



VHS Newsletter

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Special Supplement

This special supplement to the *VHS Newsletter* includes Part Four, the final section of “A Dickens of a Time.”

Sydney Dickens, son of famous author Charles Dickens, was stationed in Esquimalt as an officer in Her Majesty’s Royal Navy in 1868 and 1869. While here, Sydney took part in several theatrical performances and participated in the life of the growing town in other ways.

Author Peter Lowens is a former member of the Victoria Historical Society. He and his wife Ana established the Ana and Peter Lowens Scholarship in Victorian Literature at the University of Victoria. Peter and Ana now live in Toronto.

Peter has allowed the *VHS Newsletter* to adapt a more academic version of his essay on Sydney Dickens’ time in Victoria.

Many of the photos are from an album that belonged to Admiral George Fowler Hastings. The album is in the City of Vancouver archives and has been digitized. Hastings’ photos are a valuable resource for local historians.

As frequently happened in Victorian times, the story of Sydney Dickens has been published as a serial. Part Four, the final installment, is in this supplement.

Mark Your Calendars: 2021 Annual General Meeting

The Victoria Historical Society will hold the 2021 Annual General Meeting immediately before the regular meeting and presentation on May 27, 2021.

The AGM will begin at 7 pm, via Zoom. Sign-in information will be sent to members prior to the meeting. Ron Greene’s presentation, **Dairying in Victoria**, will follow the AGM.

Feature Article: A Dickens of a Time

By Peter Lowens

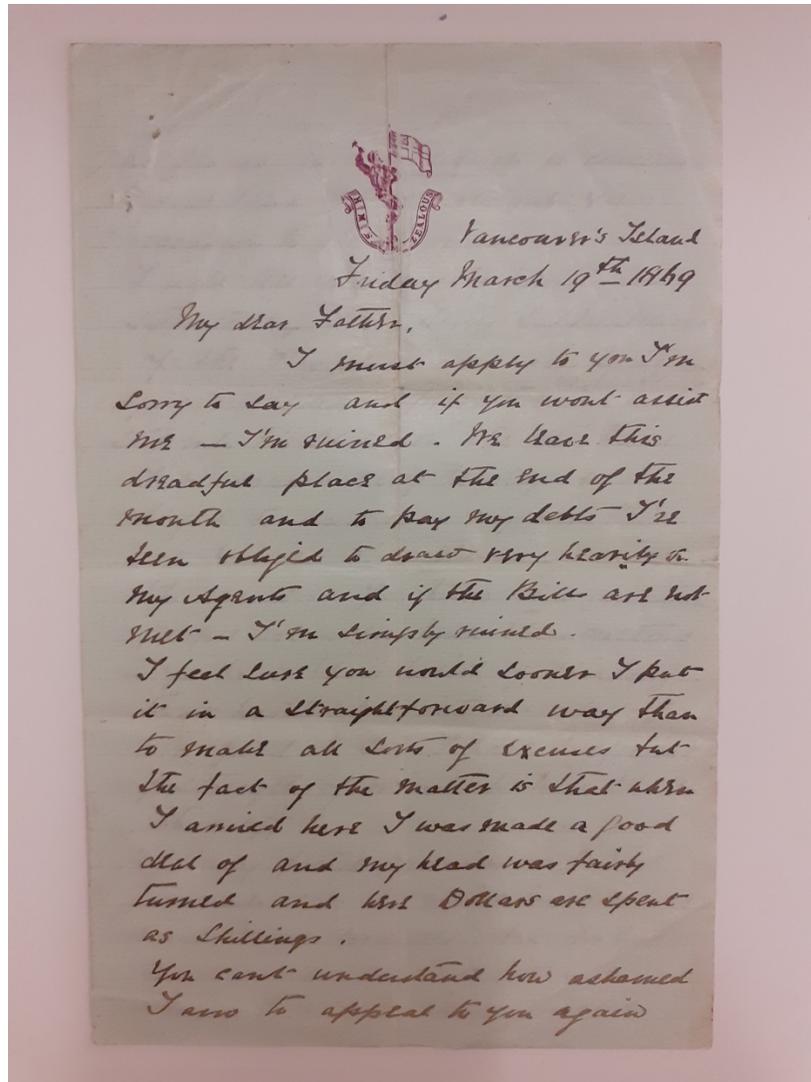
Part Four: Sydney Dickens – Officer, Actor, Prodigal Son

It is difficult to piece together the off-stage life of Sydney Dickens while he was stationed in Esquimalt in 1868 and 1869. David W. Higgins, the publisher of the *Daily Colonist*, wrote about Sydney's activities in a chapter titled "England's Greatest Novelist" in a collection of his reminiscences, *The Mystic Spring*, first published in 1904. Higgins recounted informing Sydney of his intention to see Charles Dickens read during his second tour of America. Higgins stated that Sydney offered to write a letter of recommendation for him, did so, and hand-delivered it to Higgins the next day.

