



THE WILKIE COLLINS SOCIETY

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**THE BIRTH OF WILKIE COLLINS**  
**before and after**

A 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary publication

by  
Paul Lewis



Wilkie Collins as a baby, by his father William Collins R.A. (courtesy Faith Clarke)

Wilkie Collins Society  
January 2024



William Collins R.A.  
by John Linnell 1831  
(courtesy Faith Clarke)

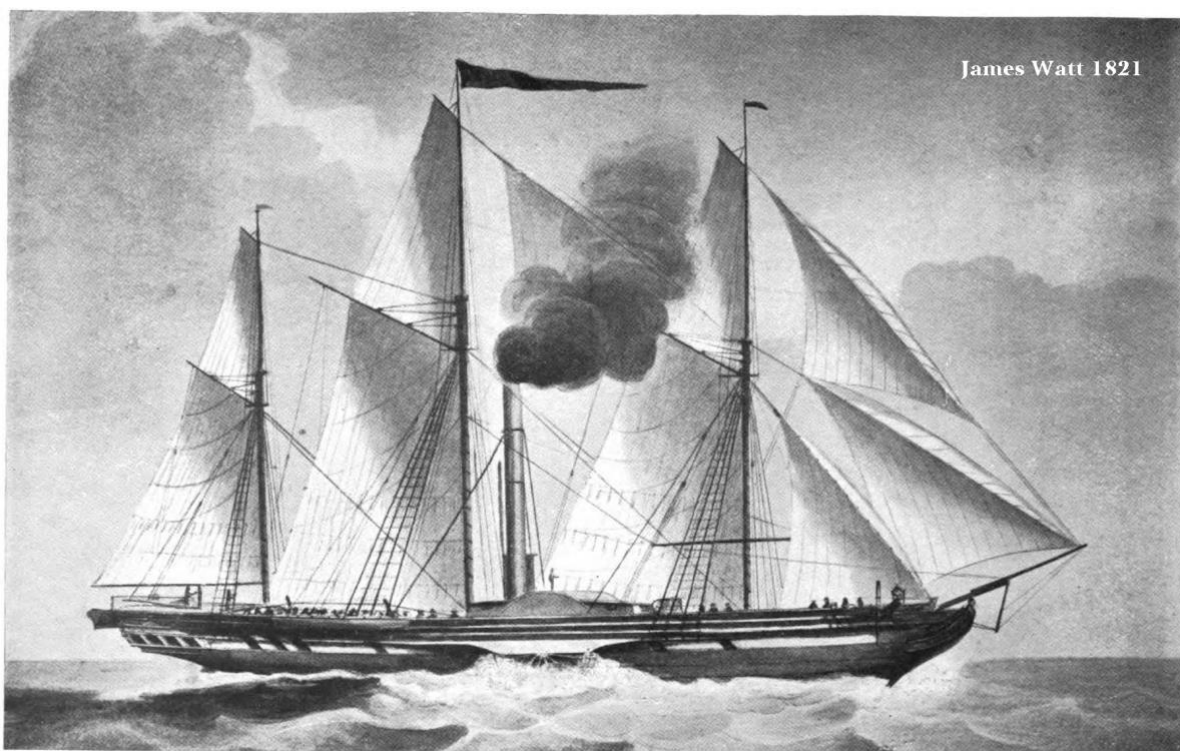


Harriet Collins née Geddes  
by John Linnell 1831  
(courtesy Faith Clarke)

## THE BIRTH OF WILKIE COLLINS

### Before

On Wednesday 4 September 1822 a 32-year-old governess Harriet Geddes went by cab with her 24-year-old brother Alexander to Blackwall, in the London docks. There she boarded the new steamer James Watt, bound for Edinburgh. The two-day trip up the east coast of England was a miracle of speed and convenience compared with the reverse journey she had taken just four years earlier of around five days in a smack – a small sailing ship subject to the vagaries of wind and weather. Well worth the four and a half guineas she paid for a place in the cabin in this new technological wonder – the steam ferry. A coach from London to Edinburgh would take at least six days and Harriet was in a hurry. She was meeting her fiancé to marry him.<sup>1</sup>



The James Watt wood paddle steamer. Built on the Clyde in 1821 its engine was by Boulton & Watt of Birmingham. It was owned by the London & Edinburgh Steam Packet Company and was the first, and for four years the largest, steam vessel registered at Lloyd's of London.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Much of the information in this pamphlet is taken from the manuscript of Harriet's unpublished autobiography (Harry Ransom Centre, University of Texas, MS-0881) which is soon to be published under the title *Alderbury Girl*, ed. Paul Lewis.

