887)
Charles Dickens (1812–1870)
Watercolour on ivory, 1843
Original shaped ormolu mount with floral design, inner gilded mount, the whole within wood frame
Oval, 5 ½ in. (140 mm) high
This recently discovered portrait (Fig. 2) of a young Charles Dickens (1812–1870) has not been seen in public since its inaugural presentation at the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition of 1844, the year following the publication of A Christmas Carol. Considered lost, even during the artist Margaret Gillies’ (1803–1887) own lifetime, it is an image heretofore only known to Dickens’ biographers through an engraving published in 1844 (Fig. 1). Its re-emergence following a house-clearance sale in South Africa adds a significant new likeness to the limited early iconography of the writer (Fig. 3).

When in 1886 Dickens’ early biographer Frederick George Kitton (1856–1904) wrote to Gillies inquiring as to the whereabouts of this portrait, he received the frustrating reply that she had ‘lost sight’ of it. There was no photographic record of what the original painting had looked like and Kitton was reduced – as everyone after him has been – to reproducing the engraving taken from the original painting in his review of Dickens’ portraits. One hundred and seventy-five years since it was last seen, and after decades spent lying incognito in South Africa, the portrait is again back on public view. Here, finally, we are able to see what poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806–1861) saw in this portrait of the world-famous author: ‘the dust and mud of humanity about him, notwithstanding those eagle eyes’.

That the portrait remained unidentified for so long is possibly because it portrays a young Dickens far removed from the grizzled features shown in the ubiquitous black and white photographs of the author. Here he is handsome, clean-shaven, with an animated and intense gaze. It is not the conventional icon of Dickens as we have come to know him. The emergence of the portrait provides important new pictorial evidence of the young author’s appearance (he is shown aged thirty-one), and confirms the observation of one contemporary that ‘there is something about his eyes at all times that in women we call bewitching; in men we scarcely have any name for it… his complexion is extremely delicate… I should not blame him if he were somewhat vain of his hair.

Yet this portrait reveals so much more about the young Dickens than a record of his appearance. Painted at a pivotal moment in his career, the sittings with Gillies ran parallel to the astonishing six weeks in which he wrote A Christmas Carol. At the time, Dickens’ reputation was resting on a knife-edge. His sales had dropped and his recently published novel Martin Chuzzlewit (1842–1844) was a flop. With A Christmas Carol – in which he invested heavily – Dickens was making a gamble: one that could elevate his status from flash-in-the-pan prodigy to literary grande. However, Dickens was not only a writer but an activist for social change. He had made it his mission to make the Victorian bourgeoisie...
Fig. 3
Margaret Gillies RWS
(1803–1887)
Portrait of Charles Dickens
(1812–1870)
Watercolour on ivory, 1843
Oval, 5 ½ in. (140mm) high

This is the portrait as it looked in the first communication from South Africa, covered in mould and dirt, the original ormolu mount recovered in modern velvet. Fortunately, the face was almost totally unaffected.

Fig. 4

Dickens made the first edition of the Carol as attractive as possible – the cover bound in ‘cinnamon’ coloured cloth, with gold lettering, coloured endpapers and coloured plates by the artist John Leech. He had expected to make £1,000 from the first edition, but only made £137 on the first 6,000 copies.
Fig. 5
John Carr (or James Charles) Armytage (1820–1897), published by Smith, Elder & Co., after Margaret Gillies (1803–1887)
Portraits of Thomas Southwood Smith (1788–1861)
Stipple engraving, published 1844
8 ¾ in. x 5 in. (210 mm x 127 mm)
plate size; 8 ½ in. x 5 ¾ in.
(225 mm x 146 mm) paper size
National Portrait Gallery, London
Given by Henry Witte Martin, 1861

The sanitary reformer and physician Thomas Southwood Smith lived with Margaret Gillies from 1838/9 until his death in 1861, but the couple never married. Southwood Smith was friends with Dickens and the two men corresponded regularly on matters of sanitary reform and working conditions.

Fig. 6
Cundall, Downes & Co.
Margaret Gillies (1803–1887)
Albumen print on card mount, published 1864
3 ¾ in. x 2 ¾ in.
(95 mm x 72 mm) image size
National Portrait Gallery, London
Purchased, 2008

The artist Margaret Gillies was forty years old when she painted the thirty-one-year-old literary sensation Charles Dickens. Both artist and sitter were united in their thinking that individuals should do everything in their power to help the poor.
inescapably aware of the appalling poverty in which their social inferiors lived. This he would do in *A Christmas Carol* to sensational effect. Indeed, unbeknownst to his audience of the mid-1840s, Dickens himself had known poverty and endured factory work as a child. Unlike many other Victorian reformers, Dickens knew hardship first-hand and his message was consequently urgent. In this portrait, we see the two faces of Dickens: the writer examining and reflecting on the successes of his career and the impassioned campaigner for social reform.

The artist to unite these two facets of Dickens’ character so skilfully was Margaret Gillies. Like Dickens, she was a member of the progressive, non-conforming Unitarian Church, which advocated both political engagement and radical action. Appropriately, the conception and purpose of the portrait were far from conventional. Always destined for engraving prior to its public showing at the Royal Academy in 1844, the portrait was to be the leading image in *A New Spirit of the Age*, a book edited by Dickens’ and Gillies’ associate Richard Henry Horne (1802–1884) and written by anonymous contributors (including Gillies’ sister, Mary). A work of prophetic ambitions, it ‘foretold the emergence of an age of greatness’ and sought to inspire a new generation with a carefully curated selection of biographies of the brightest and best young writers of Victorian England. At the head of this tome was Dickens’ biography, his portrait engraved from Gillies’ miniature.

The engraving was and still is well known among Dickens enthusiasts, but Gillies, sadly, has slipped into comparative obscurity. Though she deliberately concealed her work and private life from the sanctimonious, patriarchal society in which she lived, research into the present portrait has shone new light on Gillies’ role as a critical figure of social reform. Unmarried by choice, Gillies lived with her partner, the pioneering sanitary reformer and physician Dr Thomas Southwood Smith (1788–1861) (Fig. 5), who was fifteen years her senior. She had no children of her own, worked in a professional capacity and exhibited her art until the year of her death. A pioneer of women’s liberation, Gillies was among the earliest supporters of the suffrage movement (a campaign that found little favour with the more politically conservative Dickens). She was, in short, an exceptional woman of the Victorian era (Fig. 6).

By the time she painted Dickens, Gillies had known him for some years, most likely through her life partner and fellow Unitarian, Southwood Smith. Gillies met Southwood Smith around 1824, when he was separated from (but still married to) his second wife. Although little is recorded of their romantic life, their relationship was certainly a meeting of minds. Southwood Smith was a leading figure in the campaign to alleviate the plight of the poor. Like Gillies, he was motivated by a devoutly held belief in change for the good sanctioned by a benevolent God. Together they were a formidable force, although they never made their rather bohemian living arrangements public for fear of censure from Victorian society.

Both Gillies’ portrait and Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* were conceived in 1843, as the Industrial Revolution drew to a close and Victorian Britain began to take stock of the social repercussions of this period of immense change. Tensions
Fig. 7
Parliamentary document (known as a ‘blue book’) titled *The Condition and Treatment of the Children employed in the Mines and Colliers of the United Kingdom* Carefully compiled from the appendix to the first report of the Commissioners With copious extracts from the evidence, and illustrative engravings
Commissioners for Inquiring into the Employment and Condition of Children in Mines and Manufactories, London, 1842
Engraving

Thomas Southwood Smith was one of the commissioners whose task was to examine the employment of children in mines. The resulting document was the first ever illustrated government report and it is now clear that Gillies was one of the contributing artists. The images in the report shocked and appalled all who read it – including Dickens.

Fig. 8

Fig. 9
simmered close to the surface: wealth that had brought fortune to many was unevenly distributed, as Dickens had witnessed at first-hand. Southwood Smith had been at the centre of political attempts to address these tensions, and it was in his role as one of the four commissioners on the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Children’s Employment that he first seems to have met Dickens. The need for progress was urgent: soon after their first meeting in 1840, Southwood Smith took Dickens on a personal tour of the slums of Shoreditch and Bethnal Green (when Lord Ashley (1801–1885) – later 7th Earl of Shaftesbury – made the same tour, he had to cut his visit short, so shocked was he by what he saw). Written descriptions of working conditions continued to outrage many in Victorian society, who could hardly believe the appalling circumstances in which children worked. These were made still worse as famine swept through Europe in the decade that became known as the ‘Hungry Forties’.