Some caution must, however, be taken with many of Higgins' claims. He was well-known for his tendency to exaggerate his own activities, exploits, and importance. In fact, *The Dictionary of Canadian Biography* calls *The Mystic Spring* 'somewhat fictionalized reminiscences.'

However, Higgins presented some interesting anecdotes of Sydney Dickens' time in Victoria, although it is necessary to question how "fictionalized" these assertions may be and to what extent Higgins' own self-aggrandizement conflicts with the truth. Higgins described Sydney's physical stature as "rather insignificant. He was short and spare, but what he lacked in height he made up for in dignity. On horseback, when clad in small, and booted and spurred, he resembled a groom." Higgins also recounted the time Sydney went riding with three young ladies from Victoria. Evidently, they got lost on a trail and were not found by the townspeople until the early the next morning. According to Higgins, the women stated that Sydney showed "great gallantry" during the ordeal.

It is clear from the letter Sydney wrote to his father on 19 March 1869 that the young man was in desperate financial straits. His urgency is evidenced in both the overall tone of the letter and the fact that four of the letter's words are underlined. Sydney states 'here Dollars are spent as shillings.' A sad irony the surrounds Sydney's words to his father. The financial proceeds from the Naval Amateurs that were donated under Sydney's name in a letter published in the *Colonist* occurred just before Sydney's own plea for money to his father. Further, in *To Paris and Back for Five Pounds*, performed on 31 March 1869, Lieut. Brodie delivers a humorous line: "I forgive everybody - even my creditors ... it's a very common thing for a man to forget his creditors - but to forgive them is something sublime." Sydney, standing on stage with Brodie, must have felt a great sense of personal unease.



Letter from Sydney Dickens to his father, Charles Dickens, March 19, 1869, on HMS Zealous letterhead. The young man describes his financial predicament and asks for assistance Page one of four. Original in the collection: Ouvry Papers 27:10; Charles Dickens Museum, London.

When Sydney first arrived in Victoria he noted he was “made a good deal of.” As time passed, Sydney’s perspective apparently changed. In Sydney’s pleading letter to his father, he states “[w]e leave this dreadful place at the end of the month and to pay my debts – I’ve been obliged to draw very heavily on my agents and if the Bills are not met – I’m simply ruined.” The letter continues, “You know what American people are - you know their customs - you know their habit of drinking - that has put me into debt -.”

Grudgingly, Charles Dickens cleared his son’s substantial debts.

Whether Sydney’s assertion that Victoria was a dreadful place was because of its general population, its isolated location, or solely because of those he found himself indebted is unclear

in the letter. From the specific mention of “American people” there is the distinct possibility that Sydney became caught in the web of the highly transient population of Victoria in the late 1860s.



Residence of Paymaster of Dockyard – Esquimalt, from page 47, Admiral George Fowler Hastings’ album, 186?,
City of Vancouver Archives AM54-S4-1---: A-6-187
Sydney Dickens’ income as a young officer did not meet his expenses.

Victoria served many purposes in the second half of the nineteenth century. In addition to catering to the British navy, it was a busy location for the Hudson’s Bay Company, a winter home for a large transient population of prospectors, a busy shipping port and a terminus for ships coming north, primarily from San Francisco and Portland. Drinking and gambling had plagued Victoria since the days of the first gold rush. With the influx of people coming to Victoria, many hotels and saloons were built to serve the expanding population. In *Aqua Vitae: A History of the Saloons and Hotel Bars of Victoria 1851-1917*, Glen Mofford comments “the saloons in Victoria were a complex mix of various ethnic groups built upon American capital and entrepreneurship and British law and order.” Mofford states “[t]he sheer number of saloons was staggering for the small population of Victoria at the time.” Mofford found that prices for spirits in Victoria in the 1860s ranged from twelve and a half cents for a shot of liquor to five cents for a mug of beer.

Sydney’s desperate request for money, coupled with his reference to drinking, suggest that he may have had a serious drinking problem or often picked up the tab for his acquaintances. That said, to date there is no specific evidence that Sydney Dickens had a serious drinking problem while in Victoria. Indeed, his ability to perform on stage, in so many different roles, both male and female, often in multiple plays in one evening, suggest he did not have an uncontrolled

drinking problem. Gambling was illegal – but present – in Victoria; it could also have become a costly problem for Sydney if he strayed into the back rooms of Victoria’s many saloons and bars.

