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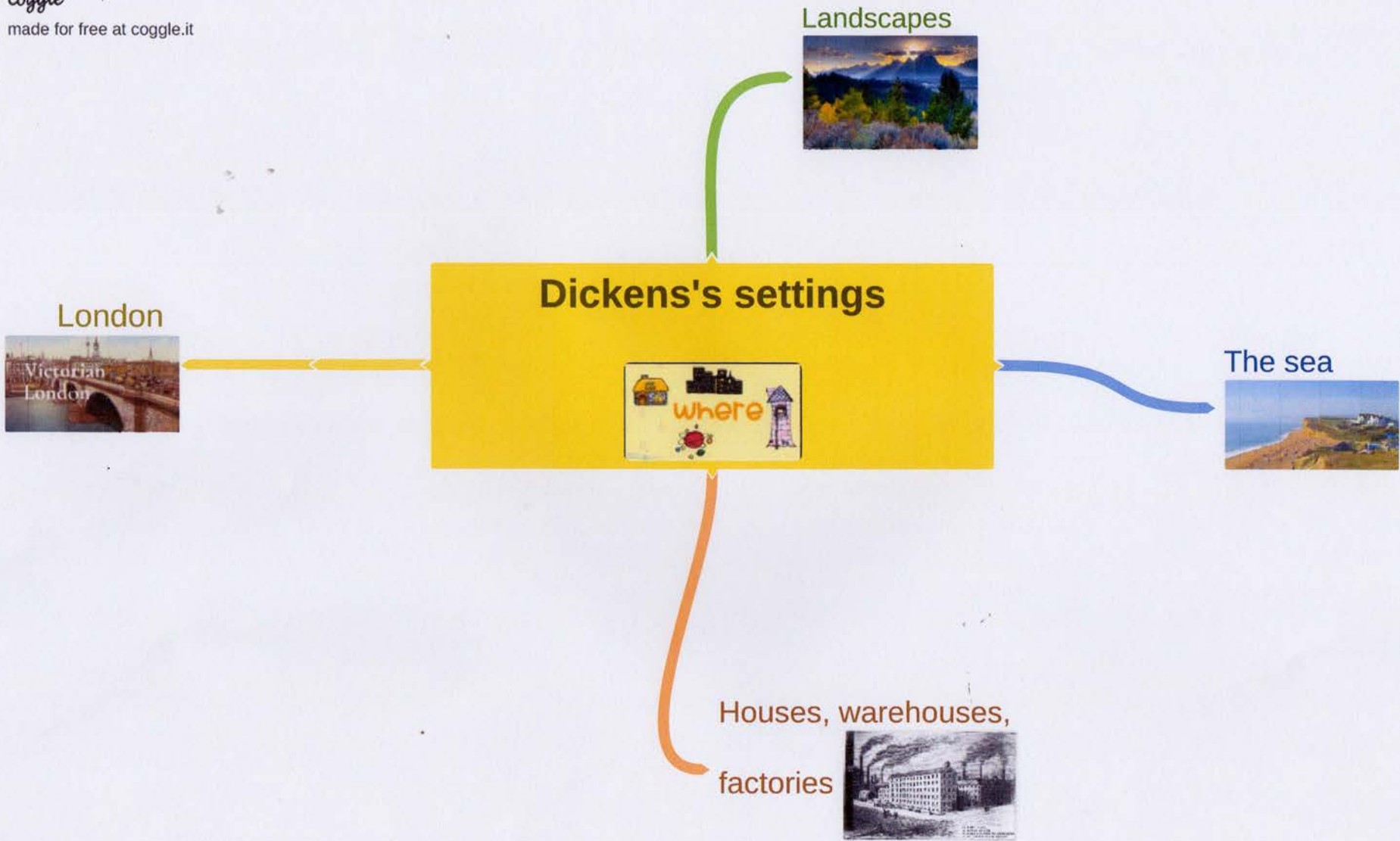
Gruppo di Pisa



*Dickens: landscapes and  
characters for literary paths at  
school*

Webinar: 4th December 2020

Luisanna Paggiaro





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# Christmas setting and atmosphere

The fascination Christmas always exerted on Dickens, who wrote new stories at each Christmas he used to read to the whole family. Christmas raised a deep emotional and poignant nostalgia of his childhood.

