

***THE WOMAN IN WHITE* at the OLYMPIC THEATRE**

The dramatic version of *The Woman in White* ran at the Olympic Theatre for twenty weeks from Monday 9 October 1871 to Saturday 24 February 1872. Until now we did not know what Wilkie Collins earned from this apparently successful production. But recent analysis of his bank records¹ can tell us precisely how much money he made. It also gives an estimate of the size of audience over the twenty week run and indicates why the decision was taken to close the play.

The background

The Woman in White made Wilkie Collins's reputation. It was originally published in 40 parts in Charles Dickens's periodical *All The Year Round* which replaced *Household Words* in the spring of 1859. Dickens had been against running serialised fiction in *Household Words* but the success of an earlier Collins's tale – *The Dead Secret* which Dickens had allowed to run for six months in 1856 – may have played a part in his change of heart.

Dickens opened his new periodical on 30 April with his own short novel *A Tale of Two Cities* which ran for 31 numbers. On 26 November 1859 the last episode of *A Tale of Two Cities* was separated from the first of *The Woman in White* by this statement.

We purpose always reserving the first place in these pages for a continuous original work of fiction, occupying about the same amount of time in its serial publication as that which is just completed...it is our hope and aim...to produce...some sustained works of imagination that may become part of English Literature.²

From the start *The Woman in White* grabbed the public's imagination. Many years later Wilkie's friend and fellow writer Percy Fitzgerald recalled

'The Woman in White' was the chief attraction in *All the Year Round* for the year 1859. Readers followed its ingeniously tortuous plot from week to week with extraordinary interest.³

Sales of the periodical soared.

Wilkie's novel did much to secure the circulation of *All the Year Round*, three times that of *Household Words* at its best. Queues of eager readers formed outside the offices on press days; the story became the theme of dinner-table gossip.⁴

Wilkie wrote to his friend Edward Ward on 7 January 1860

as far as it has gone it has certainly made itself felt pretty strongly not only in England, but in America as well.⁵

When the story was just six weeks into its run publishers vied to buy the book rights. The contest was won by Sampson Low. The price agreed is unknown⁶. But within a month Wilkie told his mother

¹ Wilkie's bank account at Coutts has now been fully transcribed and analysed by the author. See 'The Coutts account' below.

² *All The Year Round*, 26 November 1859, vol. II, p. 95.

³ Percy Fitzgerald *Memoirs of an Author*, London 1895, vol. I pp. 90-91.

⁴ Catherine Peters *The King of Inventors*, London 1991, p. 227.

⁵ William Baker and William Clarke *The Letters of Wilkie Collins*, London 1999, vol. I, p.180.

The other day I reckoned up what I have got by it thus far. One thousand four hundred pounds —with the copyright in my possession, and the disposal of all editions under the extravagant guinea and a half price, in my hands. Cock-a-doodle-doo!... Low talks already of dealing for cheaper editions - but we have settled nothing yet, for when I last heard of it, the sale of the book in the expensive form was going on.⁷

The under-bidder George Smith of Smith, Elder had offered £500 but said later that he could have paid ten times as much and still made 'a large sum by the transaction'.⁸

Sampson Low published the novel in three volumes on 15 August 1860. The whole edition of 1000 copies sold that day and another 350 were sold by the end of the first week.⁹ Over the next few months six more identifiable three volume editions were produced.¹⁰ And by the spring of 1861 a one volume edition with a photographic portrait of the author was published. Further reprints followed, the book was translated into many languages¹¹ and Wilkie sent signed quotes from it to admirers.¹² His reputation was established.

The play

Despite the success of *The Woman in White* as a novel Collins did not adapt it for the English stage for more than ten years. But there were unauthorised dramatisations. As early as November 1860 a pirate version ran in London

They are going to dramatize the story at The Surrey Theatre - and I am asked to go to law about that. I will certainly go and hiss – unless the manager makes a “previous arrangement” with me.¹³

The play was written by ‘Surrey Theater hack, J. M. Ware’¹⁴ and opened at the Royal Surrey Theatre south of the Thames in Blackfriars Road, Lambeth on Saturday 3 November with [William] Creswick as Fosco. *The Times* records 24 performances and the play closed on Friday 30 November.¹⁵ The manager was Richard Shepherd¹⁶ and Peters says ‘This time the manager of the Surrey Theatre caved in’.¹⁷ There is no indication that Wilkie actually attended the play. No income from it is identified in Wilkie’s accounts but there is an unidentified amount of £113-16s-3d paid in on 12 December.