Something had to be done, and Southwood Smith’s Children’s Employment Commission turned to shock tactics. May 1842 saw the publication of the first Illustrated Report (called a ‘blue book’) (Fig. 7). This report, which included 26 wood engravings of partly clothed women and children working in ‘systematic slavery’, left readers horror-struck. Dickens later said that he broke down and sobbed when he saw it. It is now widely accepted that these shocking illustrations were the uncredited reportage of Gillies, meaning that she had witnessed at first-hand scenes that men had been unable to stomach. Gillies hid her connection to Southwood Smith’s report, knowing that it would jeopardise her career and personal reputation should the public discover she had drawn such scenes. Her harrowing images provoked outrage and were savaged as ‘disgusting pictorial woodcuts’ that should never have found their way ‘into the boudoirs of refined and delicate ladies’, the readers having no idea that the illustrator was, in fact, a woman. While, if made public, Gillies’ association with these woodcuts may have proved detrimental to her career, in contrast she could paint Dickens and publicise the resulting image, ensuring the ascent of both sitter and artist. In this, she built on the artistic capital she had acquired over 1839 and 1840 from her triumphant likenesses of the writers William Wordsworth (1770–1850) (Fig. 8) and James Henry Leigh Hunt (1784–1859) (Fig. 9). Dickens’ first sitting appears to have been in July 1843, and the last in October of that year (Figs. 10 and 11). With social reform at the forefront of Dickens’ mind as he worked on A Christmas Carol, conversation surely turned to this issue, so close to the hearts of both artist and sitter. Indeed, Southwood Smith’s Illustrated Report was the partial inspiration for A Christmas Carol. Dickens wrote to Southwood Smith in March 1843 that he would respond to the publication by ‘writing, and bringing out, a very cheap pamphlet, called ‘An appeal to the People of England, on behalf of the Poor Man’s Child ‘. In the months that followed, he changed his mind, deciding that fiction was a more potent weapon. The message of A Christmas Carol, however, remained the same: the rich ignore the poor at their peril. Author William Thackeray (1811–1863) famously called A Christmas Carol ‘a national benefit’, so immediate and universal was its effect on the public.
Fig. 10
Letter from Charles Dickens
to Margaret Gillies dated
21 July 1843
Charles Dickens Museum, London

This letter gives the date of the first sitting Dickens gave to Gillies. He was then at Broadstairs for the rest of the summer.
This letter, also written in the month that Dickens began to write *A Christmas Carol*, records the next round of sittings for the portrait given to Gillies by Dickens. Here he explains that he has had a recent cold (he suffered from severe colds at regular intervals) and also suggests that the artist Daniel Maclise be present.

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M-Requested-Torrance.

Monday October 23rd 1843.

Dear Miss Gillies,

Tomorrow, Tuesday, at 9 o’clock, I shall be fully prepared to have my hair cut. At 10 o’clock I shall have my portrait taken. I am now not well, having had a cold, which has made me rather sick. My head aches more and more. Would you like me to ask Mr. Maclise to come in during the sitting? He has a fine eye for knowledge of my face, and...

[signature]

P.S. I have been much struck with the “Spirit” of your portrait as photographed. “A very little hit,” he said, “wearing his hat in the air, something like an ace of trumps, and giving it a twist at the same time. “I am sure he would.”

[signature]

Dickens

M. S. T. 1843
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Gillies’ portrait differs incalculably from the later engraving. In it resides a piercing intensity that the engraver was unable to replicate in line (although Dickens’ biographer Claire Tomalin could still referred to the engraving as ‘A powerful, idealizing portrait…’). Gillies casts off conventional ‘attributes’ – there was simply no need to seat Dickens, famous as he now was, at his desk and have him hold a quill. Instead, she stripped down the portrait so that the viewer is only aware of the penetrating gaze of the writer, staring out of the dark background (although Gillies took care painting his full, dark curls – a Byronian homage). It is striking in its simplicity – an abridged portrait – foreseeing Dickens’ own prediction that he would ‘haunt mankind with [his] countenance’.

Gillies’ image certainly played into the cult of Dickens’ celebrity, which continued to grow with the astonishing success of *A Christmas Carol*. Here, Gillies was ingenious in the use of the miniature format. By producing a miniature – traditionally a private object viewed by a limited audience – and having it engraved for mass consumption, she cleverly produced a ‘behind the scenes’ image of the kind that any admirer wishes to see of a celebrity icon. Existing miniatures of the author had until then been painted for private use only; one was given to Dickens’ wife upon the occasion of their betrothal (Fig. 12).

It is often difficult to gauge whether documented responses to the portrait refer to the original or, given its early disappearance, to the subsequent engravings. Dickens himself had a curious reaction, exclaiming ‘Heaven knows, my portrait looks in my eyes a little like the Iron Mask without the Man in it!’ It was not unusual for Dickens to have a negative view of his own portraits; in fact, few appear to have pleased him. But there is almost a false modesty in this remark, which is borne out by his response to other portraits. When commenting on Maclise’s lionising 1839 work (Fig. 13), he bashfully observed that ‘Maclise has made another face of me, which all people say is astonishing.’ In the present case, the cause for his remark may be more simple still. During sittings, Dickens wrote to Gillies to apologise for a cold that had ‘ridden rough-shod… over [his] features’.

Could this be the iron mask to which he refers? Gillies has been something of a hidden figure in Dickens’ story to date. A peripheral character, her brief appearance is confined to the engraving taken from her work. Now, she can be recast as one of the key figures in Dickens’ early career, a fellow Unitarian navigating a society that, like the author, she saw as fundamentally cruel and amoral. Although Gillies concealed her private life and involvement in the first *Illustrated Report*, so close a confidante of her partner Southwood Smith as Dickens probably would have known of her involvement. In turn, Gillies would likely have had direct knowledge of the horrors witnessed by Dickens in the poverty-stricken corners of London (see letter Fig. 11). In this portrait, we see a rare unity of purpose between artist and sitter – a desire to offer up something of Dickens’ inner being to his public in order to inspire a greater good.
Fig. 12
Rose Emma Drummond
(active 1815–1837)
Portrait of Charles Dickens
(1812–1870)
Watercolour on ivory, 1835
Collection of the Dickens family

This portrait miniature of Dickens was presented to his future wife, Catherine Thomson Hogarth (1816–1879) on the occasion of their engagement. During the early nineteenth century, it was customary to exchange portrait miniatures prior to marriage. It is thought that Dickens modelled Miss La Creevy, a character in his novel *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838–39), on the artist of this miniature.

Fig. 13
Daniel Maclise (1806–1870)
Portrait of Charles Dickens
(1812–1870)
Oil on canvas, 1839
36 in. x 28 1/8 in.
(914 mm x 714 mm)
National Portrait Gallery, London
Transferred from Tate Gallery, 2015

This full-length oil painting by Maclise was painted at the beginning of what was to become a lifelong friendship between the two men. Dickens invited Maclise to be present during the sittings he had with Gillies.
Endnotes

1. *A Christmas Carol* was published 19 December 1843 by London publishing house Chapman and Hall (see Fig. 4).


7. The early 1840s had been a lean time for publishing generally.

8. Initially, almost all the profits from *A Christmas Carol* were swallowed up by the production costs of the book: the beautiful binding (in Dickens’ favourite cinnamon) with gold lettering, coloured endpapers, coloured plates and advertising were not met by the five shillings he charged for the book. Of the 6,000 copies published just before Christmas, Dickens made £137 (approximately £17,000 in today’s money) but was expecting to make £1,000.


10. Dickens joined the Unitarian Church in the early 1840s, writing to Unitarian Harvard Professor Cornelius Felton, ‘I have carried into effect an old idea of mine and joined the Unitarians, who would do something for human improvement if they could; and practice charity and toleration.’ See *Letter from Charles Dickens to Cornelius Felton, dated 2 March 1843*. In: House, M., Storey, G. and Tillotson, K., eds. (1974). *The Pilgrim Edition of the Letters of Charles Dickens*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. vol. 3. pp. 455-6. Dickens was extremely active at the Unitarian Little Portland Street Chapel in late 1843 when he was writing *A Christmas Carol*.