He expressed the mid-Victorian revival of the Christmas holiday and inspired several aspects of Christmas, such as family gatherings, seasonal food and drink, dancing, games and a festive generosity of spirit.



# Charles Dickens's childhood was spent in cramped rooms and small houses



Chatham in Kent, the sea and the water: “the sound and the lapping of the tide”, always present in his imagination

Rochester was the setting of the first novel “Pickwick Papers” and of the last one: “The Mystery of Edwin Drood”, which shows a typical feature: the presence of his childhood – people and places – in all his production

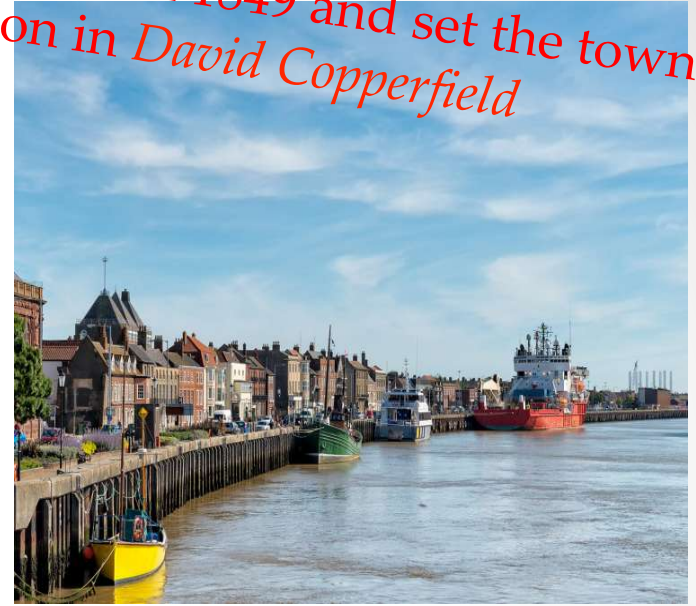


# The sea

“I was quite tired, and very glad, when we saw Yarmouth. It looked quite spongy and soppy, I thought, as I carried my eye over the great dull waste that lay across the river. I looked in all directions, as far as I could stare over the wilderness, and away at the sea, and away at the river, but no house could I make out. There was a black barge, or some other kind of superannuated boat, not far off, high and dry on the ground, with an iron funnel sticking out of it for a chimney and smoking very cosily; but nothing else in the way of a habitation that was visible to me. I suppose I could not have been more charmed with the romantic idea of living in it. There was a delightful door cut in the side, and it was roofed in, and there were little windows in it; but the wonderful charm of it was, that it was a real boat which had no doubt been upon the water hundreds of times, and which had never been intended to be lived in, on dry land. That was the captivation of it to me. If it had ever been meant to be lived in, I might have thought it small, or inconvenient, or lonely; but never having been designed for any such use, it became a perfect abode”.

*David Copperfield*, Chapter III

Dickens visited Yarmouth in 1849 and set the town as a key location in *David Copperfield*



He liked to take long walks for recreation particularly at seaside resorts

The Original "Peggotty's Hut".  
In Gandon Road, Great Yarmouth.  
Demolished 1877.

A picture of "Peggotty's Hut" at Great Yarmouth, described in *David Copperfield*

# The water imagery

Marcus Stone  
"The Bird of Prey":  
Illustration for first  
monthly number of  
*Our Mutual Friend*



**A major symbol is the River Thames, which is linked to the major theme of rebirth and renewal. Water is seen as a sign of new life, and associated with the Christian sacrament of Baptism.** Characters like John Harmon and Eugene Wrayburn end up in the river, and come out reborn. Wrayburn emerges from the river close to death, but is ready to marry Lizzie, and to avoid naming his attacker to save her reputation. He surprises everyone, including himself, when he survives and goes on to have a loving marriage with Lizzie. John Harmon also appears to end up in the river through no fault of his own, and **when Gaffer pulls his "body" out of the waters, he adopts the alias of John Rokesmith. This alias is for his own safety and peace of mind; he wants to know that he can do things on his own, and does not need his father's name or money to make a good life for himself.**

# Tears



BBC 2004

“Florence always **bursting into tears**: when she knew about her mum’s death. As she had given birth to Paul, or when she inquires her aunt about her dad”.

