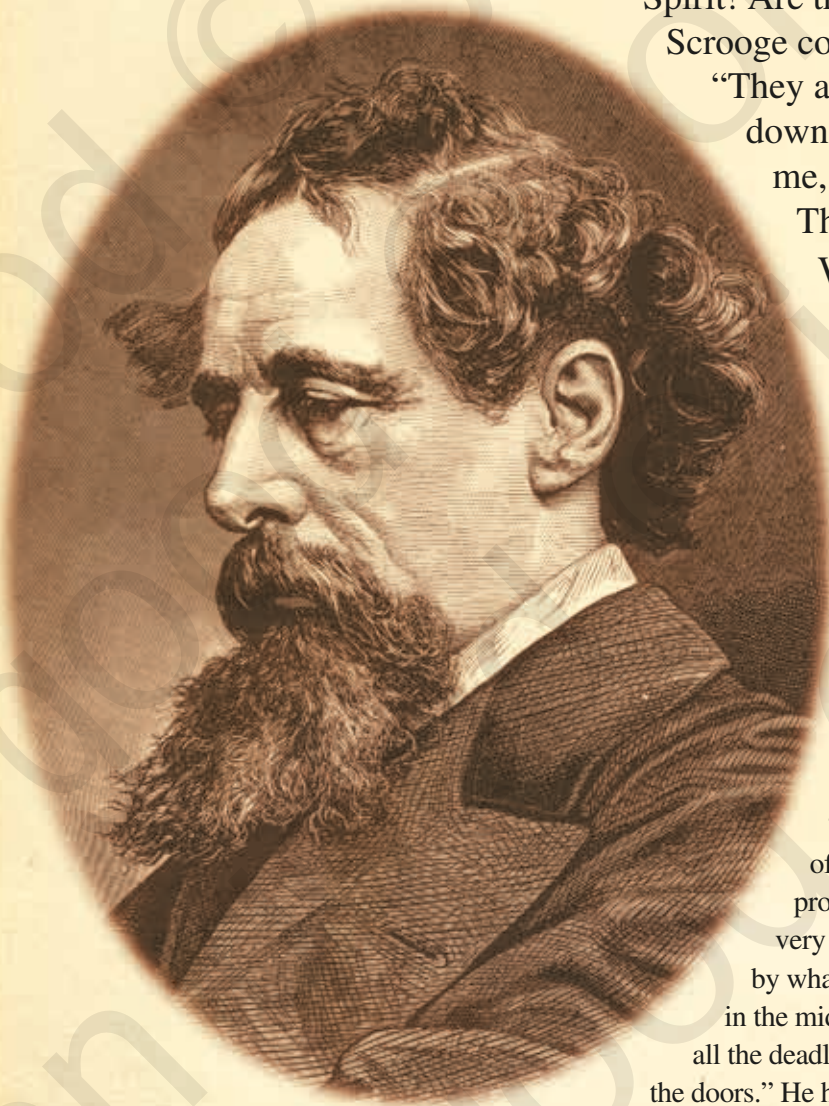




A Ghost Story of Christmas

Dickens and the writing - and reading - of A Christmas Carol



Charles Dickens

“Spirit! Are they yours?”

Scrooge could say no more.

“They are Man’s” said the Spirit, looking down upon them. “And they cling to me, appealing from their fathers.

This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want”.’

Charles Dickens, from
A Christmas Carol

During the late summer and early autumn of 1843, as he laboured on the latest instalments of his new novel, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, events in the world beyond his study led Charles Dickens to turn his hand to an altogether pithier tale that grappled directly with issues that were at the time of burning concern to him.

That September he had visited a so-called ‘ragged school’ in the Saffron Hill district of London. These schools had been set up to provide some form of basic education for the very poorest children, but Dickens was horrified by what he found: “... a sickening atmosphere, in the midst of taint and dirt and pestilence; with all the deadly sins let loose, howling and shrieking at the doors.” He had also been incensed the same year by a parliamentary report into child labour.

In October 1843 Dickens went to Manchester to make a speech to help raise funds for the Athenaeum, a new institution that was intended as a place of education and recreation for the city's labourers. It was on this trip that he conceived the idea of writing 'a ghost story of Christmas' in which the twin spectres of Ignorance and Want would be made inescapably apparent to the reading public.

Dickens' concern for the thousands upon thousands who barely survived, if they survived at all, in dreadful poverty in Victorian England was genuine, and often found practical expression; but this self-made gentleman also harboured a deep-seated fear that the deathly pair of Ignorance and Want posed a real threat to civilised life. "Beware of both" the Ghost of Christmas Present warns Scrooge, "and all of their degree, but most of all beware this boy [Ignorance] for on his brow I see that written which is Doom, unless the writing be erased."