<sup>2</sup> See [www.clydeships.co.uk/view.php?ref=22943#v](http://www.clydeships.co.uk/view.php?ref=22943#v)

## Courtship

Their courtship had been anything but hurried. They first met on Tuesday 19 April 1814 when Harriet was working in a school in London set up to cater for the children of French aristocrats who were in England to avoid losing their heads in the French Revolution. Harriet's sister Margaret also lived in London. Two and a half years younger than Harriet she was already an accomplished painter and would go on to become the most successful woman artist of the Victorian era.<sup>3</sup> At this time she was living at 22 Maddox Street in a small two-room apartment with just one fireplace between them paid for by her sponsor Lord Radnor. There she painted portraits for a living. Margaret had already met William Collins – a handsome, talented, and now well-connected artist – and Harriet first met him in Margaret's rooms when he called that spring evening.

It was a double date – Margaret with William, Harriet with his 'neither handsome nor elegant' younger brother Francis. The occasion was the artists' Ball before the annual Royal Academy Exhibition which opened on 2 May. William had two paintings in the Exhibition which he had finished a couple of weeks earlier. However, it was William and Harriet who danced together and admired each other and

“the rest of the even<sup>g</sup> we were nearly together except an occasional interruption.”

Harriet did not get home until five thirty in the morning.

William had a busy life visiting country houses to meet his clients and patrons to paint portraits or discuss commissions. Harriet's job was live-in and demanding so they did not see each other again for some time. She went to the Royal Academy Exhibition to see his pictures<sup>4</sup> and then towards the end of her long summer holiday she was invited with around twenty others to enjoy

“a day of rural felicity among the hay fields at Hendon, & we were to dine at the Inn & return in the eveng.”

William was in the party and that Thursday he never left her side. They talked the whole day and arranged to visit Green Park a few days later on 1 August to see the fireworks which celebrated the victory over Napoleon.

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<sup>3</sup> Margaret Sarah Geddes (1793-1872), known as Margaret Carpenter after her marriage in 1817, exhibited at the Royal Academy almost every year from 1814 to 1866. She painted more than 1100 pictures of which 263 were exhibited in her lifetime. See *ODNB*.

<sup>4</sup> There were two – Blackberry Gatherers and Birdcatchers – Morning. They won him Associate RA status but neither is extant today.

It wasn't until 19 December they met again when William called at Margaret's – where Harriet was once more staying – and invited her to dinner at his mother's modest family home at 118 Great Portland Street. It was a 'most merry' event with William's mother Margaret, brother Francis, an artist friend, and a lad whom William was teaching. They ate boiled mutton, roast hare, and apple pie at a round table that almost filled the small parlour, followed by cards and supper. William walked her home but talked only of her talented sister and her kind patrons.

Harriet got a new place as a governess with a family in Wandsworth, a good five miles from central London – at least an hour by coach – cutting off any chance of meeting William. But at Easter 1815 she returned to Margaret's for a week's holiday.

Once more William called and arranged to visit twice more to draw Harriet's head and neck for use in a painting he was then working on. That was *The Reluctant Departure* a major canvas for the Royal Academy Exhibition in May.



William Collins, *The Reluctant Departure* 1815 (detail)  
(Birmingham Art Gallery)

They met once more on Easter Sunday when she was invited to William's house with her sister Margaret and her husband. For entertainment William took them to hear the sermon at a local church.

