

Charles Dickens and the Staplehurst Rail Disaster

9th June, 1865

Harry R Harris

Charles Dickens is known today as one of the greatest and most popular writers of the novel ever to have lived. He has appealed worldwide to readers of all kinds since the publication of his first novel in 1836.

Born in Portsmouth in 1812, Dickens moved to Chatham in 1817 and, apart from time in London, the rest of his life was spent in Kent. He had connections with Broadstairs and Dover. (There is a blue plaque dedicated to Dickens in Camden Crescent).

The coming of the railways was to open opportunities for travel far and wide. Dickens was not slow to grasp these

opportunities. Along with two tours of America, he travelled to Italy, Switzerland and France.

He became particularly fond of Paris and which led him to write *A Tale of Two Cities*, published in 1859. It was whilst returning from a break in Paris that Dickens was involved in the Staplehurst train crash, 9th June, 1865. He was travelling with his mistress, Ellen (Nelly) Ternan, and her mother.

Much information about the crash can be gleaned from a letter Dickens wrote to the opera singer, Madame Pauline Viardot, which was sold later for £5,250.

"The scene was so affecting when I helped in getting out the wounded and the dead, that for a little while afterwards I felt shaken by the remembrance of it. But I had no personal injury whatsoever." The letter does not mention that Dickens was returning with his mistress from a holiday in Paris. She was removed to a hotel in Maidstone to avoid any scandal...one assumes her mother went with her.



Charles Dickens



Ellen (Nelly) Ternan

The railway track near Staplehurst, a station on the Ashford to Royal Tunbridge Wells line, was being repaired. Workmen failed to signal to *The Tidal Express*, the train linking the cross-Channel ferries at Folkestone to London, that there was a gap in the tracks on a bridge over the River Beult. The time for the Express varied according to the sea tides and the foreman, Henry Bengel, later admitted he had read the wrong day's timetable and so had not been expecting a train.

Momentum carried the engine and first carriage across the breach but the rear seven carriages fell into the river. Dickens was lucky, his carriage did not fall, though it was left hanging off the bridge at a steep angle. Ten people were killed, seven women and three men, and 40 others were injured. After helping his mistress and her mother to safety, Dickens grabbed his brandy flask and administered it to the wounded, doing what he could to help for the next three hours until assistance arrived. It wasn't until he was finally about to leave that he remembered he had left the as yet unfinished manuscript for *Our Mutual Friend*, his last completed novel, in the train carriage and clambered back on board to retrieve it.

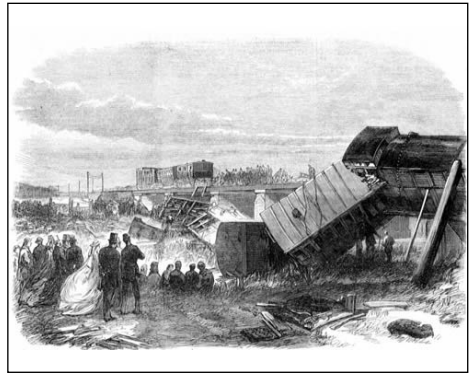
Dickens' son, Henry, later said his father never fully recovered and afterwards would often grip his train seat with both hands at the slightest jolt. Dickens had said in his letter to Madame Viardot that "I cannot yet travel on a railway, at great speed, without having a disagreeable impression, against all reason, that the carriage is turning on one side".

The rail disaster was recorded in the forerunner to the *Kent Messenger*, the *Maidstone Telegraph*, *Malling Chronicle* and *West Kent Messenger*. It was reported that the train was a 'fast' service, estimated to be travelling at 40mph and contained 130 to 140 passengers, chiefly first class. The inquest was held at the Railway Hotel in Staplehurst, where members of the jury were taken to a railway shed to inspect the bodies.

Dickens was to live another five years; he died on 9th June, 1870, exactly five years to the day after the crash.



Dickens at Train Crash



Staplehurst Railway Accident, London Illustrated News