11. That Dickens knew of the project from the outset is clear in his correspondence with Gillies, where he jovially notes that the artist Daniel Maclise had been much struck with the “spirit” of your portrait as photographed – most likely referring to the title of the forthcoming book, *A New Spirit of the Age*. The reference to photography here suggests that Gillies relied on photographs taken between sittings to work on the miniature. See *Letter from Charles Dickens to Margaret Gillies, dated 23 October 1843*. In: *Pilgrim Letters*, vol. 3. pp. 584-5.


13. This is borne out in Gillies’ obituaries, particularly in the *London North News and Finsbury Gazette*, where she was described as ‘remarkable not only for her talents but for the fact she was one of the pioneers amongst women lady artists. Indeed, it is not too much to say that it is owing in a considerable degree to her examples and exertions that the path of art has been made easy for all the sister-women who have come after her.’ See (1887) *London North News and Finsbury Gazette*. 30 July.

14. The two men appear to have been in correspondence from at least 1840. In December of that year, Dickens wrote to Southwood Smith, stating: ‘It must be a great comfort and happiness to you to be instrumental in bringing about so much good. I am proud to be remembered by one who is pursuing such ends and heartily hope that we shall know each other better.’ In: *Pilgrim Letters*, vol. 2. p. 165.

15. Southwood Smith’s first marriage ended after the death of his wife Anne (née Read) in 1812. His second marriage to Mary Christie ended possibly as a result of Southwood Smith’s strained financial situation, as he often worked without pay. Their separation, in Southwood’s own words, was amicable, and they managed to preserve a ‘mutual respect’ for each other. Margaret was also close to Southwood Smith’s eldest daughter, Caroline Hill (1809–1902), who was only six years younger.

17 Commissioners for Inquiring into the Employment and Condition of Children in Mines and
Manufactory., (1842). The Condition and Treatment of the Children employed in the Mines and Colliers
of the United Kingdom. Carefully compiled from the appendix to the first report of the Commissioners
appointed to inquire into this subject. London: William Strange.
18 Letter from Dickens to Southwood Smith, 6 March 1843: ‘I am so perfectly stricken down by the blue
book you have sent me.’ In: [Pilgrim Letters. vol. 3. p. 459].
19 Gillies’ biographer, Charlotte Yeldham (Margaret Gillies RWS, Unitarian painter of Mind and Emotion
1803–1887, Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter, 1997, p. 48), suggests that it would have been quite
possible for the artist to accompany Southwood Smith when he inspected mines but not the mines
investigated by the other inspectors, which were at far flung locations. The drawings are fully attributed
to Gillies based on their cataloguing by the Wellcome Library. See Wilcock, A. A., (2006). An
Occupational Perspective of Health. New Jersey: Slack Inc. p. 281, fig. 9-2. This is backed by numerous
other publications, including the recent book on Southwood Smith’s granddaughter, Octavia Hill,
where Gillian Darley describes the report as ‘visually polemic’. See Darley, G., (2016). Octavia Hill:
20 Vane, C. W. (Marquess of Londonderry), (1842). A Letter to Lord Ashley on the Mines and Collieries
Bill. The Morning Chronicle. (15 July). For Dickens’ anonymous reply to this letter, see Dickens, C.,
(1842) The Morning Chronicle (20 October).
21 The gap between sittings can be explained by Dickens taking a house in Broadstairs with his family for
the months of August and September 1843. See Letter from Charles Dickens to Margaret Gillies, dated 21
3. p. 459]. Dickens also adds ‘with my name attached of course’ – astutely aware that his fame would
attract readers.
23 Thackeray, W., (1844). A Box of Novels. Fraser’s Magazine. (February issue).
25 Dickens was often compared to Byron, particularly in terms of his sudden fame. Although there is
no direct evidence that Dickens consciously mirrored the earlier poet’s looks, he was well aware of the
effect Byron had on women, noting the schoolgirls overwhelmed upon seeing Byron’s representation in
Jarley’s waxworks in The Old Curiosity Shop. See Dickens, C. (1841). The Old Curiosity Shop. London:
Chapman and Hall. p. 221-2.
Again, this comment is assumed to relate to the engraving taken from the portrait.
29 [Pilgrim Letters. vol. 3. p. 584]. Dickens’ cold is perhaps testament to his gruelling work regime: after a
long day of writing he would walk at night, often covering fifteen or twenty miles.
The Lost Portrait: A Note on Provenance

By Lawrence Hendra

Tracing the provenance of the recently discovered portrait of celebrated Victorian author Charles Dickens (1812–1870) is made difficult by the fact that just thirty years after it was painted, the artist Margaret Gillies (1803–1887) had herself ‘lost sight’ of its whereabouts. The painting was not seen again until 2017, when it was discovered in an auction of household goods in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. This essay will attempt to piece together the few available facts and suggest a possible explanation as to how a portrait of one of the greatest literary figures in British history came to surface some 8,500 miles away from where it was painted 175 years previously.

As portrait miniature expert Emma Rutherford explains in the preceding essay, ‘The Lost Portrait: Charles Dickens by Margaret Gillies (1843),’ the miniature in question was painted by Gillies over six sittings with Dickens in 1843 at 1 Devonshire Terrace, London – Dickens’ home between 1839 and 1851. Following the publication of *A Christmas Carol* in December 1843, Dickens was catapulted into the public spotlight, and Gillies decided to exhibit her portrait of him at the 1844 Royal Academy Summer Exhibition. The same year, Gillies’ close friend Richard Henry Horne (1802–1884) (Fig. 14) published, with some assistance from the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806–1861), *A New Spirit of the Age*, a collection of critical essays on contemporary writers. A portrait of the subject accompanied each essay. For the essay on Dickens, Horne chose to reproduce an engraving in steel of the Gillies portrait by the engraver James Charles Armytage (d. 1897) (Fig. 1).

Following the unveiling of the miniature at the Royal Academy and its subsequent publication in *A New Spirit of the Age*, the Gillies portrait became Dickens’ defining likeness; its energetic, direct manner surpassing the more formal portrait painted by Daniel Maclise (1806–1870) in 1839 (Fig. 13). In 1846, the portrait miniature was engraved again, this time in wood by William James Linton (1812–1897) and published in *The People’s Journal* (Fig. 15). In a letter to the Dickens biographer Frederick George Kitton (1856–1904), dated 8 July 1886, Gillies describes this second engraving in a manner that suggests that in 1846, the portrait was still in her possession. However, in that same letter to Kitton (who was preparing to publish an article on Dickens’ lesser-known portraits), Gillies nonchalantly reveals that she had since ‘lost sight of the portrait itself’, before moving on to describe the sittings. Gillies did not provide any further information and sadly died the following year. Kitton, in his article published two years later, considers the portrait ‘probably buried in some private collection’.

With so little information regarding the early movements of the portrait forthcoming, it is necessary to work backwards from where and when the portrait was discovered in the hope of finding further clues. After almost two centuries,
Fig. 14
Margaret Gillies (1803–1887)
Portrait of Richard Henry Horne (1803–1884), c. 1840
Oil on panel
12 x 9 ½ ins. (305 mm x 241 mm)
National Portrait Gallery, London

An engraving of the Gillies portrait of Dickens by J.C. Armytage was published in Horne’s *A New Spirit of the Age* in 1844. In the absence of the original portrait, the engraving became a defining likeness of Dickens from this stage of his life.

Fig. 15
W.J. Linton (1812–1898) after Margaret Gillies (1803–1887)
Portrait of Charles Dickens (1812–1870), 1846
Wood engraving
3⅛ ins. (76 mm) high

The Gillies portrait was engraved again in 1846 by W.J. Linton and published in *The People’s Journal*. By this point the original portrait was almost certainly in the possession of Gillies.
Fig. 16
Margaret Gillies (1803–1887)
Portrait of Mary Gillies
(1803–1884), c. 1840
Watercolour on ivory
7 ¾ x 5 ½ ins. (182 mm x 140 mm)
Private collection

This portrait by Margaret Gillies of her sister Mary has a similar frame to the Dickens portrait. It seems likely that the Dickens portrait was also mounted in a leather travelling case with a hinged door to protect the work when not on display.