Chapter 3

“I can remember My Mama, returned the child, with **tears springing to her eyes**, in any frock”

Chapter 18

“Florence raised **her tearful eyes**”

“At first, when the house subsided into its accustomed course, and they had all gone away, except the servants, and her father shut up in his own rooms, **Florence could do nothing but weep**, and wander up and down, and sometimes, in a sudden pang of desolate remembrance, fly to her own chamber, **wring her hands**, lay her face down on her bed, and know no consolation”.

*Dombey and Son*

Dickens's sentimentalism and sensationalism



# Houses



2 Ordnance Terrace,  
Chatham (1817 –1821)



The three-storey Furnival's  
Inn, Holborn (1834-37)



1. 48 Doughty Street,  
Bloomsbury (1837-39); now  
Dickens's museum. 2  
Devonshire Terrace,



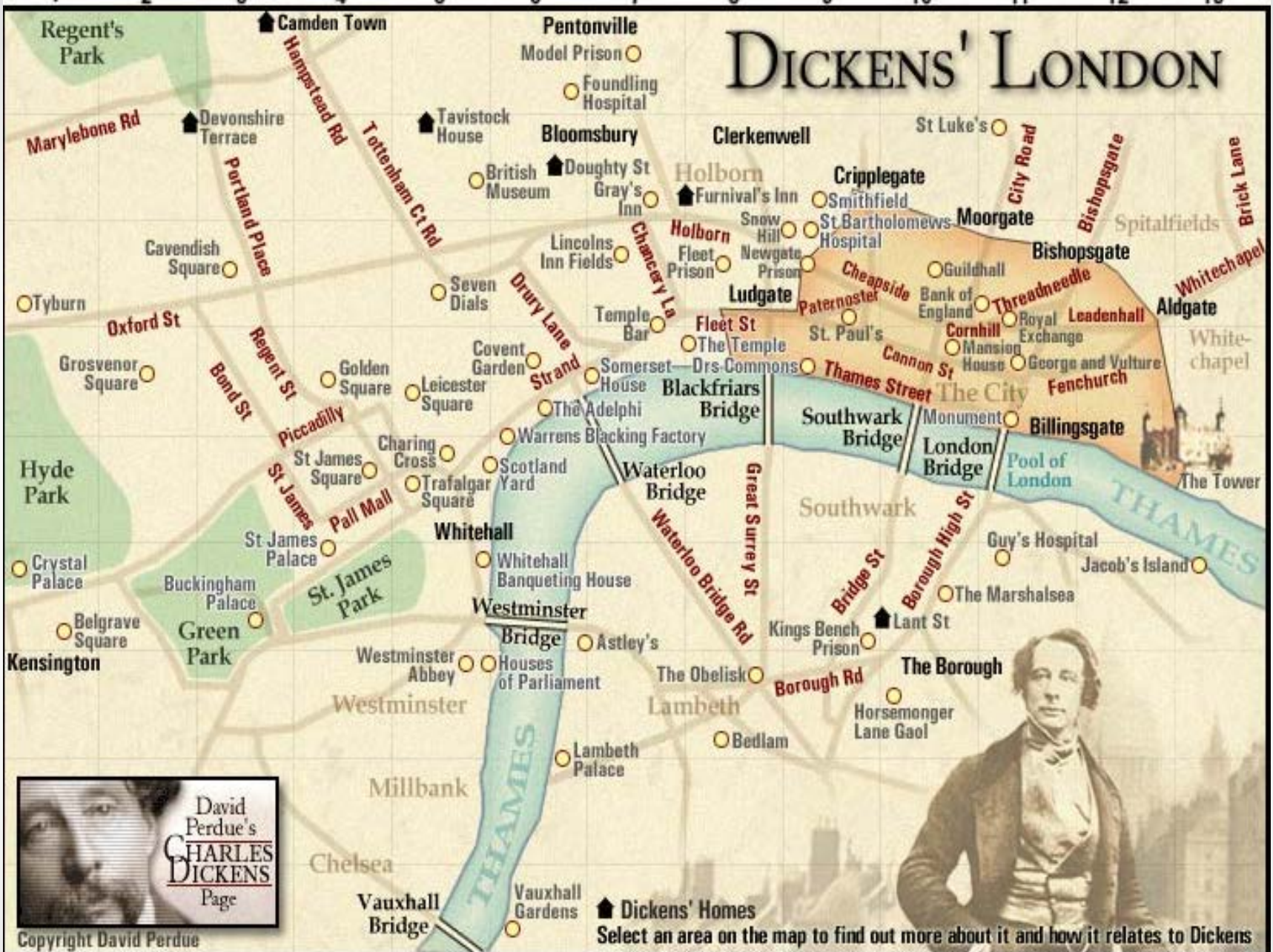
Tavistock House  
(1851)