Then it was back to Wandsworth. A year passed until June 1816 when the job came to an end and she returned to Margaret's. Almost at once she was offered a place for two years with a family in Scotland. She feared she would never see William again and, if she did, he would probably be married.

Two years later, after that contract ended, she returned to London in July 1818 and stayed again with her sister at her new home 50 Conduit Street. Margaret was now married and expecting her first child. Harriet met William briefly but soon was on her

way to a new job with the May family who lived at Hurst Court near Salisbury, not far from her family home in Alderbury.

Harriet spent more than three years with the May family before they relocated back to London in the first week of January 1822.

It was not long before William and Harriet met again – apparently by chance – twice. On the second occasion William invited her to the theatre on 23 March to see a popular new comic show by Charles Matthews. The next day they dined with William’s family – now at their more spacious home at 11 New Cavendish Street. When William walked her home they declared their love to each and from that evening were engaged to be married.

But the path was still not clear. Harriet had her own worries about their relationship. William moved in high society among ladies who did not have to work for a living and send money to support their ageing parents as she did. She fretted that William would reject her once he knew she worked as a governess.

William had had his own fears. When he was younger he did not pursue Harriet as his heart guided him to out of concern that he would not be able to support a wife and family. But in 1820 he had been elected a full member of the Royal Academy and could put the magic letters RA after his name. With commissions piling up and his income growing he felt ready to marry.

So when Harriet wrote to him the day after they declared their love confessing her poor circumstances he replied at once

you hardly do me justice in supposing the knowledge of the circumstances you mention, respecting fortune &c, would in the least alter my determination, but of this more when we meet. bless you my dear Harriet, ever yours, W.C.<sup>5</sup>

There followed many letters.<sup>6</sup> Their plans to marry were delayed – not least by the opposition of both William’s brother and mother – and in July threatened to be delayed further when William said he had to go to Scotland on an important commission with ‘a very High Personnage’ and would be away up to seven weeks. That turned out to be George IV and while painting the King’s arrival at Leith he decided they should wait no more. Harriet agreed to travel to Scotland to get married.

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So there she was, at Blackwall, boarding “that splendid steamer the James Watt”. She carried with her a note from William for the Captain, Patrick Dall, who would “take

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<sup>5</sup> William Collins to Harriet Geddes 26 March 1822 (Morgan Library, New York, Morgan 3154.1).

<sup>6</sup> Morgan 3154 1-10.

every charge of me". Her fellow passengers in the Ladies' Cabin included a newborn baby, his mother, her maid, and the wet nurse who fed him. Harriet was relieved when that noisy family left the steamer halfway through the journey at Scarborough when it 'stood off' to allow passengers to depart and board by small boat.<sup>7</sup>

The James Watt arrived at Leith harbour around 11 o'clock on Friday 6 September. There was no sign of William and she was helped to a coach by a kind elderly gentleman and ordered the driver to take her to 139 George Street where William was living and where she would stay. At the end of the half hour journey she stepped from the coach and saw at the window – William! who rushed down and took her in his arms. He had thought the boat arrived at 2pm. They stayed there with Samuel and Jane Joseph and their sons Richard, 2, and Allan, just born, while they sorted out the religious and legal niceties of a Scotch marriage.

One reason for choosing Scotland was that that the process was simpler there than in England after a new law was introduced to prevent clandestine marriages. *The Times* said of the Confirmation of Marriages Act 1822 "The practical evils of this abominable act become every hour more glaring" and reported

The obstacles interposed by the new Marriage Act induce many who can spare the time and money to resort to Scotland, where the facilities of uniting in matrimony are yet without impediment. No fewer than 12 couples were conveyed last week by the James Watt steam packet from the British to the Scottish Metropolis for the purpose of their being married.<sup>8</sup>

William and Harriet also socialised with a local banker Donald Smith, a friend of Harriet's father. She had stayed with them over Christmas 1816 in her two years as a governess for the family in Scotland and again in June 1818 when her contract ended before returning to London. Donald and his wife Ann were renowned for having so many children that Donald could not say which were his when others arrived with visitors.

