



# ***THE WILKIE COLLINS SOCIETY***

## **WILKIE COLLINS AND WEST NORWOOD CEMETERY**

**BY PAUL GRAHAM**

Kensal Green was the first of the great commercial cemeteries to open in London and thereby relieve the pressure on the overcrowded and often insanitary parish churchyards of the metropolis. Wilkie's own burial there, to be followed in due course by that of Caroline Graves, and the proximity of the memorials to such contemporaries as Anthony Trollope and W. M. Thackeray, makes Kensal Green the Mecca of Victorian cemeteries for Collins enthusiasts.

In 1837, four years after the opening of Kensal Green, the South Metropolitan Cemetery at West Norwood became the second such cemetery to open its gates. It was designed in the Gothic style by the Cemetery Company's architect William (later Sir William) Tite, who was himself interred in the catacombs beneath the Anglican chapel. Although other large commercial cemeteries opened in rapid succession, Highgate (1839), Brompton, Nunhead, Abney Park (all 1840) and Tower Hamlets (1841), Kensal Green and West Norwood remained the two most fashionable places in which to be buried. Amongst the famous names who elected to be laid to rest at Norwood, and whose monuments survive, were those of Tate, Bessemer, Reuter, Cubbitt, Doulton, Marsden and Mrs Beeton. Although not rivalling Kensal Green in Collins interest, West Norwood was the final resting place of several men whose lives intersected with that of Wilkie.

Douglas Jerrold was interred there in 1857. As a playwright Jerrold was prolific. His output included the hugely successful *Black-Eyed Susan*, which he wrote for the Surrey Theatre in 1829 and which ran for over 300 successive performances. He was also a contributor to periodical literature. He was the editor of *The Illuminated Magazine* who published Wilkie's first recorded piece, *The Last Stage Coachman*, in 1843. Jerrold's name, however, was synonymous with *Punch*. From the founding of the magazine in 1841 until shortly before his death, Jerrold contributed pungent leading articles as well as serial works of fiction such as *The Story of a Feather*. In all his writings Jerrold was the champion of the poor and oppressed against the wealthy and powerful wherever they might be. Ironically, and much to Jerrold's own chagrin, the one purely humorous series that he contributed to *Punch*, *Mrs Caudle's Curtain Lectures*, proved to be the most popular by far.

Wilkie replaced Jerrold in the role of Shadowly Softhead in Dickens's amateur production of Bulwer Lytton's *Not So Bad As We Seem* in 1852. Jerrold's defection, because of the death of his mother, led Dickens to lament that: "Jerrold - who never in his life was true to anything - has deserted us"<sup>1</sup> Jerrold once acted professionally in a play of his own, though that experiment was never repeated. His acting was, however, good enough to draw praise from Queen Victoria after she attended a performance of Bulwer's play in 1851.

When Jerrold's son Blanchard (interred in the same grave at West Norwood) wrote a piously filial biography of his father in 1859, Wilkie Collins reviewed it for *Household Words*. The review was later amongst the essays reprinted in *My Miscellanies*. Wilkie there described Douglas Jerrold as: "one of the first and the dearest friends of my literary life". Wilkie's play, *The Frozen Deep*, was revived and played to aid the fund established for Jerrold's family, much to Blanchard's annoyance as the family were far from destitute. The monument covering both Jerrolds, father and son, was photographed in 1987. It was subsequently destroyed by Lambeth Borough Council, who compulsorily purchased the cemetery in 1965, during their clearances in the cemetery. This act of municipal vandalism accounted for about one third of the original Victorian monuments.

When the publisher Richard Bentley died in Ramsgate in 1871, his body was brought to West Norwood for interment. Wilkie was one of the many literary luminaries whose work Bentley published: Charles Dickens, Anthony Trollope and Benjamin Disraeli were amongst the others. Wilkie's first published novel *Antonina* appeared in 1850 under the Bentley imprint. In Wilkie's own words, Bentley "with a liberality unheard of in those days to an unknown beginner actually gave me £200 on the completion of the book."<sup>2</sup> It was followed by *Rambles Beyond Railways* (1851); *Mr Wray's Cash Box* and *Basil* (1852); and *Hide & Seek* (1854). Wilkie also contributed several shorter pieces to *Bentley's Miscellany*, a weekly magazine started by Bentley in 1836 under the editorship of Dickens. Dickens's own relations with Bentley were notoriously fraught. Wilkie's were more amicable, though he was annoyed when Bentley announced the publication of *Antonina* by the "author of the Life of Samuel Collins RA." Bentley later further exasperated Wilkie by advertising the publication of "Mr Wray's Cash Book", illustrated by "Willais", by the author of "Antonini". After Richard Bentley's death, the House of Bentley & Sons also published *Poor Miss Finch* (1872); *Miss or Mrs?* and *The New Magdalen* (1873); *The Frozen Deep* (1874); and *A Rogue's Life* (1879). Bentley's monument, a large brick vault capped with a flat York stone slab, survives in good condition.

Frederick Robson (the Great Little Robson) starred as Aaron Gurnock in the first professional production of *The Lighthouse* at the Olympic Theatre in 1857. Wilkie attended the performance, in the company of both Dickens and Thackeray who provided moral support., and happily acknowledged the audience's applause for the author at its conclusion. The following year Robson also appeared as Hans Grimm in *The Red Vial* at the same venue. The role had been specifically written with Robson in mind.