3 Hanover Terrace



Gad's Hill Place in Higham,  
Kent, his country home



<https://londonist.com/2011/04/charles-dickens-houses-mapped>

# Warehouses

## **Murdstone & Grinby's warehouse** in *David Copperfield*

After the death of David's mother, the Murdestones oblige David to leave Blunderstone for London where the boy's stepfather owns a wine warehouse, Murstone & Grinby. The poor boy starts a miserable and unhappy life.

"Murdstone and Grinby's warehouse was at the water-side. It was down in Blackfriars. Modern improvements have altered the place; but it was the last house at the bottom of a narrow street, curving down hill to the river, with some stairs at the end, where people took boat.

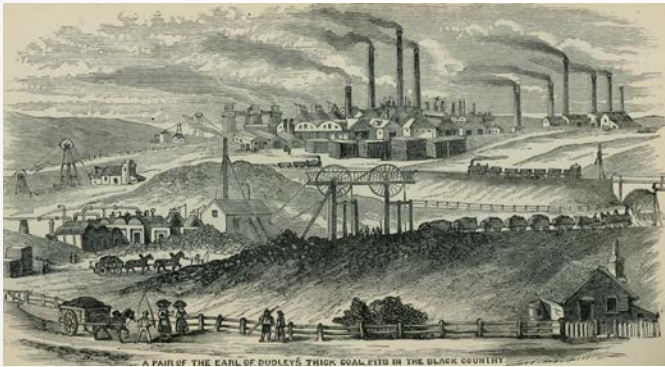
It was a crazy old house with a wharf of its own, abutting on the water when the tide was in, and on the mud when the tide was out, and literally overrun with rats. Its panelled rooms, discoloured with the dirt and smoke of a hundred years, I dare say; its decaying floors and staircase; the squeaking and scuffling of the old grey rats down in the cellars; and the dirt and rottenness of the place; are things not of many years ago, in my mind, but of the present instant. They are all before me, just as they were in the evil hour when I went among them for the first time, with my trembling hand in Mr. Quinion's".



# Factories

In the years in which Dickens wrote *Bleak House* and *Hard Times* (1852-54) he visited Birmingham (by train), where there was the workers' strike (which lasted 4 months) and the workers' assembly in Preston, Lancashire.