There were also versions of the story performed at the Theatre Royal, Norwich from 11 January 1861 and at Sadler’s Wells, Islington from 19 August 1861.¹⁸

⁶ Edward Marston, a partner in Sampson Low, wrote later ‘Concerning “The Woman in White” I have to rely on my own memory entirely, for I have not been able to find any correspondence on either side with regard to our original agreement.’ *After Work*, London 1904, p. 84.

⁷ 12 September 1860, Baker and Clarke, vol. I p.188.

⁸ Leonard Huxley *The House of Smith, Elder*, London 1923, p. 92.

⁹ WC wrote to his mother ‘the whole of the first impression was sold on the day of publication...I have just returned from Low’s with £500. 350 copies of the second edition sold in five days...in all 1350 copies in a week’ Baker, Gasson, Law, Lewis *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins: The Collected Letters*, London 2005 [cited as BGLL] vol. I p. 209.

¹⁰ See Gasson ‘*The Woman in White: A Chronological Study*’ *Wilkie Collins Society Journal* vol. II 1982 pp. 5-14.

¹¹ See for example to Edward Walford 17 April 1861 BGLL, vol. I p. 231.

¹² There are several examples in BGLL and Addenda but see BGLL, vol. I p. 225.

¹³ To Edward Marston, 31 October 1860, Baker and Clarke, vol I, p. 191.

¹⁴ Nuel Pharr Davis, *The Life of Wilkie Collins*, Urbana 1956, p. 221 though Nicoll (below) gives no author.

¹⁵ See for example *The Times* 12 November 1860 p. 6A

¹⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Surrey_Theatre and <http://www.arthurlloyd.co.uk/surrey.htm>

¹⁷ Catherine Peters, *The King of Inventors*, p. 234.

¹⁸ Allardyce Nicoll, *A History of Late Nineteenth Century Drama 1850-1900*, Cambridge 1946, vol. II, p. 769.

A few years later the story was dramatised illicitly in Germany. On 14 December 1866 Wilkie wrote to his mother with a cutting from a German newspaper

Look for the facetious illustrations of The Woman in White – which is the rage at Berlin now as a play. The people in the pit do really – as in the illustration – follow the play with the book in their hands!¹⁹

A little later Wilkie was in Paris discussing a dramatisation for the French stage.²⁰ The project seems to have come off. On 29 January he wrote to Isabelle Frith ‘February 11th, will in all probability find me at Paris, attending the rehearsals of the dramatic “Woman In White’.²¹ But it was not until late in 1870 that he got down to turning the book into a play for the English stage. On 22 December 1870 he wrote to his French friend and collaborator François Régnier

I have been very busy dramatising my books. “Man and Wife” and “No Name” are both complete in four acts each. The “Woman in White” I have just completed in scenario only. I am not quite satisfied with it – and I have put it aside to return to it again. There are obstacles in the way of my getting my plays represented here just now, which I hope to overcome.²²

On 20 January 1871 he told Régnier he would ‘send you “The Woman in White” as I write it.’²³ But by June he was still looking for a theatre. He wrote to the American agent John Bonner

I should have written to you at an earlier date on the subject of my dramatic version of “The Woman in White” – if the arrangements for the production of the work in England had been complete. They are not yet settled.²⁴

Finally they were. On 5 August he wrote again to Bonner

The dramatic “Woman in White” is to be produced on the London stage, at the Olympic Theatre, on the 2nd of October next. “Fosco” is to be played by Mr. George Vining.²⁵

But the rehearsals took longer than expected. On 26 September Collins wrote again to Bonner ““Poor Miss Finch” and the rehearsals of “The Woman in White” have not allowed me five minutes spare time’²⁶ and in the event it opened a week later than expected on 9 October at the Olympic Theatre in Wych Street near the Strand. The theatre had already housed three of Wilkie’s plays and two more would follow *The Woman in White*.

Wybert Reeve, who played Walter Hartright, gave this account of the genesis of the play.