Finally, the day arrived. William Collins and Harriet Geddes, daughter of Alex<sup>r</sup> Geddes Esqr of Alderbury, both of St. George's Parish were married on Monday 16 September 1822 at the Episcopal Church of St Paul, York Place by the vicar Archibald Alison. Samuel and Jane were the witnesses and they had just one bridesmaid, Mary Smith then aged 22 and the oldest surviving child of Donald and Ann.<sup>9</sup> Alison refused to take a fee for someone with the same name as the great poet William Collins (1721-1759), even though they were unrelated.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Harriet's autobiography, *op. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> Wilkie Collins, *Memoirs of William Collins, Esq., R.A.*, (London: 1848), vol. I pp. 210-211. And *The Times* 21 September 1822, p. 2e.

<sup>9</sup> Harriet's autobiography, *op. cit.* and public records.

<sup>10</sup> *Memoirs*, vol. I, p. 214.



Episcopal Church of St Paul, York Place,  
Edinburgh c. 1860  
(National Galleries Scotland)



Archibald Alison by Sir Henry Raeburn RA  
engraved by William Walker, Edinburgh  
1823. (National Portrait Gallery)

After a week's honeymoon touring islands off Fife including the Isle of May and Inchgarvie they bought their tickets from the steamer office the at the "head of Whale Brae, near the Admiral's Office, Newhaven" and returned to London by the same James Watt steam packet from Newhaven Stone Pier on Wednesday 25 September. It arrived in London on the Friday.

Harriet then began her married life as Mrs Collins in the large house at 11 New Cavendish Street leased by William in 1815 for him and his widowed mother Margaret, who paid the £10-10s a year rates. The rent was £84 a year, quite a step up from 118 Great Portland Street which cost just £30.<sup>11</sup>

William's brother Frank who was a dealer in prints and published several engravings and lithographs of William's paintings also lived there.<sup>12</sup> When Harriet and William had discussed her arrival in the family home as his wife, she had told William she had no intention of making his mother and brother leave as "the house seemed large enough I thought to hold us all".<sup>13</sup> And so it did.

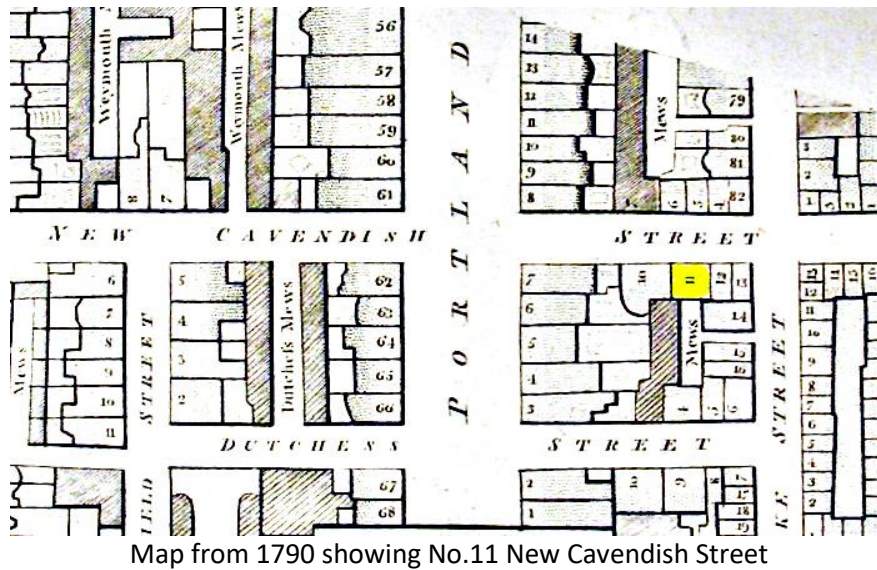
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<sup>11</sup> Westminster rate records.

<sup>12</sup> For example, *Boys Fishing* painted and etched by William Collins R.A Elect and engraved Wm Ward, 1820.