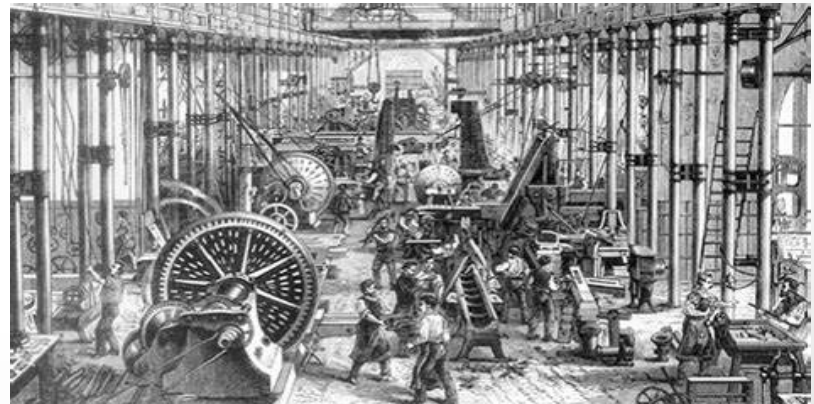
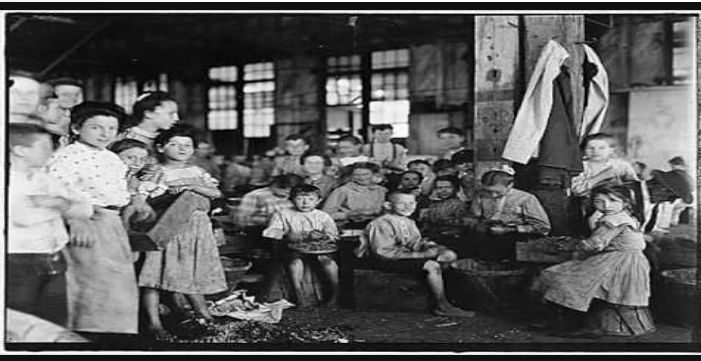
"A sunny midsummer day: There was such a thing sometimes, even in Coketown. Seen from a distance in such weather, **Coketown lay shrouded in a haze of its own**, which appeared impervious to the sun's rays. You only knew the town was there, because you knew there could have been no such sulky blotch upon the prospect without a town. **A blur of soot and smoke**, now confusedly tending this way, now that way, now aspiring to the vault of Heaven, now murkily creeping along the earth, as the wind rose and fell, or changed its quarter: **a dense formless jumble**, with sheets of cross light in it, that showed nothing but **masses of darkness** – Coketown in the distance was suggestive of itself, though not a brick of it could be seen. [...]



**The whole town seemed to be frying in oil.**

There was a **stifling smell** of hot oil everywhere. The steam-engines shone with it, the dresses of the Hands were soiled with it, the mills throughout their many stories **oozed and trickled it**. The atmosphere of those fairy palaces was like **the breath of the simoom** (hot desert wind): and their inhabitants, wasting with heat, **toiled languidly in the desert**".

*Hard Times*, BOOK THE SECOND, Chapter I, p. 105



# London

London is not just a backdrop to Dickens's novels, but it is "a character" itself! In a letter to John Forster, in 1846, Dickens wrote "a day in London sets me up and starts me, but outside of the city, the toil and labour of writing, day after day, without that magic lantern is IMMENSE"!



Mudfog: a mixture of fog, smoke, the excrement of horses and people, feces-contaminated drinking water

The fog is very thick: Frederick and Charles are obliged to see Clara and Emily home, *Punch*, Jan. - Jun. 1855

"Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. Smoke lowering down from chimney-pots, making a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full-grown snowflakes – gone into morning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun".

[...]

Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city. Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish heights. Fog creeping into the cabooses of collier-brigs; fog lying out on the yards, and hovering in the rigging of great ships; fog drooping on the gunwales of barges and small boats. Fog in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners, wheezing by the firesides of their wards; fog in the stem and bowl of the afternoon pipe of the wrathful skipper, down in his close cabin; fog cruelly pinching the toes and fingers of his shivering little prentice boy on deck". From *Bleak House*, Chapter 1

# London is mainly the centre of all social ills: poverty, prostitution, exploitation, crime, and also the place of shops and businesses



A Pickpocket in custody



The gin-shop

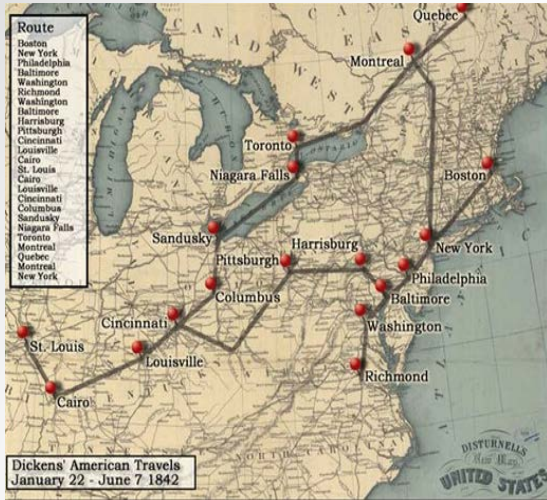


The pawnbroker's shop Monmouth Street



“Of the numerous receptacles for misery and distress with which the streets of London unhappily abound, there are, perhaps, none which present such **striking scenes as the pawnbrokers’ shops**. The very nature and description of these places occasions their being but little known, except to the unfortunate beings whose profligacy or misfortune drives them to seek the temporary relief they offer”.