They were terrible rehearsals, tiresome in the extreme, from ten o’clock in the morning until five o’clock in the afternoon—sometimes from six or seven o’clock in the evening to one and two o’clock in the morning. Endless arguments arose about crossing the stage, the position of the several characters, of a chair, a sofa, or a table. The two ladies—the one playing Anne Catherick and doubling Lady Glyde, the other Marion Halcombe—had a little difference of opinion. Neither liked to give way to the other. On a question of whether both could not keep their faces to the audience at the same time during the recognition scene in the Lunatic Asylum the discussion lasted over an hour on one occasion. Mr. Vining should at once have

¹⁹ BGLL, vol. II pp. 55-56.

²⁰ see to Harriet Collins 26 February 1867, Baker & Clarke vol. II pp.283-284.

²¹ BGLL, vol. II p. 127.

²² BGLL, vol. II p. 225.

²³ BGLL, vol. II p. 232.

²⁴ 10 June 1871, *Wilkie Collins Society Journal* 2007, ‘Addenda & Corrigenda 3’, pp. 44-45.

²⁵ BGLL, vol. II p. 267.

²⁶ BGLL, vol. II p.278.

directed the business and insisted on it, but he was a bad stage-manager. Wilkie Collins looked “perplexed in the extreme,” not knowing which side to take, but he was gentlemanly, patient, and good-tempered, always ready for a smile if a chance offered itself, or a peaceful word, kindly suggesting something when a point was to be gained. I marvelled at him, for authors as a rule are the reverse of patient when their own pieces are rehearsing. They naturally form their own conception of characters they have created, and object to have their ideas differently interpreted by the actor or actress.²⁷

Despite these trials when it did open the play was a success. After the first night Wilkie wrote to publisher George Smith

We produced my own dramatic version last night – and really took the audience by storm. “Experts” in dramatic matters predict a solid success.²⁸

Wybert Reeve continued his account

The difficulties were got through, and the 9th of October was the eventful night of the production of the play. It was a great success. At the end of the third act there was a loud call for the author, and Collins, after a good deal of trouble, was induced to appear before the curtain and respond to it. He was suffering a good deal from nervous anxiety. To my surprise the two ladies were waiting for him at the wing, each anxious to be taken on, and to allow the other no advantage. He was wise, no doubt; although the call was his, he marched them both on before the curtain.

The critics generally liked it. So much so that the theatre published a 16 page booklet *Specimens of Criticism...in the press* with a cover showing the poster for the play by Frederick Walker on the front and George Vining as Fosco on the back.

The run

At the start the theatre was packed. After the first week Wilkie wrote to his lawyer and agent William Tindell

Money flowing in at The Olympic. £123, in the theatre last Saturday night – and hundreds sent away from Pit and Gallery for want of room.²⁹

Even by week seven there were no seats to be had on Saturday. Wilkie wrote to his friend Edward Ward

Would you like to see *The Woman In White* at The Olympic? Choose any evening but Saturday – and stalls or Private Box – which you please.³⁰

Towards the end of the year Wilkie remained bullish even though the audience was falling off. In a letter to Charles Ward on 6 December he wrote

we are still playing at a profit to everybody – and no other Theatre but the Prince of Wales’s is doing that this month.³¹

²⁷ Wybert Reeve *From Life*, London 1891, p. 106.

²⁸ 10 October 1871, BGLL, vol. II p. 280.

²⁹ 19 October 1871 BGLL, vol. II p. 287.

³⁰ 22 November 1871 BGLL, vol. II p. 301.

³¹ 6 December 1871 BGLL, vol. II p. 306.

The Prince of Wales's Royal Theatre, run by Squire and Marie Bancroft, was showing a revival of the comedy *Caste* by Thomas William Robertson starring the Bancrofts themselves with Lydia Foote, and John Hare.³² All of them would go on to take major roles in later Collins plays

Saturdays were still packed a month later when he wrote to George Manville Fenn enclosing a ticket for Wednesday 3 January 1872 – week 12 – saying

If Wednesday evening does not suite you, return me the ticket – and say which evening will do. Any evening you like but Saturday.³³

The play was advertised on bills and posters including the famous image by Frederick Walker of the woman dressed in white from behind at a doorway with her head turned in profile against the stars. It was also widely advertised in *The Times* starting with more than 40 lines on the day it opened including a long statement on Wilkie's behalf about its originality. By 30 October it was billed as 'The new successful drama' and on 12 December it was 'powerfully acted' and 'dramatised by the distinguished author, Wilkie Collins, from his own marvellous work and pronounced by the Press and Public the most genuine success of the season.' By 16 January the review was strengthened to 'Pronounced by the public to be the best acted modern drama of the day.' By then the short play, which traditionally preceded the main work, *The Boot on the Right Foot* was replaced by a short farce *Never Reckon Your Chickens until they are Hatched* by the lead actor Wybert Reeve and followed by another farce *A Chapter of Accidents*.