Fig. 17
A.B. Allison
Map of the Colony of Natal,
South Africa, 1860
In Mann, R.J. 1860. The Colony of Natal. An account of the characteristics and capabilities of this British Dependency. London: Jarrold & Sons, p.7
British Library, London

Natal was declared a British Colony in 1843. The capital city was Pietermaritzburg which was about forty-five miles inland from Durban (previously known as the Port of Natal) on the east coast.
the portrait was unearthed in 2017 in Pietermaritzburg, located in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. It was bought as part of a job lot of items piled on top of a cardboard tray, which had previously been used as packaging for a case of twelve beer cans. Other items in the lot included a dirty metal lobster, a brass dish and an old recorder. Upon first inspection, the portrait appeared unassuming, not least because the underside of the protective glass was layered with dirt and mould (Fig. 3). The velvet and ormolu mount (the inner section of which had been recovered in velvet) was equally shabby in appearance, although it bore a close resemblance to the style of frame Gillies is known to have been using in and around 1843 (Fig. 16). As is standard protocol for auction sales, the catalogue did not include any information regarding the identity of the consignor; however, subsequent research confirmed an antiques dealer based in nearby Durban entered the tray of objects into the sale. Contact was soon made with the dealer, who had recently retired after some thirty-five years in the trade. Unfortunately, the dealer could not recall where he acquired the piece, although he did confirm that he almost certainly bought it locally, either at auction or from a private client. Although the provenance trail had gone cold, the geographical location of the portrait’s discovery is nevertheless of great interest and worth further investigation. Our research has led us to map out the following trajectory, which we believe provides the most likely explanation for how the painting came to be in South Africa.

When this work was painted in 1843, the northern area of what is now KwaZulu-Natal was part of Zulu Kingdom, whereas the southern area had been proclaimed the British Colony of Natal in 1843 (Fig. 17). The capital city of the British Colony was Pietermaritzburg, which is about forty-five miles inland from Durban on the east coast (Fig. 18). In the decades that followed, Natal, like many other British colonies around the world, was considered a land of great opportunity. Thousands of British men, women and children made the epic journey to start a new life there.

Two such intrepid explorers were brothers Thornton Arnott Lewes (1844–1869) (Fig. 19) and Herbert Arthur Lewes (1846–1875) (Fig. 20), second and third sons of George Henry Lewes (1817–1878) and his wife Agnes (née Jervis) (1822–1902). By the time Thornton travelled to Natal in October 1863, his parents had separated (though they never divorced) and his father had moved in with Mary Ann Evans (1819–1880), better known by her pseudonym, George Eliot (Fig. 21). Herbert joined Thornton a little later, departing for Natal in September 1866. The Lewes family were well acquainted with Dickens; George Lewes first met the author in 1837, following his review of *The Pickwick Papers* (1837), *Oliver Twist* (1839) and *Sketches by Boz* (1839) in the *National Magazine and Monthly Critic*. Dickens subsequently invited Lewes to tour around Britain with his company of actors. Lewes was so taken with the experience that he even toyed with the idea of acting professionally, much to the disagreement of his critics, who considered his stature too slight and his voice too weak to command the stage. As well as being well acquainted with Dickens, both Thornton and Herbert Lewes were also very close to Gillies, whose adopted daughter Gertrude Hill (1837–1918) (Fig. 22) was married to their older brother, Charles Lee Lewes (1842–1891).
Pietermaritzburg was founded in 1838 and was the capital city of the Colony of Natal. Thornton and Herbert frequently travelled between Pietermaritzburg and Durban visiting friends.
Since the late 1830s, Gillies had been living with the physician and sanitary reformer Dr Thomas Southwood Smith (1788–1861). By the time he moved in with Gillies, Southwood Smith had been married twice, with two daughters from his first marriage – Caroline (1809–1902) and Emily (1810–1872) – and by his second marriage a son named Herman (1819–1897). In 1835, Caroline married a man named James Hill (1798–1872) and Gillies, along with her sister Mary (d. 1870), were bridesmaids at their wedding. Caroline and James had five daughters, including Gertrude. When James Hill fell into financial difficulty in 1840, Southwood Smith adopted Gertrude and Gillies became her guardian. Although Gillies was familiar with the Lewes family already, the marriage of Gertrude to Charles Lee Lewes in 1864 brought them closer together, and Gillies was often referred to as ‘Aunt Margaret’ by Eliot in her extensive correspondence to the Lewes children. In fact, Gertrude and Charles lived with Gillies for a period of time until 1878, by which point they had three children and needed more space. It has also been suggested that Charles assisted Gillies in her painting by posing as a life model for some of her more ambitious multi-figure compositions.

Given their evident closeness, it seems likely that Gillies gifted the portrait of Dickens to one of the Lewes family members and from there it was transported to Natal. But, as was often the case, life in the British colonies overseas was much harder than anticipated, and Thornton and Herbert appear to have had very little money between them. It therefore seems unlikely that a portrait miniature of Dickens would have been among the few possessions they carried on their person – it certainly was not listed among Herbert’s possessions when he died in 1875. It may be the case that the miniature was sent out to Natal after the brothers had voyaged there and then perhaps given or sold to a friend or acquaintance with an interest in English literature.

Indeed, the promotion of British culture in Natal during the mid-19th century is well documented. Although books were often beyond the means of the average working-class colonist, the publication of monthly journals meant that novels could be read in affordable instalments. English literature was also promoted through lectures and public readings. Dickens was always a firm favourite, with one commentator recalling how ‘the genius of that marvellous writer never failed to evoke the enthusiasm of the appreciative colonists, who, often in remote localities, responded with laughter, or with tears, to the magic of his unmatched creations’. Such was the appetite for English literature among the wealthy colonists of Natal at the time that people began to amass private libraries, sometimes on a grand scale and furnished in the English style.

One such bibliophile was John Sanderson (1820–1881), a well-known newspaper editor who first contributed to the short-lived Natal Times and then established and edited the Natal Colonist in Durban (Fig. 23). Sanderson was a great lover of poetry and his passionate recitals of Robert Browning (1812–1889) were the talk of the town. Given the Lewes’ association with English literary circles, it is hardly surprising that the brothers became acquainted with the Sanderson family.
Fig. 21
Sir Frederic William Burton
(1816–1900)
Portrait of George Eliot
(Mary Ann Cross, née Evans)
(1819–1880), 1865
Chalk
20 ¼ x 15 ins. (514 mm x 381 mm)
National Portrait Gallery, London

G.H. Lewes separated from his wife Agnes (although they never divorced) and moved in with George Eliot. Eliot supported the Lewes children and later financially assisted Herbert’s widow Eliza when she relocated to England from Natal with her two young children.
Fig. 22
Margaret Gillies (1803–1887)
Portrait of Gertrude Lewes
(née Hill) (1837–1918), c. 1866
Watercolour
16 1/8 x 12 3/8 ins. (410 mm x 320 mm)
Private collection
In Paterson, A. 1928. George Eliot’s
Family Life and Letters. London:
Selwyn and Blount. p. 152

Margaret Gillies adopted Gertrude
Hill when she was aged two in 1839
when her father fell into financial
difficulty. Hill later married
Charles Lee Lewes, eldest son of
G.H. Lewes, in 1865.

Fig. 23
Artist unknown
West Street, Durban, 1855
Engraving
4 x 6 ins. (101 mm x 152 mm)

During the 1850s Durban was
growing rapidly as thousands
of people flocked to the newly
established colony. English
culture was promoted through the
construction of a Public Library.
There were also public readings
and Dickens was a firm favourite
with the local population.
A Mr David Buchanan from Pietermaritzburg introduced Thornton to John Sanderson in the spring of 1864, and Herbert came to enjoy a close relationship with the Sanderson family. Towards the end of his life, Herbert would visit them every two or three days, where he would read, converse and listen to Mrs Sanderson play the piano.

It was at the Sanderson’s house that Herbert sought assistance – and finally succumbed to his illness – in late June 1875. Sanderson wrote to Herbert’s father on 2 July 1875, informing him of Herbert’s death. The Lewes family kept in contact with the Sandersons for many years thereafter. Herbert’s widow, Eliza (née Harrison), who had grown up in Natal and was a family friend, made the Sandersons godparents to their two children, Marian (1872–1955) and George Herbert (1875–1956), along with George Lewes and Eliot.