Wilkie later adapted the plot of *The Red Vial* to form the basis of *Jezebel's Daughter* (1880), where the character of Hans Grimm was reincarnated as Jack Straw. Robson, real name Thomas Robson Brownhill, was one of Collins' favourite actors. He died after a long illness, probably in part attributable to alcoholism, in Camden in 1864. His monument had collapsed by 1971 and was subsequently destroyed.

The Scottish artist David Roberts, who specialised in scenes of Egypt and the Holy Land, was well known to Wilkie Collins, himself the son and brother of artists. His father numbered Roberts amongst his artistic friends. In his biography of his father, Wilkie Collins included the contents of the last letter William Collins received from Sir David Wilkie, written in Jerusalem on 2 April 1841, recording: "You know the excellent drawings our friend Roberts has made of various scenes in this place...Roberts, you know, has done much, but I almost wish he had done it more, and had been here longer."<sup>3</sup>

When Wilkie Collins was holidaying in Rome in 1853 with Augustus Egg and Dickens, the latter recorded in a letter to his wife how they had found "Davy Roberts...painting in St. Peter's with Louis Haghe (a lithographer also interred at West Norwood)...he smoked his cigar and drank his punch with us last Thursday evening."<sup>4</sup> On Roberts' death in 1864, he was interred in the Bicknell family vault with his daughter and in-laws. Following a posthumous exhibition of his work in 1875, his admirers arranged for his remains to be re-interred in an adjoining plot with a separate headstone. His monument deteriorated to the extent that the inscription was illegible. Last year, thanks largely to donations from two major dealers in his works, it was replaced by a similar stone in pristine condition.

When William Clowes introduced steam presses into his company's premises near Charing Cross in 1823, the English printing industry was revolutionised and the mass production of inexpensive books and periodicals became a real possibility. On his death in 1847, his son, also William Clowes, took up the baton. The company had moved to a new site in Duke Street, off Stamford Street, in Southwark, which became the largest printing works in the world. The official company history, *Family Business* by W.B. Clowes (1953), includes signatures from some of the famous correspondents whose works the company printed. Wilkie's signature is included there but, regrettably, no letters from him survive in the company's archive. The firm of Clowes & Sons printed the first edition of *The Woman in White*, in three volumes, in 1860 for Sampson Low. For the same publisher they printed the first, three volume, edition of *No Name* in 1862 and the first, two volume, edition of *My Miscellanies* in the following year. For Richard Bentley & Son, William Clowes printed the first English edition of *Miss or Mrs?* in 1873. Biographies of both Clowes' are contained within the *Dictionary of National Biography*. They now lie side by side under similar York stone slabs. Happily, the firm that bears their name still survives, though based now in Beccles, Suffolk.

Sir Thomas Noon Talfourd, playwright, poet, politician, barrister and judge, was a friend of Wilkie's. In 1836 his five act tragedy, *Jon*, attempted to return the Drama to an English stage dominated by farce, burlesque and spectacle. He later earned literary immortality when Dickens based the character of Traddles in *David Copperfield* upon him. It was at a dinner in Talfourd's house in Russell Square that Collins witnessed early signs of the marital unhappiness that was to result in Dickens's separation. He reported to Wybert Reeve the gloom of Dickens after his wife publicly complained of his habit of leaping out of the conjugal bed to jot down happy nocturnal thoughts. Talfourd died of apoplexy in 1854 whilst on the Bench at Stafford. His monument, a tall, elegant cross, remains in good condition.

William Hardwick Bradbury joined the printing and publishing business established by his father, also W. H. Bradbury, and F. M. Evans in Whitefriars Street. Bradbury & Evans were the printers of *Punch* and of the works of Dickens, and became Dickens's publishers too when the author left Chapman & Hall in 1844. They were also the printers, for Richard Bentley, of *Antonina*; *Mr Wray's Cash-Box*; and *Hide and Seek*. They also published *The Dead Secret* in two volumes in June 1857. From 1872 until his death at his Balham home in 1892, Bradbury was the head of the firm of Bradbury, Agnew & Co. of Bouverie Street. His monument, a plain, flat slab, survives, though some of the lead lettering has come loose and been lost.

The much anticipated edition of Collins' letters may throw some further light on his relationship with these men and with others interred at West Norwood.

The entrance to West Norwood Cemetery is on the Norwood Road, about five minutes walk from West Norwood railway station. The Friends of West Norwood Cemetery organise conducted walks on the first Sunday of every month at 2.30 p.m. in the summer (April-October) and 11.00 a.m. in the winter. Despite the depredations of time and the local council, enough of interest survives to make the visit to Norwood worthwhile for any Collins enthusiast.

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<sup>1</sup> Pilgrim edition of *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, Volume 6, p. 590.

<sup>2</sup> W. M. Clarke *The Secret Life of Wilkie Collins* (Allison & Busby) (1989) p. 54.

<sup>3</sup> *Memoirs of the Life of William Collins R.A.* Volume 2 (E. P. Publishing) (1978) pp.183-5.

<sup>4</sup> Pilgrim edition of *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, Volume 7, p. 205.