As the run came to an end adverts pronounced the 'last seven nights of the most thrilling and effective drama of the day, splendidly acted, magnificently mounted' and then on 24 February it was 'The last night of The Woman in White, the successful drama by Wilkie Collins'.³⁴

The money

There is no extant letter or contract for the deal between Collins and the proprietors of the Olympic Theatre. However, we can conclude from other evidence that he was paid 10% of the box office receipts for each week they reached £400 or more and 5% for each week they fell below that figure.

On 18 October 1871 he sent his friend Charles Ward – who worked for Coutts bank and acted as Wilkie's manager there – the first cheque from the play

I enclose a cheque for £47.10s.- being my first week's percentage on the performances of The Woman in White.³⁵

The accounts record the payment on 18 October as "Of Mr Liston". William Henry Liston was the proprietor of The Olympic from 1869 to 1872³⁶ and his wife Marie³⁷ was in the programme as the 'Directress' of the play.

Two days later Wilkie wrote to his friend Charles Reade

The "business" promises famously. Receipts for the First Week £475...- which give a good profit to those interested.³⁸

³² *The Times* 6 December 1871.

³³ BGLL, vol. II p. 313.

³⁴ *The Times* on dates cited usually p. 8.

³⁵ BGLL, vol. II p. 286. For a guide to pre-decimal currency see www.paullewis.co.uk and click on 'Victorian coinage'.

³⁶ <http://people.umass.edu/a0fs000/1800/0409.html>.

³⁷ National Archives, Census RG 10/71 p. 8.

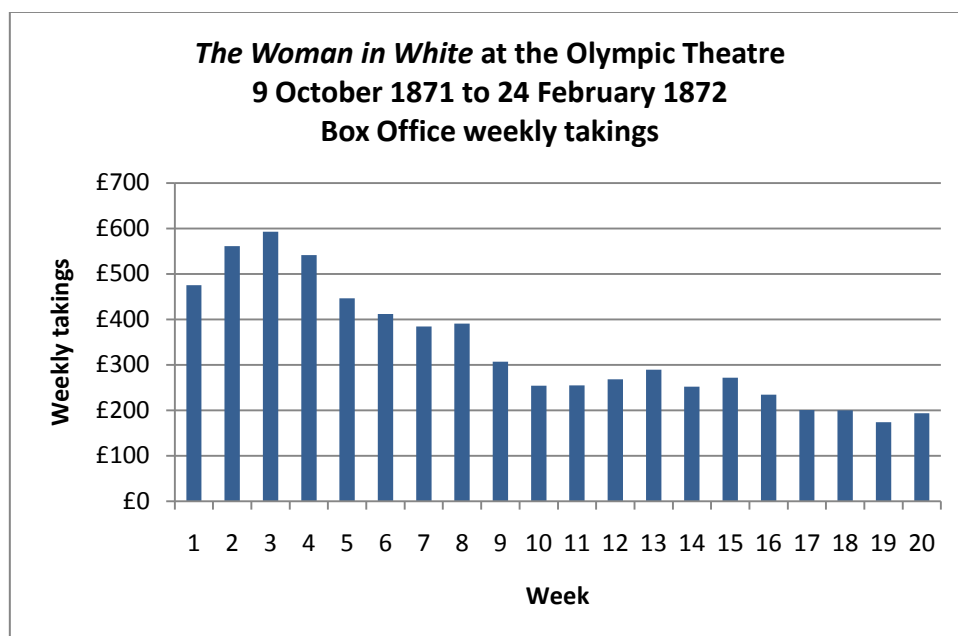
³⁸ BGLL, vol. II p. 287.