Dickens finished *A Christmas Carol* at the beginning of December, about six weeks after he'd begun it, during which time he was still working away on the eleventh monthly instalment of *Martin Chuzzlewit*. At his urging, his publishers, Chapman and Hall brought out the story in a beautifully-produced edition, bound in red cloth, with marvellous illustrations by the *Punch* cartoonist, John Leech. Priced at a relatively modest five shillings, it was published on December 17th and a week later, on Christmas Eve, it had sold more than 5000 copies - an instant bestseller.

* * *

For Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* was to prove to be more than simply a hugely successful book, for it was of this story that Dickens gave the first of his famous public readings in December 1853, a decade after it was published. The place was Birmingham Town Hall, and the occasion, a fundraiser for a new industrial and literary institute in the city. He gave two readings of the *Carol*, the first on December 27th, followed by another on the 30th - the second performance priced cheaply at sixpence on Dickens' instruction so that a working-class audience could afford to attend.

He thought the reading would take two hours; instead it took three. In later years he found ways of trimming his performance to a more listener-friendly hour and a half.

Nevertheless, once he got into his stride on that snowy night of December 27th, the reading was a great success. His reading three nights later was nothing short of a triumph: these were the people that Dickens most desired to reach - the workers - and reach them he did, right to their hearts. According to the *Birmingham Journal*, he was met with a 'perfect hurricane of applause'.

Dickens' love of the theatre is well documented, and he was an enthusiastic producer of and actor in amateur theatricals. It was his power of mimicry that helped make him such an effective public reader. Although he was himself an unsuccessful dramatist, the dramatic potential of his books has been recognised and realised by many theatre-makers since in countless adaptations for stage and screen. Dickens would be immensely gratified. Peter Ackroyd, in his biography of the author, writes: "for Dickens, even at the very end of his life, the theatre was an enchanted place. He often used the play as a metaphor for ordinary human life when all the glitter and brightness fade and we are thrust back into a world which is 'wet, and dark, and cold'."

So you can be sure that, should Dickens chance to materialise this evening, he would be quite the merriest of ghosts.

Stuart Leeks
© John Good

How Many Ghosts?

How many Ghosts of Christmas Past can you count below?



Christmas Past

'Modern' Christmas has been celebrated in this country for over 160 years, but the traditions associated with it have changed a lot in that time. Many Christmas customs were forgotten during the Civil War and were not reinstated until the 19th century. It was the Victorians, with their peculiar blend of nostalgia and progressiveness, who invented the kind of Christmas festivities that we enjoy today. They had

an idealised image of medieval Christmas, and recreated what they believed the "old Christmas" to have been like.

The Victorians brought Christmas into the home, developing new customs and reviving the old traditions that they found acceptable. Although carol-singing had never really died out, it was the Victorians who gave the custom a new lease of life. They rediscovered old carols, published them in collections and wrote new songs on traditional themes for the family to sing in the parlour. In addition to songs and parlour games, there might well be a play to perform. Professional entertainers were also valued, and shoppers in London would be diverted by a tremendous variety of jugglers, conjurers, and musicians in the streets. In the theatres, the Christmas pantomime had been inherited from the previous century, but early in Victoria's reign it began to change. The 18th-century form was introduced by a short farce, which extended into a much longer harlequinade. Gradually the play lengthened and the harlequinade shrank, until the genre evolved into something quite close to its modern form.

On the other hand, some of what we now tend to think of as traditional Christmas customs were actually introduced during Victoria's reign. The use of holly and mistletoe as indoor decoration is very ancient, but to these were added flowers and coloured paper. The Christmas tree was first imported by Prince Albert from his native Coburg in 1841, and soon caught on as a fashion.

Improved communications - notably the penny post - and mass production combined to produce the Christmas card. It began in the 18th century as a school exercise, a decorated verse to give to parents to demonstrate their child's progress. In 1843, one of the pioneers of industrial design, Henry Cole, commissioned a card to be mass-produced to serve his own requirements. It set a new fashion ripe for commercial exploitation and - coincidentally - invented the white Christmas into the bargain, because of the unusually harsh winters experienced during the 1830s and 1840s.



Prince Albert, Queen Victoria, and their young family admire the first Christmas tree at Windsor Castle, 1842

Ebenezer's Wordsearch

Try to find all the words listed below. They may run forwards,
backwards, up, down and even diagonally!

When you have found all the words, there will be twenty-eight letters left over,
which will spell out the name of a character from A Christmas Carol.

