

PICKWICKIAN STUDIES

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Pickwickian Studies by Percy Fitzgerald

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PERCY FITZGERALD

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STUDIES**

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BY

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CONTENTS

	PAGE
CHAPTER I.—IPSWICH	
I.—The Great White Horse	1
II.—Eatanswill and Ipswich	5
III.—Nupkins and Magnus	10
IV.—Had Mr. Pickwick ever loved?	13
V.—Ipswich Theatre	18
VI.—Who was Pott?	20
CHAPTER II.—BATH	
I.—The old City	24
II.—The Pump Room and Assembly Rooms	27
III.—Boz and Bath	34
CHAPTER III.—OLD ROCHESTER	
I.—Jingle and the Theatre	39
II.—“The Bull”	43
III.—Jingle's Love Affairs	44
IV.—The Garrison	46
CHAPTER IV.—BOZ AND BLACKING	49
CHAPTER V.—SINGLE SPEECH TRUNDLE	53
CHAPTER VI.—MUGGLETON AND ITS CRICKET	59
CHAPTER VII.—GOSWELL STREET	62

CONTENTS—CONTINUED

CHAPTER VIII.—MARY HOGARTH	-	-	65
CHAPTER IX.—THE PICKWICK CLUB	-	-	69
CHAPTER X.—ROADSIDE INNS			
I.—“The Bell” at Berkeley Heath	-	-	74
II.—“The Greyhound,” Dulwich	-	-	75
III.—Grimaldi the Younger	-	-	76
CHAPTER XI.—MR. PICKWICK'S PROTOTYPE	-	-	78
CHAPTER XII.—THE CALVERLEY EXAMINATION			
PAPER	-	-	85
CHAPTER XIII.—PICKWICK IN REAL LIFE			
I.—Dowler and John Forster	-	-	89
II.—Thackeray	-	-	90
III.—Tupman	-	-	91
IV.—Grummer	-	-	93
CHAPTER XIV.—CHARACTERISTICS			
I.—The Wardle Family	-	-	95
II.—Shooting, Riding, Driving, &c.	-	-	97
III.—Horses and Driving in “Pickwick”	-	-	99
IV.—Mr. Pickwick in Silk Stockings	-	-	100
V.—Violent Assaults, Shooting, &c.	-	-	102
VI.—Winkle and Snodgrass	-	-	104
CHAPTER XV.—DULWICH			
I.—Mr. Pickwick's Diversions	-	-	107
II.—Mr. Pickwick's Funeral	-	-	112

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CHAPTER I. IPSWICH

I.—THE GREAT WHITE HORSE

THIS ancient Inn is associated with some pleasant and diverting Pickwickian memories. We think of the adventure with "the lady in the yellow curl papers" and the double-bedded room, just as we would recall some "side splitting" farce in which Buckstone or Toole once made our jaws ache. As all the world knows, the "Great White Horse" is found in the good old town of Ipswich, still flourishes, and is scarcely altered from the days when Mr. Pickwick put up there. Had it not been thus associated, Ipswich would have remained a place obscure and scarcely known, for it has little to attract save one curious old house and some old churches; and for the theatrical antiquary, the remnant of the old theatre in Tacket Street, where Garrick first appeared as an amateur under the name of Lyddal, about a hundred and sixty years ago, and where now the Salvation Army "performs" in his stead.* The touch of "Boz" kindled the old bones into life, it peopled the narrow, winding streets with the Grummers, Nupkins Jingles, Pickwick and his followers; with the immortal lady aforesaid in her yellow curl papers, to say nothing of Mr. Peter Magnus. From afar off even, we look at Ipswich with a singular interest; some of us go down there to enjoy the peculiar feeling—and it is a peculiar

* Some years ago, as it is stated in Murray's Guide Book, most of the old gabled houses disappeared. They are shown in "Phiz's" picturesque sketch.