That puts his initial payment of £47-10s as 10% of the box office. After that the distribution was paid weekly three or four days after the end of the week. The amount rose to a peak of £59-6s-3d in week three and fell back gently to £41-3s-3d in week six. But in week seven it fell by more than half to £19-4s-3d and was barely more in week eight at £19-10s-9d. On receiving that cheque Wilkie's friend and banker Charles Ward must have written to him to query the lower payments. Wilkie replied

Under £400 a week I only take £5 per cent. Hence the drop.³⁹

Thereafter the payments continued to decline and by the end Wilkie was making barely £9 or £10 a week. Altogether he received a total of £486-9s-9d, a shade under £486.50 in decimal notation.

Applying Wilkie's percentages to the payments he received it is possible to reconstruct the weekly takings of the theatre. Over the 20 week run they totalled £6,701 peaking at £593 in week three and, despite a small rise over the New Year, fell to a low of £174 in week nineteen. A slight bounce after the closure was announced added less than £20 to that figure for the final week.



Wilkie's letter to Tindell of 19 October, cited above, shows that the takings for a completely full house with 'hundreds sent away' were £123. A similar sold out figure a couple of years later is confirmed by an extant Olympic Theatre Box Office account for Thursday 25 September 1873 when Wilkie's *The New Magdalen* was playing. Takings that night were £117-18s and 'fifty people could not find admission for their money.' A total of 988 tickets were sold made up of 356 Gallery, 325 Pit, 122 Amphitheatre, 74 Dress Circle, 68 Stalls, 35 Boxes, and 8 Private Boxes which could hold several people. In addition up to 38 Stalls seats were filled by people with complimentary tickets. So the total house could be as many as 1050 people.⁴⁰

Ticket prices revealed by the original Programme for *The Woman in White* were almost identical to those charged for *The New Magdalen*.⁴¹

Stalls, 7s.	Dress circle, 4s.	Boxes, (with bonnets) 4s.	Pit, 2s.
	Amphitheatre, 1s.	Gallery, 6d.	

³⁹ 6 December 1871 BGLL, vol. II p. 306.

⁴⁰ Mitchell Collection, Glasgow Public Library 891117/123 and 122.

⁴¹ Original programme for 9 October 1871, author's collection.

Private Boxes, £2 12s 6d., £2 2s. & £1 1s. Box Office open daily from
10 to 5, Under the Direction of Mr. NUGENT. Places may always be secured at
all the Libraries.

Taking Wilkie's full house figure for that first Saturday of £123 the theoretical maximum possible takings for the week (the theatre was closed on Sunday and there were no matinées) were £123 x 6 = £738. No theatre achieves that. But it puts the house at about 64% full in the first week, 80% full in the third, falling to about half full when Wilkie's share became 5% and about a quarter full when the run ended in February 1872.

Using the figure of 1050 for a completely full to bursting house it is possible to calculate that as many as 5000 people saw the play in its third week with a total audience of more than 57,000 people over the 20 week run. Even at the end more than 250 people a night were in the audience. But as takings fell below £200 a week the management decided it was time to pull the plug.

This was not quite the end of Wilkie's income from the play. After its success in London two troupes, each headed by one of the leading actors Wybert Reeve and George Vining, began to tour the play round the country.⁴² Wilkie quarrelled with Vining over alterations to the script and after two weeks in Manchester Vining abandoned the tour.⁴³ Reeve had more success and reports a letter from Wilkie in June 1873

let me heartily congratulate you on the great increase of reputation which your performance of Fosco has so worthily won. I and my play are both deeply indebted to your artistic sympathy, and your admirable business management – to say nothing of the great increase of sale in the book in each town you play,⁴⁴

No payments for this tour have been identified in the accounts. If they arrived among the entries marked simply 'recvd' they were small. A planned revival in London never took place. Another version, with Reeve as Fosco, ran for two weeks at the Broadway Theatre New York at the end of 1873 and toured the USA.⁴⁵ Wilkie reported receiving just £10-13s from Reeve for this tour.⁴⁶

What was it worth?

In the year 1871/72 Wilkie's total income from all his work was £3442. The takings from the play at £486 represented just over 14% or one pound in every seven of that sum. His biggest earner was the story *Poor Miss Finch*. He sold it for serial publication in *Cassell's Weekly* for £600 and then sold it again for £750 to Richard Bentley for the initial book publication. He was also paid £600 from Harper & Brothers to publish it in New York, £70 from Tauchnitz for the Continental English publication and £102-9s-6d from Hunter Rose for its publication in serial form in Canada. He received £10 for the right to translate it into German, £8-6s-8d for a Dutch translation and another payment of £40 from a continental agent which may also be for a translation of this book, possibly into French and Spanish. That is a total of almost £2200. By contrast he was paid just £163-6s-8d in this year for the republication of six old titles, including £40 for a cheap edition of *The Woman in White*. And he earned £226-12s-8d interest on investments.⁴⁷

So the money for the play was a significant proportion of Wilkie's earnings in that year. Much less than he earned from his latest novel. But far more than he earned from anything else.

