



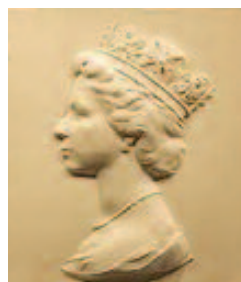
IN *the* VILLAGE

WELL WORTH A VISIT

The Postal Museum

Mount Pleasant, near Sadlers Wells, is within walking distance of the Inn. It houses the Mount Pleasant Royal Mail Sorting Office and, since 2017, a new Postal Museum. For those having children to appease or nostalgia to satisfy it is well worth a visit especially when tied in with a trip on Mail Rail – part of the underground train system by which mail was transported between sorting offices and main line stations.

The quite small museum records the history of mail. It is surprising to discover that the first mail delivery system was as early as the 17th century. What started by hand and horse moved on to stagecoach, followed by rail in 1830 and then by motor vehicles (a lovely red and black pre-Second World War Morris Minor van is on display) and then aeroplanes: a regular London to Brisbane flight carrying mail started in 1934 taking 12 days to cover the 12,700 miles.



Stamps, of course, are on display, together with a history of their use. Postmaster General Tony Benn wanted to remove the sovereign's head, the predominant feature then on all stamps. His aim met resistance but led to stamps mostly becoming larger with designs recording not only events, which had been so for many years, but with pictures of all sorts of things specially commissioned. Possibly there was an eye on the commercial stamp market. Happily, the sovereign's head silhouette remained. We think of roadside post boxes as red but they were green when they first appeared here in 1874; and when air mail came it had its own blue post boxes.

Inquisitive children and those needing a rest may watch one of the films produced over the years by the Post Office film unit. I was taken, in particular, by 'Fairy of the Phone', containing dated but very funny instructions to the new phone using public on what and what *not* to do when using the phone.



Mail Rail

Until 2003 mail was transported across London by trains running in an extensive system of tunnels some 20 metres underground. Its construction – itself a remarkable achievement – began in 1914, was suspended during the First World War, and completed in 1927. The system is much like that of the Tube but with platforms located under sorting offices and stations and with tunnels, track and rolling stock on a smaller scale. The engines were self propelled and, in case a train ran out of control, sand bags were placed at the bottom of descents to avert disaster.

In 2017 Mail Rail reopened a short section on which you can now take a ride. I had hoped when I booked to go that I would find myself somewhere under Gray's Inn, after all Crossrail now runs under the northern edge of Gray's Inn Square. But it was not to be. Instead, I found myself running in a circle from Mount Pleasant to Liverpool Street and back on a trip lasting about 20 minutes. The number of junctions within that trip was surprising and, if replicated elsewhere, demonstrates how complex the system was. The engines are now manned ('womanned' in my case) and the carriages better for the small rather than the large. For me it was an informing experience: for children it would be an informing thrill.

You can book for the Postal Museum and Mail Rail online. Advance booking for Mail Rail is not only compulsory but, so far, essential, especially in school holiday times. When I went online at midday on Thursday 25 January to book a ride that afternoon, many rides were already fully booked. The Museum suggests a visit may take 2–3 hours. I think 2 hours a reasonable maximum time to allow, including a trip on the train.

The Charles Dickens Museum

A shorter walk from the Inn is the Charles Dickens Museum at 48 Doughty Street, just north of The Walks. It was opened in 1925 by no less a person than our own Lord Birkenhead and it replaced an earlier Dickens museum. For Dickens, No 48 was his first house when he moved there in 1837 after the birth of the first of his 10 children. He lived there for three very eventful years: in that time he wrote *Pickwick Papers*, *David Copperfield* and *Nicholas Nickleby* and as a result became a household name.

The building is a typical four-storey Georgian town house but furnished in the period with some of Dickens' possessions such as his writing desk and armchair, curiosities and prints and other publications such as theatre posters.

There are also portraits of Dickens and his associates. Period fashion is shown mostly by costumes worn in films of his works.

The longer you are there and the more you read the helpful captions of the exhibits the more you learn not just about Dickens but of his times and how his experiences, not least those close to home, shaped his characters. His father's spendthrift habits meant that Dickens had to work in a blacking factory when aged 12 and led to his father's imprisonment as a debtor in Marshalsea. Little doubt that the blacking factory played its part in *Oliver Twist*. Mr Micawber was based in part on his father. Dickens' early life shaped a lifelong interest in social welfare and concern for the poor.