It seems likely that the Dickens portrait came to be in South Africa as a result of a connection made by either Thornton or Herbert Lewes during their time in the country. The Lewes brothers’ close associations with the prominent literary circles of London secured their warm welcome from the learned upper echelons of Durban and Pietermaritzburg society, many of whom collected books and other objects of English cultural interest. It may be the case, therefore, that this portrait – a treasured gift from their beloved ‘Aunt Margaret’ – was sent out to Natal, where it was then sold or gifted to one of the prominent individuals who assisted Thornton and Herbert Lewes in establishing themselves, and whose favours and introductions were crucial to the brothers’ success in an unforgiving land.

Although we may never know the complete provenance of the lost portrait of Dickens, the research presented above provides a convincing case as to how the miniature came to be found at the lowest point of the African continent. What we can say for certain is that the portrait’s journey, from the heart of Victorian London, across the Atlantic Ocean, and back again, is a remarkable one. And that we at Philip Mould & Co. are proud to have restored the lost portrait of the young Dickens back in its rightful home.
Endnotes

3 Horne and Gillies were already well acquainted. Horne had been romantically involved with Gillies’s sister, Mary, (d. 1870) since the late 1830s and, along with Gillies’s partner, Southwood Smith, they had all been living together since then. Also, in 1842, Gillies had provided the illustrations for a report on education and labour undertaken by Horne for the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Children’s Employment. The shocking revelations presented by the report caused outrage and were one of the contributing factors to Dickens’ staunch condemnation of child labour.
8 Like the portrait miniature of Mary Gillies, it seems likely that the Dickens miniature was originally set into a leather case with a hinged door that could be fastened shut to protect the painting when not on display.
9 KwaZulu-Natal was formed in 1994 when the Zulu Bantustan of KwaZulu merged with the province of Natal.
12 Eliot often refers to Margaret and Mary collectively as ‘The Miss Gillies’ in her extensive correspondence.
On 3 January 1840, Charles Dickens (1812–1870) wrote an apologetic letter to his friend, John Forster (1812–1876) (Fig. 24), cancelling an engagement at the theatre. He had, he explained, kept his servants ‘up very late indeed for a great many nights’, and had too much writing to do to be able to attend. The previous year had ended in a blaze of festivities, celebrating the success of Dickens’ novel *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839). At twenty-eight years old, Dickens was beginning the new decade as an international celebrity, living the kind of glamorous life that as the scared child of an imprisoned debtor, he could only have dreamed of.

At the start of the 1840s, the Dickens family comprised Charles, his wife Catherine (née Hogarth) (1815–1879) (Fig. 25) and their three young children: Charley, who would have his third birthday on 6 January; Mamie, who was almost two, and the new baby, Katey. In December, the Dickens family had moved out of 48 Doughty Street into the much grander home of 1 Devonshire Terrace, opposite Regent’s Park. Being able to afford to take on the lease of such a prestigious home proved to the young author that he had, at last, left behind the twin spectres of Warren’s Blacking Factory (where he had worked as a child labourer) and the Marshalsea Prison (where his father had been imprisoned for debt).

In April 1840, the first instalment of Dickens’ latest novel was published in the periodical *Master Humphrey’s Clock*. Indeed, the first chapter of *The Old Curiosity Shop* could have been autobiographical:

> ‘Night is generally my time for walking… I have fallen insensibly into this habit, both because it favours my infirmity and because it affords me greater opportunity of speculating on the characters and occupations of those who fill the streets.’

These words echo much of Dickens’ own routine. He suffered from insomnia and spent many nights walking the streets of London, Genoa, Paris or whichever city he was residing in, seeking inspiration and discovering new characters.

During the serialisation of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Dickens received letters from readers living all over the world, many of whom feared for the fate of the novel’s child heroine, Little Nell, and begged the novelist not to let her die. The author was, however, despondent about the state of humanity and suffering with depression about the lives of poor children. In *Oliver Twist* (1839), he had given his impoverished young hero a happy ending; this time, he could not. Dickens felt that the world was too cruel to allow a Little Nell to survive. He wrote to Forster after he had completed Nell’s death scene, describing himself as ‘the wretchedest of the wretched’. He chose her fate because he wanted his readers, sitting in their
John Forster was one of Dickens’ closest friends – he was also his adviser and his biographer.

Maclise painted this portrait of Catherine in 1847 and it was exhibited at the Royal Academy the following year, incorrectly labelled as ‘Mr. Charles Dickens’. Catherine may have recently given birth to her seventh child, Sydney Smith Haldiman Dickens (born 18 April, 1847) as the payment to Maclise from Dickens was in July of the same year.
Fig. 26
Alfred D’Orsay (1801–1852)
Portrait of Charles Dickens (1812–1870), 1842
Pencil on paper
7 7/8 x 5 7/8 ins. (200 mm x 150 mm)
Charles Dickens Museum, London

This portrait of Dickens by his friend Alfred D’Orsay was drawn in the same year that the writer travelled to America. On meeting Dickens in Boston in 1842, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow described him as, ‘a gay, free and easy character; a fine bright face; blue eyes, long dark hair, and withal a slight dash of the Dick Swiveller in him.’
comfortable homes, able to afford food and a roof over their head, to understand what it was like to be poor, in the hopes that they would all try to alleviate the poverty that existed everywhere around them.

This campaigning zeal marked Dickens’ career. Indeed, the author would espouse numerous causes and work tirelessly on them, his letters recording the energy and enthusiasm with which he attempted to change society and the legal system that governed it. In 1842, Dickens and his wife journeyed to and travelled around America and Canada (Fig. 26). He discussed his books, and the couple met many interesting and influential people. They both performed on stage, too, indulging their joint love of amateur theatricals. But the author also made a point of visiting charities and state institutions, including the Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia, by which he was appalled. He wrote about the prison in his ensuing travelogue, *American Notes* (1842): ‘The system here, is rigid, strict, and hopeless solitary confinement. I believe it, in its effects, to be cruel and wrong’. *American Notes* was both a humorous and an angry account of his journey, detailing what he considered to be the good and bad points of North America. His most furious words were reserved for the ‘atrocities’ of slavery – a heartfelt fury for which many of his American readers took several decades to forgive him (Fig. 27).

When the author arrived in America, he carried with him a letter, signed by a plethora of prominent British authors, calling for a law on international copyright, a cause he fought for throughout his life for the benefit of fellow struggling writers and their heirs. It was also during this first trip to America that Dickens underwent a change of religion. After he and Catherine returned to England, Dickens wrote to one of his new American friends, the Harvard Professor Cornelius Felton (1807–1862): ‘I have carried into effect an old idea of mine and joined the Unitarians, who would do something for human improvement if they could; and practise charity and toleration’.

Some years later, Dickens would befriend fellow author Elizabeth Gaskell (1810–1865) and her husband, who was a Unitarian minister (Fig. 28). On his frequent visits to their home in Manchester, Dickens and the Gaskells would talk long and earnestly about their joint desire to help end poverty and inequality, but it was a cause that began for Dickens many years before their first meeting – and the city of Manchester was the site of one of his most famous inspirations.

In the autumn of 1843, Dickens travelled to Manchester, where his musician sister, Fanny Burnett (née Dickens) (1810–1848), lived with her husband and two sons. Their elder son, Henry, was disabled and Dickens was deeply concerned for his nephew’s future. The author had been invited to the city to give a speech in support of the Athenaeum, a charity that provided educational opportunities for working men and women. As always, Dickens came to know the city by walking, and he was horrified by the sight of families living in such crippling poverty. So many people on the streets he walked along were daily living in danger of starvation. This was the ‘Hungry Forties’, when Britain was experiencing an economic depression. Unemployment was growing exponentially; two consecutive harvests had failed and the price of everyday foods was beyond the reach of many. Dickens’ speech at the Athenaeum on 5 October...
was fired by the social injustices he had witnessed, his words burning with his own feelings of powerlessness to do anything except help those few whom he encountered in person. He railed at the way in which the upper class of wealthy privileged men seemed determined never to share their riches with those in society who needed help the most.

By the time Dickens returned to London, he had decided to write something monumentally important, something that would campaign against the ‘ignorance and want’ so pervasive in Victorian society. The first known mention of *A Christmas Carol* can be found in a letter to the Scottish academic and magazine editor, Professor Macvey Napier (1776–1847). On 24 October 1843, Dickens wrote: ‘I plunged headlong into a little scheme I had held in abeyance during the interval which had elapsed between my first letter and your answer; set an artist at work upon it…’. At this time, Dickens was supposed to be researching and writing a pamphlet about child poverty for the government, but he decided this was a fruitless exercise, knowing that the pamphlet would be seen by very few and almost certainly ignored by those who did read it. Instead, he planned to write a story unlike any he had written before: a novella-length ghost story of Christmas – with a biting social message. His character, Tiny Tim – a disabled child – was inspired by his own nephew, Henry Burnett (Fig. 29).