Drury Lane: “**the filthy and miserable appearance of this part of London can hardly been imagined...** Wretched houses with broken windows patched with rags and paper: every room let out to a different family, and in many instances to two or even three ... a gutter before the houses and a drain behind – clothes drying and slops emptying, from the windows; girls of fourteen or fifteen, with matted hair, walking about barefoot, and in white greatcoats, almost their only covering; boys of all ages, in coats of all sizes and no coats at all; men and women, in every variety of scanty and dirty apparel, **lounging, scolding, drinking, smoking, squabbling, fighting, and swearing**”.



# Travels

## To the United States



*American Notes* (1842)

“I shall never forget the one-fourth serious and three-fourths **comical astonishment**, with which, on the morning of the third of January eighteen hundred and forty-two, **I opened the door of, and put my head into, a state-room on board the Britannia steam packet**, twelve hundred tons burthen per register, bound for Halifax and Boston, and carrying Her Majesty’s mails. [...]

### *Chapter 1*

“[There is another building] called **the Alms House**, that is to say, the workhouse of New York. This is a large institution also: lodging, I believe, when I was there, nearly a thousand poor. It was badly ventilated, and badly lighted; was not too clean; and impressed me, on the whole, very incomfortably. But it must be remembered that New York, as a great emporium of commerce, and as a place of general resort, not only from all parts of the States, but from most parts of the world, has always a large pauper population to provide for”.

“The fastenings jar and rattle, and one of the doors turns slowly on its hinges. Let us look in. **A small bare cell**, into which the light enters through a high chink in the wall. There is a rude means of washing, a table, and a bedstead. Upon the latter, sits a man of sixty; reading. He looks up for a moment; gives an impatient dogged shake; and fixes his eyes upon his book again. As we withdraw our heads, the door closes on him, and is fastened as before. This man has murdered his wife, and will probably be hanged.

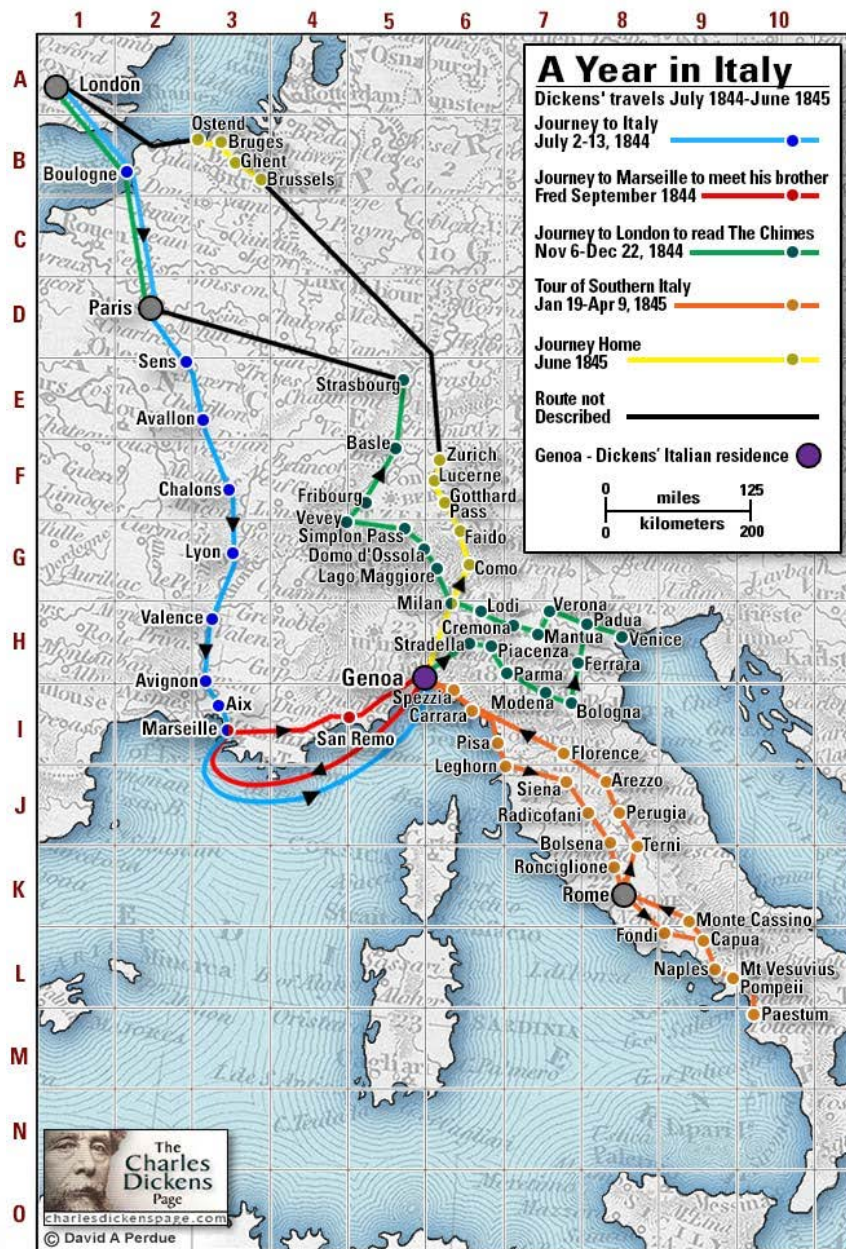
“In another part of the city, is the **Refuge for the Destitute**: an Institution whose object is to reclaim youthful offenders, male and female, black and white, without distinction; to teach them useful trades, apprentice them to respectable masters, and make them worthy members of society”.