At the age of 16 Dickens also worked as a clerk for solicitors in Gray's Inn. Sadly, his experiences left him with a lifetime's distaste for the Law. Hence in *Oliver Twist* Mr Bumble says: 'If the law supposes that ... the law is a ass – a idiot. If that's the eye of the law, the law is a bachelor; and the worst I wish the law is, that his eye may be opened by experience – by experience.' One feels sure that, had Dickens become a member of Gray's, his attitude to lawyers and the Law would have been different.

Like so many public figures, his public persona was different from that of the private man. He was concerned with his image. He was something of a sharp dresser, revelling in



Lord Birkenhead opening the Dickens Museum on 9 June 1925. © Dickens Museum.

colourful waistcoats. He never wore his spectacles in public. He kept his upbringing under wraps: his work in the blacking factory and his father's imprisonment emerged only two or three years after his death. And, of course, aspects of his domestic life, if known, would not have gone down well.

Dickens' popularity as an author has waned with time, and many children these days know little if anything of him and his novels, once a mainstay both

of childhood and more mature reading. For this reason, plus its somewhat conventional layout, the museum may hold more for adults than children, although children are given the opportunity to draw his characters. There is plenty there for the inquisitive child. A visit is well worth it and should take no more than an hour or so.

The Foundling Museum

One hundred years before Dickens was out and about in Bloomsbury and writing about social injustice Thomas Coram was doing something more positive to alleviate the fate of abandoned children. Early 18th century London was growing fast but so too was deprivation amongst the poor, sometimes gin-fuelled, which led to babies being abandoned when only a few days old. Close to home, foundlings used to be abandoned in the open arcaded area under Lincoln's Inn Chapel. In Europe the Church cared for abandoned children but not so in London.

Thomas Coram, a shipbuilder returned from America, set out to remedy this and his relentless efforts raising financial support from the great and the good enabled him to petition the King and obtain a Royal Charter to set up the Foundling



Hospital. It opened in 1741 in rented premises in Hatton Garden. On the first day 30 babies were accepted. Between 1742 and 1752 new premises were built in what is now Brunswick Square, and by the early 1750s the Foundling Hospital was caring for 600 babies and children. Truly, a remarkable achievement!

The Foundling Hospital has developed into the Coram Foundation, which now has a much wider remit concerning the needs of children, not the least being adoption, where Coram has had great success.

The Foundling Museum tells the story of the Hospital which in due course expanded into centres outside London and established a school. But it is its earlier development where, for me, most interest lay. Amongst its first supporters was Hogarth, the leading English artist of the time who encouraged artistic interest and support to such an extent that the Hospital housed what became the first London public art gallery with works donated by artists of the day. Very soon Handel lent support paying for the chapel organ and performing his first benefit concert of *Messiah* there, thereafter performing it there every year. Prominent doctors of the day gave their services. Dickens too later gave support.

But the grip of a visit to the museum is to be found in discovering what happened to the children on reception, during their stay, and what was done to set them on course for life. Many babies were brought there by mothers too poor to care for them. The popularity of, and demand on, the Hospital was such that frequently mothers had to be turned away for lack of a place for the child. Such scenes must have been harrowing.

One of the first things the visitor sees is the collection of tokens by which children were to be identified by mothers seeking to reclaim them: perhaps a piece of clothing cut from what the child was wearing, a memento, or half a playing card cut so that the two halves could be matched to prove the link. Later more formal means of identification were employed. One cannot help but be moved on seeing these. Children find them fascinating, bewildering and suddenly perhaps realise how lucky they now are.



The museum has a fine collection of paintings on display throughout, and they include some 19th century Hospital scenes by Emma Brownlow, daughter of John Brownlow, Secretary of the Hospital from 1849 to 1872 and himself a foundling. The Court Room on the first floor has a splendid rococo ceiling and the second floor houses a considerable collection of Handel memorabilia. There is a changing exhibition by modern day artists/writers in the basement.

Initial funding and support for the Hospital was provided by 'Ladies of Quality and Distinction' and practical care, inevitably, was provided mostly by women. It is apt therefore that many of the showcases contain comments on the museum provided by prominent women of today and comforting to see supportive comments there by Master Anuja Dhir and Ann Kenrick, Warden of Charterhouse and wife of Master Warby.

This an excellent museum, one of the best small museums I have visited, and, as one might expect, it is very child friendly. Long may it flourish!

JLW