Dickens’ publishers, Chapman and Hall, were unimpressed with the author’s idea. His most recent novel serialisation, *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1842–1844), had had the unfortunate distinction of being the only one of Dickens’ novels to lose readers during its serialisation. As a result, Dickens was struggling financially. Catherine had given birth to a fourth baby, a son named Walter, in 1841, and she was again heavily pregnant (Fig. 30). Extra pressure was put on the family finances when Chapman and Hall only agreed to publish *A Christmas Carol* if the author paid for a large percentage of the costs, not least for the very expensive, hand-coloured illustrations upon which Dickens insisted. Dickens’ friend, the artist John Leech (1817–1864), was to illustrate the story (Fig. 31).

The astonishing and immediate success of *A Christmas Carol* surprised even its author. One of its most fervent supporters was the novelist William Thackeray (1811–1863). In a heartfelt review, Thackeray commented: ‘It seems to me a national benefit, and to every man or woman who reads it a personal kindness.’ The first print run of 6,000 copies was published on 19 December 1843, and by Christmas Eve the order had been given to reprint.

The overwhelming popularity of *A Christmas Carol* sealed Dickens’ reputation not only as one of the country’s finest novelists, but also as a passionate and compassionate campaigner. Dickens received constant written appeals, and spent hours of every working week responding to pleas and passing on information to friends he hoped would be able to assist the scores of desperate people turning to him for help. Many of these causes became highlighted issues in his novels; others inspired the journalism he continued to write alongside his fiction, carrying his political anger about social injustice to a wider public.

One of Dickens’ burning issues was that of education for all. In the 1830s, he and Catherine became friendly with wealthy philanthropist, Angela Burdett-
Fig. 29
Unknown artist
Henry Burnett Jnr. (1839–1849), late 1840s
Photograph
Reproduced in Charles Dickens by Pen and Pencil, 1890

Henry was the disabled son of Dickens’ sister Fanny and her husband Henry Burnett. He was the inspiration for ‘Tiny Tim’, although unlike his fictional counterpart he did not survive childhood, dying at the age of nine.

Fig. 30
Daniel Maclise (1806–1870)
The children of Charles and Catherine Dickens, 1841
Pencil and wash on paper
Circular, 15 ins. (380 mm) high
Charles Dickens Museum, London

This sketch by Maclise shows four of Dickens’ children – Charley, Katey, Mamie and Walter alongside Grip, their pet raven.

Fig. 31
John Leech (1817–1864)
‘Scrooge’s third Visitor’, 1843
Hand coloured steel engraving for A Christmas Carol
5 ⅔ x 3 ⅓ ins. (135 mm x 82 mm)
Charles Dickens Museum, London
Coutts (1814–1906), granddaughter of the banker Thomas Coutts (1735–1822), founder of Coutts & Co (Fig. 32). On 19 September 1843, he wrote to her in painful despair:

‘On Thursday night, I went to the Ragged School; and an awful sight it is. I blush to quote Oliver Twist for an authority… The school is held in three most wretched rooms on the first floor of a rotten house: every plank, and timber, and brick, and lath, and piece of plaster in which, shakes as you walk. One room is devoted to the girls: two to the boys… I have very seldom seen, in all the strange and dreadful things I have seen in London and elsewhere anything so shocking as the dire neglect of soul and body exhibited in these children… The children in the Jails are almost as common sights to me as my own; but these are worse, for they have not arrived there yet, but are as plainly and certainly travelling there, as they are to their Graves…”

Following the success of A Christmas Carol, Dickens realised just how much of a difference his writing could make. Burdett-Coutts was determined to use her unexpected riches to good effect, and she and Dickens worked together on many shared causes, intent on alleviating as much suffering as possible, with Dickens often recommending heartrending cases to his friend.

By mid-1844, the physical and emotional rigours of the previous months, not least the hurtful criticism of American Notes and Martin Chuzzlewit, had taken their toll on Dickens. He was struggling with depression, a condition he had suffered from since childhood. He was in desperate need of change and was yearning for excitement. He found it by commissioning the building of a large travelling carriage capable of holding eleven people, the family dog and mountains of luggage, and whisking his family and servants away on a road trip to Italy.

They arrived in Albaro, on the outskirts of Genoa, in mid-July 1844. The family stayed contently for almost a year, spending months living in one wing of a fresco-filled palazzo, which Dickens was thrilled to hear had resident ghosts. During this year, the author travelled around Italy and occasionally journeyed back to London for business meetings. This year living in Genoa healed his fragile emotional state, inspired his second Christmas novella, The Chimes (1844), and resulted in his second travelogue, Pictures from Italy (1846).

After returning from Italy, Dickens’ depression lifted – at least for a time. Though he had recovered from the rigours and exhaustion of 1843, he was never able to recover from the fervour begun by A Christmas Carol. His small ghost story had turned him into a megastar. From this time onwards, at almost every time of the year, he was either writing, or thinking about, his next Christmas publication.

Following their year in Italy, the family continued to travel overseas. Until this point, family holidays had taken place in Britain, mostly in the seaside town of Broadstairs, Kent, but now Dickens longed to show his children more of the world. Future years saw the family spending summers in continental Europe, usually to the favoured destinations of France or Switzerland. Even while on
Angela Burdett Coutts had inherited one of the largest fortunes in England and owned Coutts Bank. She became one of Dickens’ closest confidantes, as well as financially supporting charitable causes recommended by him.
holiday, Dickens would continue his crusade for social change, visiting ground-breaking healthcare and educational facilities, as well as prisons, about which he would write articles, either in praise or anger, wanting to show the realities of the world to his readers.

During the 1840s, Dickens completed four novels. He also wrote his two travelogues, all five of his Christmas books, a range of short stories, a special book written privately for his children, entitled *The Life of Our Lord* (1846–1849), and numerous articles, as well as hundreds upon hundreds of letters.

During the time that artist Margaret Gillies (1803–1887) completed her portrait of Dickens, the author was only just beginning to understand how much fame could help a cause. By the end of the 1840s, he had witnessed the extraordinary power that his writing held, and he tried to use his celebrity to help influence the zeitgeist and the decision makers. Dickens’ letters from this time reveal an exhausting schedule, and a man who managed to be an indulgent and adoring father, even though he barely ever took more than half a day off work. Dickens often described himself in letters as being ‘haunted’ by his work, but he seldom lost his enthusiasm for the craft of writing or for creating enticing new worlds for his readers – always embedded with an impassioned message for Victorian London and beyond (Fig. 33).

### Fig. 33

Antoine François Jean Claudet (1797–1867)

**Charles Dickens (1812–1870), circa. 1850**

*Daguerreotype*

Charles Dickens Museum, London

This photograph of Dickens was taken when he was writing *David Copperfield* in 1850. Here he is shown as a much-loved public figure, confident and successful.
Endnotes


2 The former is now the Charles Dickens Museum. The latter was destroyed by developers in the 1950s and replaced with an office block, one wall of which bears a relief sculpture depicting Dickens and several of the characters he created while living in the house.

3 Dickens was 12 years old when his father was arrested. While his mother and all his younger siblings had to join their father in his prison cell, as the family could not afford to pay rent, Dickens lived by himself in a lodging house and worked six days a week to support his family.


7 Dickens did not live to see his desired changes to copyright law carried out, but the law was changed after his death. His campaigning is credited as instrumental in helping to bring about this change.

8 Dickens would return to America (but not Canada) a quarter of a century later, for a reading tour in the winter of 1867 to 1868. Catherine Dickens did not accompany her husband on this second trip, as Dickens had sought a legal separation from her in 1858.


11 Unlike Tiny Tim, Henry Burnett did not survive childhood. He died on 29 January 1849, at the age of nine, a few weeks after the death of his mother, Fanny, who died of tuberculosis.

12 Francis ‘Frank’ Dickens was born on 15 January 1844.

13 John Leech would become famous as one of the leading cartoonists for the satirical magazine Punch.


15 In 1850, Dickens founded and edited a new magazine, Household Words. When the magazine came to an end in 1859 (a casualty of the end of the Dickens marriage, which also resulted in an angry end to the author’s relationship with the magazine’s publishers), he began a new magazine, All The Year Round, which he edited until his death in 1870.