After Sydney Dickens left Esquimalt in October 1869, the Naval Amateurs continued to perform at the Theatre Royal in Victoria. In a Prologue to one production, Lt. Sydney Eardley-Wilmot stated that the role of a member of Her Majesty's navy was, in part, to remember that:

Dramatic art’s not learnt upon the sea
And if good acting is not always seen,
Remember, ‘tis better to be a Nelson than a Kemble or a Kean.

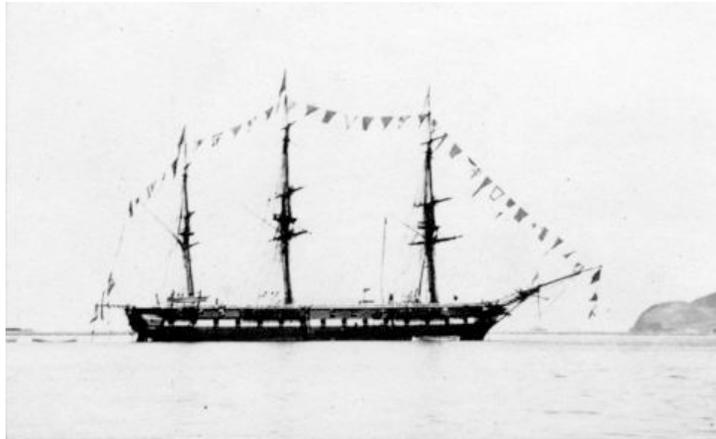
During Sydney Dickens’s naval career, it is apparent that his greatest battle was waged not against an enemy of England but rather against his own financial shortcomings. For those who were privileged to see him upon the stage, however, Sydney was both appreciated and acclaimed.

On 2 January 1977 – more than a century after Sydney’s death – James K. Nesbitt wrote in the *Colonist*: “It’s a great many years ago now since an old lady told me she had once danced with a son of Charles Dickens, aboard a warship in Esquimalt Harbor. I was young then, and paid scant attention, thinking, I suppose, that she was in her dotage.”

The memory of seeing a theatrical performance with Sydney Dickens as a principal actor, or dancing with a son of Charles Dickens, must have lingered in the minds of many people who lived in Victoria during 1868 -1869.

Sydney departed aboard HMS *Cameleon* at the end of October 1869. The ship sailed to the “Sandwich Islands” and arrived in Valparaiso, Chile, the major British naval station in the Southern Pacific, on 26 February 1870. On 2 June 1870 Sydney transferred to HMS *Satellite*. The *Satellite* left Valparaiso in 28 August 1870. Sydney’s father, Charles Dickens, died on June 9, 1870. Did the young officer learn of his father’s death before leaving port or did the news greet him when he returned to England with his ship in December 1870?

After serving on HMS *Pembroke* for six months, Sydney was assigned to HMS *Topaze* in June 1871. In the middle of November 1871, *Topaze* set sail on a voyage to Lisbon, across the Atlantic Ocean to Rio de Janeiro and back across the Atlantic, around the Cape of Good Hope and on to the port of Bombay before returning to England. On 6 February 1872, in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, Sydney was promoted to full Lieutenant.



HMS *Topaze* from page 16, Admiral George Fowler Hastings' album, 186?,
City of Vancouver Archives AM54-S4-1---: A-6-99
Sydney Dickens' last ship.

After leaving Cape Town Sydney took ill. By the time the *Topaze* reached Bombay on April 22, he was so sick that he was invalided off the ship and sent home on S.S. *Malta*. The voyage on the P&O steamer would take weeks, rather than the months it would take *Topaze* to return to England. But even the speedy steamer wasn't fast enough for Sydney.

The notice below appeared in Victoria's *Daily Colonist* on 6 July 1872.

Died — On (24 April) on board the P&O steamer *Malta*, on his way home from Bombay, Lieut S. H. Dickens, R.N. of H.M.S. *Topaze*, fifth son of the late Charles Dickens. Many of our readers were well acquainted with this gentleman who was on this station for some time.

As befitting a naval officer, Lieutenant Sydney Dickens was buried at sea. He was twenty-five years old.

Perhaps it is enough to reflect that although Sydney Dickens' time in Victoria was brief, it was one that was long remembered by those who saw a son of Charles Dickens both perform on their stage and serve as a lieutenant in Her Majesty's navy. Sydney Dickens' memory is preserved today with Dickens Point still on maps of northern British Columbia.

Sydney Dickens never became a Nelson (or a Kean). Sydney Dickens made friends and brought joy and laughter to Victoria's theatres. He won no battle honours but he did win the hearts and minds of the residents of Victoria, British Columbia.

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Call for VHS Newsletter Submissions

Members are encouraged to submit articles, photos or story ideas related to local, regional or provincial history to the *VHS Newsletter*. Authors should credit sources and are responsible for obtaining any required permission for use of photographs and images.

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The editor, Britta Gundersen-Bryden, may be reached at gbryden@gmail.com

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