



Treasure of the Month

Serialised Publication and *Bleak House*



In April 1836, the first part of the Charles Dickens novel *The Pickwick Papers* was published by Bradbury and Evans. The novel was published as 20 parts sold in 19 instalments, the final two parts being published together in November 1837.

Known in trade parlance at the time as 'part books', today this form of publishing is better known as serialisation, and through it subscribers could obtain a 300 000 word illustrated novel for £1, paid for in 1 shilling instalments.

At the time, many novels were issued as 'three-deckers' – i.e., they were published in three volumes, with wide margins and generous line spacing, in order to pad out the text to fill the volumes. Volumes were generally priced at five or six shillings each, so a complete novel would cost between 15 and 18 shillings, at a time when a teacher, for example, earned a weekly wage of around 17 shillings.

Serialisation enjoyed its first heyday in the 1740s to 1760s, when it was used mainly to publish non-fiction works. At the time *The Pickwick Papers* was published, some novels were being published through serialisation, but Dickens and his publishers took a different approach.

Other serialised novels were whole works which had been broken up into parts for publication, whereas Dickens' book was designed to be published in parts right from the beginning. *The Pickwick Papers* was not instantly successful, but by the time part 14 was published in May 1837 it was selling 40 000 copies per issue.

Displayed here is a selection of the serialised set of Dickens' *Bleak House* which is part of the Fryer Library collection. Like *Pickwick*, it was issued in 20 parts sold in 19 instalments between March 1852 and September 1853.

Examples of the original unbound parts of any Dickens novel are scarce today, and those that exist give an insight into one aspect of the publishing industry during the early Victorian period.

The bright green covers were designed to stand out in Victorian bookstalls, and the illustration gave a visual summary of the storyline. Advertising appeared both on the inside covers and on pages inserted before, after, and sometimes in between, the novel's text.



Even though serialisation as a whole cost slightly more to the consumer (based on the above costs), the cost was spread over a longer period, making it a more affordable option. Some estimate that, had *The Pickwick Papers* been published in book form to start with, it would have been priced at 31 shillings 6 pence, whereas it cost a total of 20 shillings issued in parts. Also, after the final issue was published, it was made available as a single volume for only 1s more.



Serialisation did not only make books somewhat more affordable - the profits, particularly for authors, were increased. Figures show that the sales of Bleak House alone would eventually make Dickens over £11 000. Part of this can be attributed to the sale of advertising, but it was also due to advancements in the printing process, which drove production costs down. For example, the production costs of Dombey and Son in 1846 were nearly double that of Our Mutual Friend which appeared in 1865, just under 20 years later.

Dickens went on to publish nearly all of his novels via serialisation, either in parts, like Pickwick, or in journals such as Bentley's Miscellany – Oliver Twist was first published in the latter, between February 1837 and April 1839 (Dickens was editor of the journal at the time). By the time of his death in 1870, the serial novel had been superseded by other publishing models.

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