17 Dickens’ time in Italy would also go on to inspire the Italian scenes from his 1857 novel Little Dorrit.
At his death in 1870, Charles Dickens (1812–1870) was lauded in regional and national newspapers as ‘novelist’, ‘journalist’, ‘editor’, ‘public reader’, ‘advocate’ and ‘campaigner’, but also repeatedly, and determinedly, as ‘friend of the Poor’. At the Westminster Abbey memorial service for Dickens, theologian Benjamin Jowett (1817–1893) alluded to the sense of personal loss felt in the collective outpouring of grief: ‘Men seem to have lost, not a great writer only, but one they had personally known.’ Dickens had become a national treasure. Though, unlike other ‘national treasure’ authors, the nation’s enthusiasm for Dickens began when he was in his mid-twenties, persisted beyond his death at the age of 58 and still shows no sign of letting up over a century later.

The contemporary public’s appetite for tangible evidence of their idol meant Dickens’ father, John Dickens (1785–1851), profited from selling cuttings of his son’s signature in 1839. Following the novelist’s death, the 1870 auction of his household contents attracted crowds of people determined to own a chair, lamp or water glass connected to this lion of the age. The Charles Dickens Museum’s collection contains many items with plaques proclaiming Dickens ‘sat here’, ‘owned this’ or ‘walked past here’. The long history of his celebrity status, coupled with the Victorian age of mass production, produced a glut of documentary evidence about his life. We are not short of Dickens ‘things’.

As curators caring for the material culture of this prominent figure, we know that among the cut-out signatures, first editions and insightful autograph letters, there is a selective group of objects that, more than any others, encapsulate the author, his life and works. Such treasures include the desk and chair from his study in his final home at Gad’s Hill in Higham, Kent, on which Dickens penned his last five novels, which now reside in the Charles Dickens Museum, London (Fig. 34); the complete manuscript of Great Expectations in the Wisbech & Fenland Museum, Cambridgeshire; or the 1839 Nicholas Nickleby Portrait by Daniel Maclise (1806–1870) in the National Portrait Gallery, London. To this canon, we can now add the 1843 portrait miniature of the novelist painted by artist Margaret Gillies (1803–1887).

Gillies’ portrait of Dickens is a stripped back composition, without any prop or backdrop, yet it is full of meaning and suggestions about the author’s character. It captures the energy, youth, vanity and ambition of a man on the cusp of something extraordinary. To accompany this special exhibition marking the unveiling of the portrait, several objects have been selected that draw out these meanings. This assemblage of personal items cast a light over the portrait, illuminating the private details Gillies captured so deftly in her image of the novelist.
Fig. 34
Mahogany desk with walnut, fruitwood and cane chair owned by Charles Dickens
Charles Dickens Museum, London

This furniture was used by Dickens from 1859 until his death in 1870 and is now on display at the Charles Dickens Museum.

Fig. 35
Silver and ivory set of razors made by Mecri & Bazin owned by Charles Dickens
Charles Dickens Museum, London

This set of razors, along with other personal items, were kept by Dickens’ sister-in-law and housekeeper Georgina Hogarth. When Dickens died, she passed them to his pageboy, Isaac Armatage.
Dickens wore spectacles in daily life, but only one portrait of him – this sketch by Leslie Ward – shows him wearing them.

Dickens was proud of his hair, which he wore in long, loose curls until it thinned in middle age.
One’s first impression upon seeing the portrait is how handsome Dickens looks: expressive eyes and a clean-shaven face are surrounded by tidy, dark and loose curls. The recollections of Dickens’ friend John Forster (1812–1876) align with this image:

‘A look of youthfulness first attracted you, and then a candour and openness of expression which made you sure of the qualities within… eyes wonderfully beaming with intellect and running over with humour and cheerfulness, and a rather prominent mouth strongly marked with sensibility… The hair so scanty and grizzled in later days was then of a rich brown and most luxuriant abundance, and the bearded face of his last two decades had hardly a vestige of hair or whisker.’

Terms like ‘delicate’, ‘pretty’ and ‘dandy’ were often used to describe Dickens during this period. The accoutrements of the author’s daily toilette – a razor case, perfume bottles, hairbrush and travelling mirror – were preserved by his sister-in-law and housekeeper Georgina Hogarth who, on Dickens’s death, gifted the razor case to his pageboy Isaac Armatage (Fig. 35). For Armatage, they would have been a manifestation of fond memories of a kind employer. They also illustrate the novelist’s conscious sculpting of his appearance. In his lifetime, Dickens wore spectacles but only one sketch exists as evidence of this (Fig. 36). He always carried a comb, was known for bright and garish clothes, curled his hair and dyed his moustache. From a young, artistic dandy to a middle-aged, frenetic literary great, throughout his life Dickens knew the public image he wanted to project and how to achieve it (Fig. 37).

Recollections of family and friends who knew Dickens refer repeatedly to his boundless energy, which Gillies hints at in her positioning of him for the 1843 portrait. Forster refers to a ‘restlessness’ and Dickens’ son, Charles Dickens Junior (1837–1896), describes ‘the even alarming thoroughness – with which he always threw himself into everything he had occasion to take up… this extraordinary, eager, restless energy.’ Dickens was known to walk four miles in an hour, and up to 10 to 15 miles by day or night. A read through his correspondence over the course of 1843 is an exhausting caper across the country, attending parties and plays, keeping appointments and accepting invitations. To continue his work away from his study, Dickens took with him on his journeys equipment including a portable writing desk and a quill (Fig. 38).

During his travels in 1843, Dickens was collecting visual snapshots of people, places and things that would eventually find their way into his next publication, *A Christmas Carol* (1843). The children of ‘Ignorance and Want’ may have been children spotted on a tour of a ragged school; the description of an industrial town surely composed after a visit to see his sister Fanny Burnett (née Dickens) (1810–1848) in Manchester; and the idea for Jacob Marley’s face appearing in a door knocker pocketed during a walk in the capital, down Craven Street, off Trafalgar Square. More than anything, it was the investigative journalistic activities he crammed into the year that would have the most profound
effect, resulting in his growing awareness of specific social issues and a realisation of the power of his voice as an advocate for the voiceless in Victorian society. Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol* in just six weeks. It sold out in five days. A rare, first edition copy was gifted by Dickens to his good friend William Macready (1793–1873) on New Year’s Day 1844 (Fig. 39). One can only imagine the words the two friends would have exchanged as they swapped gifts and reflected on the busy year, and how this little novella had brought such an extraordinary end to it.

A family portrait from 1841 hangs in the current exhibition alongside the Gillies portrait, reminding us of Dickens the husband and father to four children under six, with another on the way (Fig. 30). Maclise created this cosy scene of the four eldest Dickens children, with their pet raven, Grip, at their home at 1 Devonshire Terrace. Dickens had decided to travel to America in 1842 and wanted Catherine to come with him. Maclise produced the artwork to comfort Catherine during the months they were separated from the young children. The couple cherished the work and hung it in every hotel room they stayed in, where it was admired by all. Catherine thanked Maclise for the beautiful sketch, telling him ‘it is in great demand wherever we go’, and both she and Dickens wrote to the artist of how much they missed the children.2 Dickens’ eldest daughter, Mary (known as ‘Mamie’) (1838–1896), recalls her father’s fondness for children and particularly his ability to change his register when writing to or for them.10 Gillies’ recollections of Dickens attest to this: she recalls at one of his six or seven portrait sittings, he ‘completely won over’ a child who was in the room with his amusing stories.11 Though Gillies’ portrait was commissioned to showcase the cultural titans of the era in the publication *A New Spirit of the Age* (1844), the portrait is actually of a young father just about to complete the most famous of family Christmas stories, which would have longevity unlike any other, with adaptations from Mr Magoo (1962) to the Muppets (1992).