⁴² See BGLL, vol. II p. 326 and fn.2.

⁴³ See to Vining, 17 April 1872, BGLL, vol. II pp. 338-339 and to Tindell, 10 May 1872, BGLL, vol. II pp. 353-353.

⁴⁴ Reeve, *op. cit.* p. 108.

⁴⁵ Andrew Gasson *Wilkie Collins: An Illustrated Guide*, London 1998, p. 160.

⁴⁶ to Ward 29 July 1874, BGLL, vol. III p. 46.

⁴⁷ Information from the Coutts accounts and supported by Wilkie's letters.

The question of what £486 was worth then is more difficult to answer. The Office for National Statistics produces a Long Term Prices Index back to 1750. That shows the average cost of a typical basket of goods has risen 84.75 times from 1872 to 2008.⁴⁸ In other words you would need £8,475 today to buy what you could get with £100 in 1872. That puts the £486 earned from *The Woman in White* play as worth £41,188 at today's prices.

Another way of looking at what the money was worth is to take the price of a seat in the stalls in a West End theatre. The Olympic charged 7s (35p). Today such a seat will sell for around £45 which is 128 times the price paid by the audience in 1872. Wilkie could have bought 1390 stalls seats with his profit. Today that would cost him £62,550.

But any price rise may understate the value of the money as earnings. Overall wages rise more each year than prices. The website www.measuringworth.com claims that earning £100 in 1872 is about the same as earning £52,000 today. If that is right the play earned Wilkie the equivalent of more than £250,000 in today's terms.

That estimate may be excessive. Other sources show that that a teacher earned about £100 a year then (£88 in 1855 and £115 in 1881) which is about 1/320 of the £32,200 which is the average pay of a classroom teacher today.⁴⁹ Similarly in 1880 a cocoa factory hand earned around 20s a week for 56 hours work.⁵⁰ That is 1.78p an hour and the minimum wage today of £5.73 is 320 times more. Multiplying the £486 earned by the *Woman in White* drama by 320 gives equivalent earnings of £155,000. Put another way it is nearly five years' pay for a teacher and more than nine years' for the cocoa factory worker.

So there are many ways to work out what an amount of money then is worth now. But however it is done, the takings from the play's 20 week run were a significant sum.

The Coutts account

Wilkie Collins opened his bank account at Coutts on 23 August 1860 with a payment of £300, almost certainly part of the money he earned from the Sampson Low contract to publish *The Woman in White* in book form. He kept the account for the rest of his life. We know that a few payments were made in cash and are not recorded in the bank records and a small number of entries – both in and out – are anonymous. But overall it is a fairly comprehensive account of the finances of one of the top Victorian authors over the period from the beginning of his fame to his death.

The accounting year at Coutts ran from 24 June to the following 23 June. At the end of that period the year's transactions on each account were transcribed into parchment volumes in alphabetical order by customer. It was a major annual task which took some time. On 18 June 1879 Wilkie wrote to Charles Ward

Caroline is fetching a new cheque Book for me. I have given her the necessary order, so that you may not be interrupted at this busy time.⁵¹

The large annual account volumes are held in the archives of Coutts, now part of The Royal Bank of Scotland Group. All Wilkie Collins's accounts have now been transcribed from these records.

My thanks to Tracey Earl, archivist at Coutts, for her unstinting help in obtaining the bulky volumes and putting up with me while I took copies and for her help interpreting Victorian banking terms and

⁴⁸ Author's calculations using the index CDKO at www.statistics.gov.uk and www.statistics.gov.uk/articles/nojournal/1750CPI.pdf.

⁴⁹ Leone Levi *Wages and Earnings of the Working Classes* London 1885 p.51 and <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/7372058.stm>.

⁵⁰ Levi *op. cit.* p. 141.

⁵¹ BGLL, vol. III p.249.

practice. Faith Clarke, Wilkie's great granddaughter, kindly gave permission to access the information.

Paul Lewis
August 2009