



Charles Dickens visits Mulgrave Castle

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In April 1844 Charles Dickens, one of the most eminent authors and social reformers of his time, visited Mulgrave Castle at Lythe, near Whitby. Mulgrave Castle was the home of Lord and Lady Normanby. Lord Normanby was a politician and author. So, what was it that brought Dickens to Mulgrave Castle, and how did he respond to the North Yorkshire Moors?

Dickens was born in 1812, the son of John Dickens. His father lived beyond his means and when Dickens was twelve years old was imprisoned in Marshalsea debtors' gaol. Charles was removed from school and sent to work in a factory to support his family. His early experiences shaped his views and provided rich fodder for his writing, including a concern to expose the plight of the working classes. His articles and sketches developed into part fact, part fictional stories, and were eagerly awaited by scholars, politicians and workers alike. The articles, and subsequently his novels, brought the ills of the era to public attention in an accessible form for the first time. His personality contributed to his success and he became something of a celebrity.

Dickens treated his novels as a springboard for debate about moral and social reform. He was extremely sociable and influenced his friends and acquaintances in informal and formal gatherings. His celebrity status and

substantial income allowed him to travel widely, to indulge his passion for theatrical performance and develop into an accomplished networker.

Whilst travelling his pen was never idle. His lively imagination and his powers of observation conjured up scenes and characters such as Squeers in 'Nicholas Nickleby', thought to be based on a headmaster he visited during a trip to Yorkshire to look into the condition of schools. In the early 1830's Dickens met Charles Smithson, whose family law practice was based in Malton, and they became friends. When Smithson's elder brother and father died he returned to Malton from London to run the family practice in Chancery Lane: it is suggested that the building became the model for Scrooge's counting-house in 'A Christmas Carol'. In 1843 Dickens spent three weeks visiting Charles Smithson, enjoying his hospitality and the North Yorkshire countryside.

He enjoyed the wide open spaces and was clearly delighted: "all day long I cantered over such moss and turf that the horse's feet scarcely made a sound upon it".

As Dickens' popularity grew he mixed with the most influential figures of his time, including Lord Normanby, a Whig politician with liberal views who was Home Secretary from 1839 to 1841. Dickens and Lord Normanby shared a love of oratory and amateur

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theatricals, which was also a passion of Lord Normanby's son, Lord Mulgrave; Dickens had crossed the Atlantic five years earlier and performed with him in Montreal. Lord Normanby was also a novelist.

In April 1844 Charles Smithson died prematurely, and following the funeral in Malton Dickens was invited to stay at Mulgrave Castle by Lord Normanby, who spent several days walking and riding with him and showing him the district, including a visit to Whitby Abbey and to the fishing village of Staithes. They lunched at 'The White Horse and Griffin' in Church Street, Whitby. Dickens also travelled on the - then horse-drawn - railway to Pickering (now the North Yorkshire Moors Railway).

He was delighted with his stay at Mulgrave Castle and is reputed to have been so ecstatic about its situation and the views from the newly designed terraced lawn, 'The Quarter Deck', that he danced with joy. He expressed himself to be surprised at so many beauty spots in such close proximity.

In July 1844, shortly after his return to London from Yorkshire, Dickens hosted a dinner to celebrate the publication of 'Martin Chuzzlewit' which was presided over by Lord Normanby and attended by many notables. In 1847 Dickens was to dedicate 'Dombey and Son' to the Marchioness of Normanby.

In later years Dickens fondly remembered his trips to North Yorkshire. He wrote to his great friend, the novelist Wilkie Collins, and referred to the Pickering to Whitby railway thus: "that curious rail-road on the Whitby Moor - you were balanced against a counter-weight of water and that you did it like Blondin" (Blondin being a renowned French tightrope walker of the time). It was clearly a striking memory amongst many.

The particular combination of Dickens' personal attributes, interests and consequent friendships begin to explain how he came to visit to Mulgrave Castle in 1844 and how that contributed to his appreciation of North Yorkshire.



Find out more

Dickens Society, Malton

<http://dickenssocietymalton.co.uk/>

Mulgrave Castle

<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1001065>



The White Horse and Griffin, Church Street, Whitby



Charles Dickens in 1867-68



Mulgrave Castle, Lythe



Inspiration for Scrooge's Counting House