

An Inspiration for Dickens' Betsy Trotwood?

— Peter Burville —

In her most interesting article about Charles Dickens' Dover connections Lorraine Sencicle expressed her strong view regarding the origins of the character Betsey Trotwood in *David Copperfield* (ref 1). Lorraine offers Sarah Rice as the model that Dickens used. In my recently published one-name study *An East Kent Family: the Burvilles* (ref 2), I offer an alternative Dovorian inspiration for Betsey as recorded below. Many fictional characters are an amalgam of characteristics borrowed from several people whom the author has met in the flesh plus a few dashes of imagination. There may be several potential sources for the character Betsey Trotwood. Below are some extracts from the "Folk Stories" section of the one-name study which records family tales that have been passed down the generations.

Another family story is that some aspects of the characters in Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*, of 1849, were based on Burvilles. In her 1895 book (ref 3) Mary Horsley tells us regarding Pilot's Field on the cliff slopes behind Snargate Street: "When Charles Dickens stayed in Dover this field was his favourite haunt. He would lie on his back basking in the sun, and think out the details of his last story, and in 'David Copperfield' he describes 'Betsey Trotwood's Cottage' as being in this Pilot's Field, or thereabouts."

Mary Horsley also wrote: "Mrs N.B. has

spoken of old Mother Burvill, who was quite a character in Dover, but she has not mentioned that her dress at all times was most remarkable. On week-days she looked rather like a great beehive, as she wore very ample skirts and a double-caped frill cloak, making her look as broad as she was high. On Sundays she was gorgeously arrayed in a flowery chintz gown, which she bought second-hand at Mr Long's in Walton Lane. She was very particular about the patterns, preferring one which she called the 'Weeping Willow pattern'. She always attended Pentside Chapel, much to the alarm of any children who went there with their parents. It was commonly reported that she and her donkey slept in the same room, but whether this was so or not has never been settled; but, any way, they were much attached to each other, and on one occasion their affection showed itself in a very amusing way. Grimaldi, a famous London clown, was to perform in the Dover Theatre, and required a donkey to appear on the stage with him. Mother Burvill lent hers for the occasion, and was allowed a free admission to the pit in consequence. When her donkey appeared on the stage she became much excited, clapped her hands and called out to him, whereupon the animal, recognising his mistress's voice, set up an unmusical braying and steadily refused to do anything he was required to do, and, at last, had to be forcibly ejected amid the roars of the audience. Poor old Betty

Burvill, it seems rather hard that she should always have been chosen as the person on whom to play pranks. It is said that even a Royal Duke, who had been spending the evening at Sir Thomas Mantel's, on his way back to the Castle, could not resist the fun of letting her rain water run to waste. We children would go a long way round rather than pass her cottage, we had such fear of her, especially when she made ugly faces at us. She was a sort of 'bogy man' to the children of that generation."

A date has not been established for the theatrical event but clowns Grimaldi, father Joseph and son Joseph Samuel William, made provincial tours during the period from at least 1812 to the 1830s. The donkey provider was the Mother Burvill who had an interest in the scavenging business, as recorded by Mary Horsley (ref 4): "The sweeping of the streets was done by old paupers from the Workhouse and it was not very thoroughly or satisfactorily done. What they swept up was carried to a farm in Ladywell, called Bull-Cow Yard or else to Buckland Farm and there deposited to enrich the land. There was one dirt cart drawn by a donkey, and owned by a certain 'Mother Burvill', who lived where the Esplanade now is and who went about collecting the ashes which were afterwards sold to the brickmakers at the rate of 2d. or 3d. a bushel. This old woman was a terror to us children, it being popularly supposed that she ate naughty children, and the horrid old woman encouraged the idea. Naturally

the boys were her sworn enemies, and one of my brothers remembers boring a hole with gimlet, in her rain water butt, that she might find it empty in the morning!"

The Esplanade area development project started in 1834. The Pentside Chapel that Mother Burvill attended operated from 1823 to 1903. In 1838 Joseph Long, Mother Burvill's source of clothes, was recorded as a "Pawnbroker and Linendrapier" in Waltons Lane. Clearly Betsey Trotwood's and Betty Burvill's cottages were in the same area, the Esplanade being across the Granville Dock from Pilot Field. Sir Thomas Mantell's house, from where the Royal Duke set out to have a prank with old Mother Burvill's water butt, was on Commercial Quay which is below Pilot Field and opposite the Esplanade.

Another similarity was their attitude to children with Betsey's Trotwood's "Go along! No boys here!" when they came near her cottage. Donkeys were also a major feature of their lives. Dickens' Betsey chased them away from her cottage whilst Betty owned one as a source of income. So, there is some possibility of an element of truth in the family story of a member of the Burville Bailiwick providing an input to the character of Betsey Trotwood. From the evidence above, the reports of Betty Burvill's activities seem to centre on the 1830s. At this time there were several possible Elizabeths in Dover who are candidates for "old Mother Burvill".

References:

- 1, The Dover Society Newsletter, No. 73, March 2012, pages 20-22.
- 2, The Dover Society Newsletter, No. 73, March 2012, pages 26-28.
- 3, Horsley, M., Some More Memories of Old Dover, Goulden, 176 Snargate Street, Dover (1895)
- 4, Horsley, M., Some Memories of Old Dover, Goulden, 176 Snargate Street, Dover (1892)