The year 1843 was a time of financial strain for Dickens, with a growing family and increased commitments and concern after the poor reception of his last two publications, *American Notes for General Circulation* (1842) and *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843–1844). These feelings would have been in competition with a growing awareness of his own literary and commercial power and bankability following his trip to America the year before. Fêted with balls and dinners and hounded by well-wishers to the point he had to hire a secretary to help manage his correspondence, in a letter to Forster, Dickens describes signs of wear appearing on his face after a house party where he was introduced to ‘at least one hundred and fifty first-rate bores, separately and singly’. Dickens recounts: ‘I have the print of a crow’s foot on the outside of my left eye, which I attribute to the literary characters of small towns. A dimple has vanished from my cheek which I felt myself robbed of at the time by a wise legislator.”12

The constant attention was exacerbated by the fact that Dickens was increasingly recognisable. Two official portraits were commissioned during the America trip: a painting by Francis Alexander (1800–1880) and a bust by Henry Dexter (1806–1876) (Fig. 40). The latter is of particular note as Dexter used measuring instruments to compile the most accurate readings of Dickens’

**Fig. 38** Rosewood inlay with mother-of-pearl writing desk containing two ink bottles.
Charles Dickens Museum, London

Dickens’ boundless energy and gruelling writing schedule meant that he often worked in transit, using this portable writing desk on his many travels.
Fig. 40
After Henry Dexter (1806–1876)
(original now lost)
Portrait bust of Charles Dickens
(1812–1870), 1842
Plaster (painted)
26 ½ ins. (675 mm) high
Charles Dickens Museum, London

The original bust by Dexter (now lost) was commissioned by Dickens while on tour in America in 1842. The sculptor used measuring instruments accurately to portray the author’s features.
face. While Dexter’s bust is commendable for its physiological accuracy, Gillies’ portrait captures something far more elusive: the weight of responsibilities and possibilities that hung over the sitter at a pivotal moment in his life. The following year, Dickens would be basking in adulation, having released his most successful story yet; it would also be the year he experienced his first taste of the public’s enthusiasm for readings of his works, which would set him on a path towards a second career as a public speaker.\(^\text{13}\)

From the advent of photography in the 1840s until his death in 1870, Dickens was arguably the most photographed man in Britain outside the Royal Family. Dickens sat for several photographers, nearly always in the studio, with carefully staged scenes supplemented with books, quills and other set dressing to convey messages about his career (sometimes, he even brought his own furniture) (Fig. 41). Throughout the 1850s and 1860s, carte de visites of the author were highly reproduced and extremely collectable; ‘cartomania’, as it was known, disseminated Dickens’ face and embedded the image of the author (albeit the bearded old man version) on the public consciousness. He became instantly recognisable in the streets.\(^\text{14}\)

In 1865, the photographer Robert Hindry Mason (1824–1885) produced a series of portraits of Dickens that transported viewers to the front door of his final home, Gad’s Hill in Higham, Kent, and introduced them to his family and close friends (Fig. 42). These images were for public consumption and, as Professor of Victorian Studies at Queen’s University Belfast Leon Litvack has recently pointed out, Dickens had a substantial part to play in directing these and, therefore, maintaining control of his public image.\(^\text{15}\) Mason’s photographs were supposed to show a personal side to Dickens, yet they were heavily staged, revealing details of Dickens’ life and character that he wished to be known – and disguising the rest.

Like the Mason photographs, Gillies’ portrait of Dickens was always meant for public consumption. Gillies did not, however, grapple with the same level of interventions by the sitter as Mason did. Indeed, she seems to have had far more creative control over the end result. Using the intimate medium of an ivory and watercolour miniature, Gillies produced a portrait of a public figure with a gaze that feels personal and full of private meaning. Today, Dickens is firmly established as a literary icon with global reach. His name is used as an adjective; he is even an epoch. His books have never been out of print and it does not feel like December unless there are at least three adaptations of *A Christmas Carol* on the stage or screen. Hidden for all this time, it is an extraordinary thing to see this portrait after one hundred and seventy-five years, and to catch the gaze of this man in the moments before he experienced, and caused, such tremendous change.

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Fig. 41
(George Herbert) Watkins (1828–1916)
Charles Dickens (1812–1870), 1858
*Albumen print*
Charles Dickens Museum, London
This photograph of Dickens shows him posed as if reading to his public.

Fig. 42
Robert Hindry Mason (1824–1885) (Mason & Co.)
Charles Dickens (1812–1870) on the front step of Gad’s Hill Place, Higham, Kent with friends and family, 1860s
*Albumen print*

Gad’s Hill Place was the only property that Dickens ever owned (he rented his London residences). Hans Christian Andersen, Wilkie Collins and William Powell Frith all stayed at the house, which became a popular retreat for fellow writers. It was on a couch in the dining room that Dickens died from a stroke in 1870.
Endnotes

11 Gillies, M., *Letter from Margaret Gillies to F. G. Kitton, dated 8 July 1886*. [Manuscript]. London: Charles Dickens Museum. The child, who Gillies recalls was a girl of about five years old, may have been Dickens’s own daughter Mammie who was born in 1838, or Gillies’s adopted daughter, Gertrude Hill who was born in 1837.
List of illustrations

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Fig. 41 © Charles Dickens Museum, London
Fig. 42 © Charles Dickens Museum, London
Index

All references are to page numbers; those in *italic* type indicate illustrations

A

*American Notes* 33, 36, 44

Armytage, James Charles 10, 20

B

Broadstairs, Kent 14, 36

Browning, Elizabeth Barrett 8, 20

Browning, Robert 25

Burdett-Coutts, Angela 34, 35, 37

Burnett, Fanny (née Dickens) (see Dickens Family)

Burnett, Henry (see Dickens Family)

C

Chapman and Hall (publishers) 34

Children’s Employment Commission 13

*The Chimes* 36

*A Christmas Carol* 3, 5, 8, 9, 11, 16, 20, 31, 34, 35, 36, 43, 44, 45, 47

D

1 Devonshire Terrace 20, 30, 44

Dickens, Catherine (née Hogarth)

(see Dickens Family)

Dickens Family

— Burnett, Fanny (sister) 33, 43

— Burnett, Henry (nephew) 33, 34, 35

— Dickens, John (father) 40

— Hogarth, Catherine (wife) 17, 30, 31, 33, 34, 44

— Hogarth, Georgina (sister-in-law) 43

Dickens, John (see Dickens Family)

48 Doughty Street 4, 30, 41

Drummond, Rose Emma 17

E

Eliot, George (Mary Ann Cross, née Evans)

23, 25, 26, 28

F

Felton, Cornelius 33

Forster, John 30, 31, 43, 44
<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>G</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gad’s Hill 40, 46, 47</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaskell, Elizabeth 32, 33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genoa, Italy 30, 36</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gillies, Margaret 3, 5, 6, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 20, 21, 22, 23, 25, 27, 28, 38, 40, 43, 47</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gillies, Mary 11, 22, 25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great Expectations 40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>H</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higham, Kent (see Gad’s Hill)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hill, Gertrude 23, 25, 27</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hogarth, Catherine Thomson (see Dickens Family)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hogarth, Georgina (see Dickens Family)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horne, Richard Henry 11, 20, 21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illustrated Report ('blue book') 12, 13, 16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>J</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jowett, Benjamin 40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>K</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kitton, Frederick George 8, 20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>L</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leech, John 34, 35</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leigh Hunt, James Henry 12, 13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lewes, Agnes (née Jervis) 23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lewes, Charles Lee 23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lewes, George Henry 23, 28</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lewes, Herbert Arthur 23, 24, 25, 28</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lewes, Thornton Arnott 23, 24, 25, 28</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Life of Our Lord 38</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linton, William James 20, 21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>M</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maclise, Daniel 15, 16, 17, 20, 24, 31, 35, 40, 44</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macready, William 44</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manchester 33, 43</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin Chuzzlewit 8, 34, 36, 44</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>N</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Magazine and Monthly Critic 23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A New Spirit of the Age 11, 20, 44</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicholas Nickleby 17, 30, 40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North America, tour of 33, 44</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>O</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Old Curiosity Shop 30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oliver Twist 23, 30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>P</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paris, France 30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The People’s Journal 20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Pickwick Papers 23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pictures from Italy 36</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>R</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Royal Academy of Arts 3, 8, 11, 20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Royal Commission of Inquiry into Children’s Employment 13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>S</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanderson, John 25, 28</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sketches by Boz 23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Africa 3, 8, 9, 20, 22, 23, 24, 25, 27, 28</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southwood Smith, Dr. Thomas 10, 11, 12, 13, 16, 25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suffrage movement 11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>T</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thackeray, William 13, 34</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tomalin, Claire 16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>U</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unitarian Church, Unitarianism 11, 16, 33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>W</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wordsworth, William 12, 13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>