<sup>13</sup> Harriet's autobiography, *op.cit.*





William had converted the attic to a studio by inserting a skylight into the roof and removing some partitions. There was a fireplace “like that of an alchemist” where he experimented with perfecting paints and varnishes. An artist friend reported that when his wealthy clients visited him they found “there was a charm about a place arranged for the purposes of art which surpassed all the splendours of their *impracticable* saloons. There was a kind of monastic seclusion and security about this nest of art which at once delighted and humbled the mind of the visitor, producing a love of art without ostentation.”<sup>14</sup>



11 New Cavendish St was demolished in the 1920s and these apartments built on the site of 9-13, now 96-100 after a renumbering (Google maps)



This plaque was unveiled on 4 October 2014 (Author’s photograph)

### Confinement

Fifteen months later at the start of January 1824 Harriet Collins was in her room, her hair braided, her garments loose, wondering when her ordeal would be over.<sup>15</sup> She

<sup>14</sup> John Linnell to Alaric Watts, 1835, cited in Alfred Story, *The Life of John Linnell*, 1892, vol.I, pp. 286-287.

<sup>15</sup> Based on the confinement practices of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

was confined there with a maid, punctuated by occasional visits from a local midwife. Her own mother lived two days coach journey away near Salisbury in Wiltshire and there is no evidence to suggest the 61-year-old made the arduous and expensive journey to be with her daughter at this time. But her mother-in-law, Margaret, aged 64, who had experienced three childbirths, was surely in attendance.<sup>16</sup> What of Harriet's sisters? Margaret was just a mile's walk away at 14 Old Bond Street. She had four children though the youngest, Margaret Elizabeth, was just seven months old and probably sickly as she died the next year. But Margaret surely visited her after the attentions Harriet had administered to her in childbirth and in illness. Catherine Esther, aged 28, had married in 1816 and already had five children. She lived in Salisbury. Her two youngest sisters Mary Christina and Emily Elizabeth, still lived at home with their parents in Alderbury and would not have made the journey. Alexander her 26-year-old brother, who had taken her to Blackwall eighteen months earlier, worked in banking and lived in London. But men did not play a part in confinement.

William, banned from his wife's presence by Victorian convention, probably spent much time in his attic studio where he was surrounded by screens covered with unframed sketches on millboard.<sup>17</sup>

There were also probably three large canvasses on easels on display in various states of completion. These three oil paintings – *The Cherry Seller*, *Buckland on the River Dart*, and *Portraits of the Children of Henry Rice Esq.* – were all completed between January and April 1824 ready for the exhibition at the Royal Academy in May with prices from 70 to 200 guineas.<sup>18</sup> We can imagine William contemplating them – perhaps adding a touch of colour, adjusting a line, or pondering whether to add another cloud.

The previous year he had made £703 from the sale of his paintings – equivalent to more than £70,000 today.<sup>19</sup> For a man whose father had died penniless twelve years earlier,<sup>20</sup> William's talent as an artist had brought him great success. But all he too could do was wait.

Now aged 34 Harriet was old to be in labour with her first child. But perhaps with the assistance of forceps and possibly a doctor,<sup>21</sup> her baby came into the world on Thursday 8 January 1824.

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<sup>16</sup> Apart from her two sons William (b.1787) and Francis (b.1790) Margaret had a daughter in 1783, probably called Martha, who died aged 4 – *Memoirs*, *op.cit.* vol. I, p. 4 and public records.

<sup>17</sup> *Story*, *op.cit.*

<sup>18</sup> Information from Alan Bean and *Memoirs*, *op.cit.* vol.II p. 346.

<sup>19</sup> Analysis by Paul Lewis of information in *Memoirs*, vol. II, pp. 341-352.

<sup>20</sup> *Memoirs*, vol. I, pp. 46-48.

<sup>21</sup> Andrew Lycett, *Wilkie Collins – A Life of Sensation*, (London 2013), p. 21.