and piquant one—of staying at Mr. Pickwick's Inn—of sleeping even in his room. This relish, however, is only given to your true "follower," not to his German-metal counterfeit—though, strange to say, at this moment, Pickwick is chiefly "made in Germany," and comes to us from that country in highly-coloured almanacks—and pictures of all kinds. About Ipswich there is a very appropriate old-fashioned tone, and much of the proper country town air. The streets seem dingy enough—the hay waggon is encountered often. The "Great White Horse," which is at the corner of several streets, is a low, longish building—with a rather seedy air. But to read "Boz's" description of it, we see at once that he was somewhat overpowered by its grandeur and immense size—which, to us in these days of huge hotels, seems odd. It was no doubt a large posting house of many small chambers—and when crowded, as "Boz" saw it at Election time in 1835, swarming with committeemen, agents, and voters, must have impressed more than it would now. The Ball-room at "The Bull," in Rochester, affected him in much the same way; and there is a curious sensation in looking round us there, on its modest proportions—its little hutch of a gallery which would hold about half-a-dozen musicians, and the small contracted space at the top where the "swells" of the dockyard stood together. "Boz," as he himself once told me, took away from Rochester the idea that its old, red brick Guildhall was one of the most imposing edifices in Europe, and described his astonishment on his return at seeing how small it was.

Apropos of Rochester and the Pickwick feeling, it may be said that to pass that place by on the London, Chatham, and Dover line rouses the most curious sensation. Above is the Castle, seen a long time before, with the glistening river at its feet; then one skirts the town passing by the backs of the very old-fashioned houses, and you can recognise those of the Guildhall and of the Watts' Charity, and the gilt vanes of other quaint, old buildings; you see a glimpse of the road rising and falling, with its pathways raised on each side, with all sorts of faded tints—mellow, subdued reds, sombre greys, a patch of green here and there, and all more or less dingy, and "quite out of fashion." There is a rather forlorn tone over it all, especially when

we have a glimpse of Ordnance Terrace, at Chatham, that abandoned, dilapidated row where the boy Dickens was brought up dismally enough. At that moment the images of the Pickwickians recur as of persons who had lived and had come down there on this pleasant adventure. And how well we know every stone and corner of the place, and the tone of the place! We might have lived there ourselves. Positively, as we walk through it, we seem to recognise localities like old friends.

"Boz," when he came to Ipswich, was no more than a humble reporter, on special duty, living in a homely way enough. The "White Horse" was not likely to put itself out for him, and he criticises it in his story, after a fashion that seems rather bold. His description is certainly unflattering:

"In the main street, on the left-hand side of the way"—observe how minute Boz is in his topography—"a short distance after you have passed through the open space fronting the Town Hall, stands an Inn known far and wide by the appellation of 'The Great White Horse,' rendered the more conspicuous by a stone statue of some rampacious animal, with flowing mane and tail, distantly resembling an insane cart horse, which is elevated above the principal door. The 'Great White Horse' is famous in the neighbourhood in the same degree as a prize ox or county paper-chronicled turnip, or unwieldy pig—for its *enormous size*. Never were there such labyrinths of *uncarpeted passages*, such clusters of *mouldy, badly-lighted rooms*, such huge numbers of small dens for eating or sleeping in, beneath any other roof, as are collected between the four walls of this overgrown Tavern."

Boz cannot give the accommodation a good word, for he calls the Pickwickian room "a large, badly furnished apartment, with a *dirty grate* in which a small fire was making a wretched attempt to be cheerful, but was fast sinking beneath the dispiriting influence of the place." The dinner, too, seems to have been as bad, for a *bit of fish* and a steak took one hour to get ready, with "a *bottle of the worst possible port, at the highest possible price*." Depreciation of a hostelry could not be more damaging. Again, Mr. Pickwick's bedroom is described as a sort of surprise, being "a more comfortable-looking apartment that his short experience of the accommodation of the Great White House had led him to expect."