### *Chapter 6*

# In 1844-45 Dickens travelled through France and Italy with his family

## *Pictures from Italy* (1846)

“The view, as I have said, is charming; but in the day you must keep the lattice-blinds close shut, or **the sun would drive you mad**; and when the sun goes down you must shut up all the windows, or the **mosquitoes** would tempt you to commit suicide. So at this time of the year, you don't see much of the prospect within doors. As for the **flies**, you don't mind them. Nor the **fleas**, whose size is prodigious, and whose name is Legion, and who populate the coach-house to that extent that I daily expect to see the carriage going off bodily, drawn by myriads of industrious **fleas** in harness. The **rats** are kept away, quite comfortably, by scores of **lean cats**, who roam about the garden for that purpose. The **lizards**, of course, nobody cares for; they play in the sun, and don't bite. The little **scorpions** are merely curious. The **beetles** are rather late, and have not appeared yet. The **frogs** are company. There is a preserve of them in the grounds of the next villa; and after nightfall, one would think that scores upon scores of **women in pattens** were going up and down a wet stone pavement without a moment's cessation. That is exactly the noise they make”.





# *Pictures from Italy (1846)*

“The moon was shining when we approached Pisa, and for a long time we could see, behind the wall, the leaning Tower, all awry in the uncertain light; the shadowy original of the old pictures in school-books, setting forth ‘The Wonders of the World.’ Like most things connected in their first associations with school-books and school-times, **it was too small**. I felt it keenly. It was nothing like so high above the wall as I had hoped.



“If Pisa be the seventh wonder of the world in right of its Tower, it may claim to be, at least, the second or third in right of its **beggars**. They waylay the unhappy visitor at every turn, escort him to every door he enters at, and lie in wait for him, with strong reinforcements, at every door by which they know he must come out. The grating of the portal on its hinges is the signal for a general shout, and the moment he appears, he is hemmed in, and fallen on, by heaps of rags and personal distortions. **The beggars seem to embody all the trade and enterprise of Pisa**. Nothing else is stirring, but warm air. Going through the streets, the fronts of the sleepy houses look like backs”.

*To Rome by Pisa and Siena*

## Other travels: to Switzerland (1846-47) and to Paris



### Paris, La Morgue, Museum of Corpses

The corpses of the people who died of violent death were undressed and laid naked on slabs of stone, so that they could be seen and recognized by the public and later on they were dissected. Dickens made frequent visits to it, moved by what he called “**the attraction for repulsion**”.