William Collins, *The Cherry Seller* – Scene at Turvey, Bedfordshire<sup>22</sup>  
(Bury Art Museum)

### **Baptism**

Six weeks later on Wednesday 18 February the boy was baptised at the seven-year-old parish church of St Marylebone, possibly by the rector, 85-year-old the Venerable Luke Heslop.<sup>23</sup> In the long tradition of the Collins family this first-born son was named William. And chosen for his second name was Wilkie after his father's good friend the Scottish artist David Wilkie (1785-1841) who stood as his sponsor or godparent. He had arrived at 11 am at New Cavendish Street and travelled to the church with them.<sup>24</sup> At the christening the unmarried David Wilkie looked intently into his godson's eyes and said with surprise 'he sees!'.<sup>25</sup>

Margaret Collins and brother Francis were surely there too. It is unlikely that Harriet's mother – then aged 61 and also called Harriet – or her 59-year-old father Alexander Geddes were present. They certainly could not have afforded the two-day coach trip from Salisbury without financial assistance from their daughter.<sup>26</sup> But her sister Margaret Carpenter and her husband William were most likely there, with or without some or all of their then four children. Her brother Alexander lived not far away and may also have attended, though it is unlikely her other sisters living in or near Salisbury, undertook the two-day journey.

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<sup>22</sup> Exhibited at the Royal Academy Exhibition 3 May to 10 July, No. 20 in the Great Room. Sold for 200 guineas to Thomas Charles Higgins of Turvey House.

<sup>23</sup> See [stmarylebone.org](http://stmarylebone.org).

<sup>24</sup> William Collins to David Wilkie, 13 February 1824 (NLS MS9835 f.182)

<sup>25</sup> *Memoirs, op.cit.* vol. I, p. 235.

<sup>26</sup> Harriet's autobiography, *op.cit.*

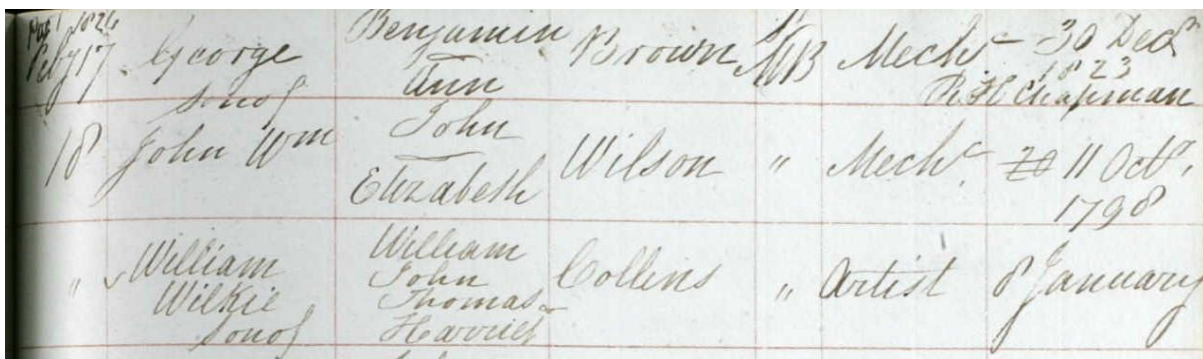


St. Mary-le-bone parish church in 1817 shortly after it was built



St Marylebone Parish Church today

The Parish Register shows that William Wilkie was one of eight babies and children baptised that day. His father gave his full name of William John Thomas Collins which he only used on official documents.



[Feby 18]	William Wilkie Son of	William John Thomas & Harriet	Collins	[St. MB]	Artist	8 January
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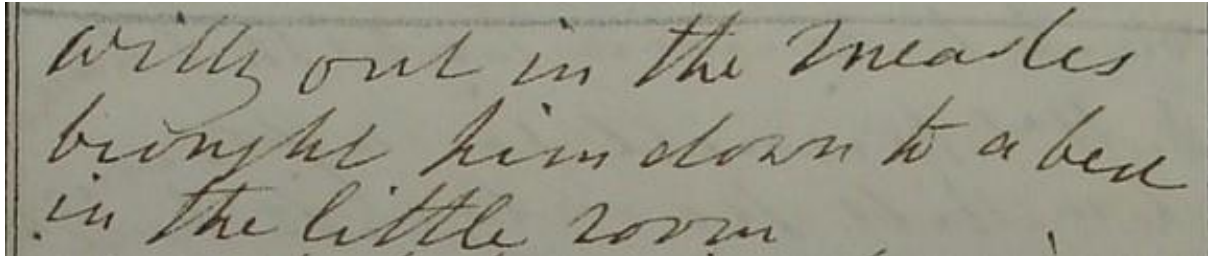
The Parish Register records the baptism of Wilkie Collins on 18 February 1824.