T S I P O R H T N A L I H P
B O B C R A T C H I T T U S
H E H E E O T E L T S I M L
D O N T N E S E R P G H B O
O S L I E T Y D N A R B U R
S O F L W R E S I M M S G A
C T H E Y G A M E S I R G C
R I S S O E L I M S T E I T
J A C O B M A R L E Y K W U
S T R O H S T F I G N C I R
M C A G S G Y E P T I A Z K
S F U T U R E Y T A T R Z E
O C R E Z E N E B E S C E Y
O M C H R I S T M A S T F E

Fezziwig

Past

Gifts

Bob Cratchit

Games

Goose

Brandy

Ebenezer

Present

Future

Yet

Humbug

Smile

Mistletoe

Philanthropist

Tiny Tim

Wine

Miser

Christmas

Carols

Tea

Crackers

Jacob Marley

New

Scrooge

Ghosts

Turkey

Holly

Bed

Colour In 2



A Christmas Crossword



Across

- 1 You might find this on the windows at Christmas. (5)
- 2 The youngest son of 11 Down. (4, 3)
- 6 ___ o'clock — the time at which the first two ghosts appear. (3)
- 8 Carol: Once In Royal ___'s City. (5)
- 9 Scrooge's first name. (8)
- 11 The chimes of this tell Scrooge when it's midnight. (5)
- 13 Presents can be found ___ the Christmas tree. (5)
- 14 Marley's first name. (5)
- 16 "God bless ___, every one!" (2)
- 17 Another word for ghost. (6)
- 20 Scrooge's favourite exclamation. (6)
- 21 This bird is served for dinner at Christmas. (6)
- 22 Carol: The ___ And The Ivy. (5)

Down

- 1 The Christian name of Scrooge's nephew. (4)
- 2 The number of ghosts that visit Scrooge after Marley. (5)
- 3 Carol: The First ___ (old spelling). (6)
- 4 11 Across tells this. (4)
- 5 Scrooge enjoys counting it! (5)
- 7 The author of *A Christmas Carol*. (7)
- 10 It is served at Christmas dinner, after the main course. (7)
- 11 Scrooge's clerk, Bob ___. (8)
- 12 The Victorians used to travel in Hansom ___. (4)
- 15 Carollers do this. (4)
- 18 Carol: God Rest You ___, Gentlemen. (5)
- 19 It makes the jingle on Santa's sleigh. (4)

Spot the Difference



There are eight differences between these two pictures of Marley's Ghost. Can you spot them all?



Answers

How Many Ghosts?



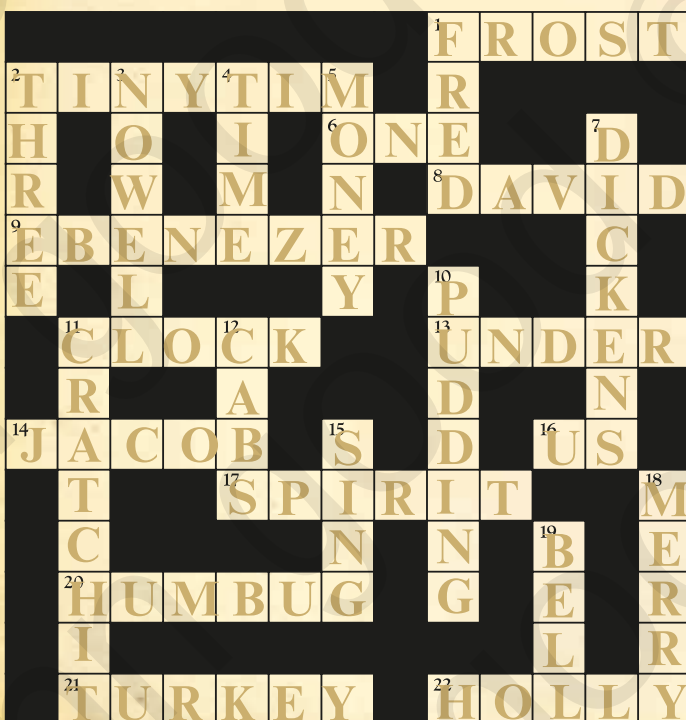
There are 8 ghosts in the picture

Wordsearch

T S I P O R H T N A L I H P
 B O B C R A T C H I T T U S
 H E H E E O T E L T S I M L
 D O N T N E S E R P G H B O
 O S L I E T Y D N A R B U R
 S O F L W R E S I M M S G A
 C T H E Y G A M E S I R G C
 R I S S O E L I M S T E I T
 J A C O B M A R L E Y K W U
 S T R O H S T F I G N C I R
 M C A G S G Y E P T I A Z K
 S F U T U R E Y T A T R Z E
 O C R E Z E N E B E S C E Y
 O M C H R I S T M A S T F E

The character made from the remaining letters is: The Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come

A Christmas Crossword



Spot the Difference



Answers