### The name

Although we think of him as a Victorian, William Wilkie Collins was born in the reign of George IV, thirteen years before Victoria came to the throne. His manners and speech were perhaps more eighteenth century than nineteenth. "He pronounced the words

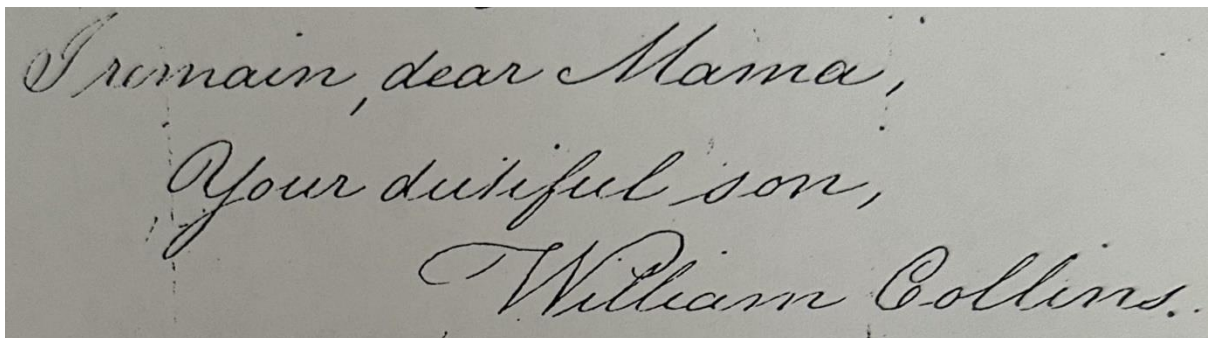
"really" and "real" as if they had been spelt "raily" and "rail," and he gave to the word "obliged" its old-fashioned sound of "obleeged."<sup>27</sup>

At home he was known as Willy and that name is found in letters between Harriet and William and in Harriet's three surviving diaries. This from 1835 when he had measles.



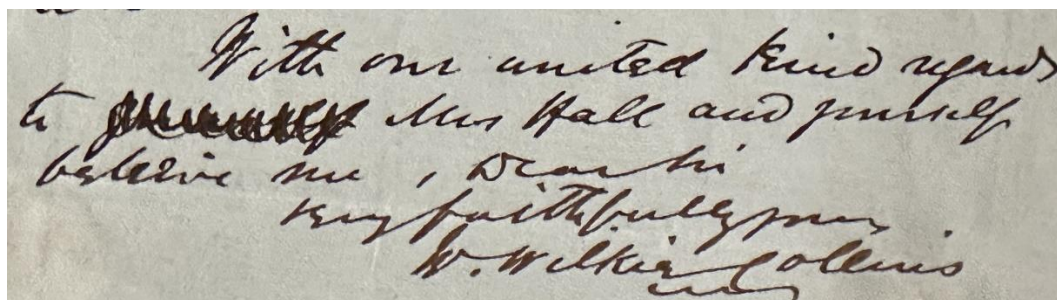
Harriet Collins, Diary 23 March 1835, (National Art Library MSL/1912/125)

In early letters to his parents from school he signed himself formally as William Collins, or W. W. Collins. Plain William does not appear after November 1839.



[0002] to Harriet Collins, 1 December 1838<sup>28</sup>

By 1841 he signed his letters William Wilkie Collins, then for a short spell just Wilkie Collins before he went back to W. Wilkie Collins. We can certainly date him being called 'Wilkie' from the early 1840s.



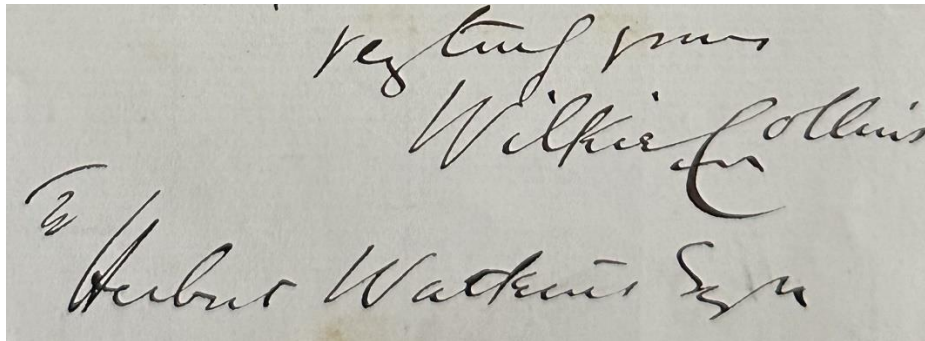
[3311] to S. C. Hall, 18 March 1847

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<sup>27</sup> R.C. Lehmann, *Memories of Half a Century*, 1908, pp. 30-31.

<sup>28</sup> Baker, Gasson, Law, Lewis *The Collected Letters of Wilkie Collins*, Intelx, 2018 gives all letters a unique number [nnnn]. Images are taken from various manuscript sources.

He dropped the W. from 1856 and signed himself simply Wilkie Collins (or WC) for the rest of his life with a distinctive signature that did not change.

A photograph of a handwritten letter. The text is written in cursive ink on a light-colored paper. The top line reads 'Very truly yours' and the second line reads 'Wilkie Collins'. Below this, there is a large, stylized signature that appears to be 'Herbert Watkins Esq'. The signature is written in a fluid, cursive hand.

[0278] to Herbert Watkins, 14 April 1858

His friends – male and female – called him Wilkie, a familiarity that caused surprise to some. And to us and forever he is known as Wilkie Collins – or just plain Wilkie as he preferred.

### **Marylebone man**

Born and christened in Marylebone, Wilkie lived in that parish just about all his life.

He met his first love, Caroline Graves, in Marylebone and lived with her at seven addresses in Marylebone from the mid-1850s until his death. He installed his second lover Martha Rudd in Marylebone in the early 1860s and she moved twice to other addresses in Marylebone. Their three children were all born at those Marylebone addresses.

His letters are almost silent on the subject of Marylebone except as the name of a road. Only once did he name the district. Unable to get seats at the Surrey Theatre to take friends and children to see a pantomime, they went instead to the Royal Alfred Theatre in Church Street, Portman Market to see *Whittington and his Cat*. He wrote on 4 January 1869 to Nina Lehmann, his lifelong friend and the mother of two of the boys in his party, “we shall do as well in Marylebone as in Surrey”.

Most of his writing was done in Marylebone though he did find the noise and sometimes the fog and weather oppressive and decamped to friends, the seaside, or once even to a hotel on the London outskirts.

Although Wilkie spent many of his summers in Ramsgate and travelled abroad on many occasions to Europe and once to the United States, Marylebone was where he always returned.

In 1889 he died in Marylebone and his funeral cortege set off from Wimpole Street to Kensal Green Cemetery. If anyone was ‘from’ Marylebone, Wilkie Collins was.



Parish of St Mary-Le-Bone, George Oakley Lucas, 1847

In Wilkie's life the parish of St. Mary-Le-Bone was bounded by Oxford Street to the south, Edgware Road to the west, The Broad and Cleveland Street to the east, and Hampstead to the north. It included the large Regent's Park. All the houses where Wilkie Collins lived as an adult with his families are in this parish as are many of those lived in by his parents. Later, to accommodate a growing population, a dozen more churches were built subdividing the parish.

Today part of the area is known as Fitzrovia.

This edition of  
THE BIRTH OF WILKIE COLLINS  
Is limited to 200 copies

